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Whose Uncertainties? Dealing with Multiple Meanings in a Transnational Biography

Joschka Philipps*

Abstract: »Wessen Ungewissheiten? Der Umgang mit multiplen Bedeutungen in einer transnationalen Biografie«. Uncertainty permeates and structures social life, biographies, and research. In its ubiquity, it may well be the “the most ordinary thing in the world” (Wohlrab-Sahr 1992, 10), and has been considered a key concern of sociology (Boltanski 2011, 55). This article reflects on how uncertainty looms large both in the social world and throughout the social scientific research process. The focus is on the biography of N., a woman who grew up in Conakry in the Republic of Guinea and currently lives in France, and how her lived experiences are being turned into an academic text. N.’s narrations of her life feature uncertainty in different forms, ranging from moments of existential crisis to a quotidian contingency produced by the multiplicity of norms, languages, ideologies, and systems of meaning of her transnational life-worlds. The article reflects on the relationship between the researcher and N., showing how our work on her biography implies multiple translations and transformations of meaning, as well as miscomprehension and doubts. On a theoretical level, uncertainties are also implicit in situating an academic text in relation to others, especially in inter- and transdisciplinary contexts with contradictory concerns and ideals of scholarship. The article is embedded in a broader research project on so-called conspiracy theories, a prime example of a concept and a burgeoning academic field where scholars tend to externalize and sometimes pathologize uncertainties about political power.

Keywords: Uncertainty, transnationalism, biography, methodology, conspiracy theories.

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1. Introduction

For N: “So this virus, this Ebola thing, you guys sent this to us, too. It’s all about money. Because it’s also in the film. I’m going to pitch that to the RTG.”¹

Joschka: “Ah no, [no, nooo]”

N: “[LISTEN Joschka, listen, just LISTEN,] just listen, Joschka! You’re also the ones who released the film. You white people. You white people, we’re tired of you. But listen. This CIA guy and the other guys who are doing research, they have their name, they work for the White House, they’re the ones who made the virus, the hemorrhagic virus... anyway, I’m going to send you the film, you’re just talking, I’ll send you the film, you’ll see (laughs)!”

J: (laughs) “Ahhh, these kinds of ghetto stories...”

N: (laughs / shouts) “Not ghetto, I watched the MOVIE!”

J: “Yeah.”

N: “YESTERDAY!”

J: “Yes. (2) BUT WAIT, there are movies about ANYTHING (.) [THERE (...) THERE ARE MOVIES]” [claps his hands]

N: “[IF WE PLAY THE MOVIE...] (.) But it’s true that you fabricate these viruses, and that you use them against whoever you’re upset with. You put them for funds, to make money.”²

The above extract dates from 2014 and comes from the first conversation I recorded with N., shortly after I had met her in a café in downtown Conakry, the capital of the Republic of Guinea, in West Africa, where I was doing field research at the time. At first sight, there seems to be a joking mood to the conversation; N. and I are laughing, and I am clapping my hands at one point. Yet, a closer look reveals something very different. N.’s accusation that white people brought the Ebola virus to Guinea to make money, based on a film she saw, and my snobbish reply (“These kinds of ghetto stories”), are followed by strong insistences from both sides (“J: “Ah no, [no, nooo]”; N: [LISTEN Joschka, listen, just LISTEN,]”) as to whether N.’s claim is true. Two awkward seconds of pausing (“J: Yes. (2) BUT WAIT [...]”) hint further at the tension in this exchange, which ultimately revolves around questions of truth and power, race and exploitation.

The conversation in May 2014 in Conakry was one of the first I had with N. Since then, we have produced a large corpus of recorded and unrecorded conversations, including group discussions with her family and friends, and

¹ Radio-Télévision Guinéenne (RTG) is the national radio and television broadcaster in the Republic of Guinea. All conversations are translated from French.

² Interview with N., Camayenne, Conakry, Guinea, 12 May 2014.

semi-structured and unstructured interviews and exchanges, which we are in the process of transforming into her biography.³ The idea is to describe N.'s life as she tells it, and to learn about the multiple social and political worlds that she traversed from her own perspectives. These perspectives are as heterogeneous as the milieus she traverses. Born in Conakry in 1989 and currently living in France, N. alternated between being a Muslim, a fortune-teller, a Buddhist, an atheist, an agnostic, and a mystic. After two semesters at the university studying law and international relations, she worked, among other things, as a transnational drug courier, a connector and broker between politicians and businessmen, an NGO leader, a maker of business cards, and a creator of e-mail accounts for Guinean members of parliament, while making good money as an escort. She was diagnosed with HIV in early 2014, a disease that neither N. nor the people around her knew how to grasp. In her search for medical treatment, she moved to France in 2015 and recovered fully. She started working as a cashier and salesperson in supermarkets and other businesses, became a wife and a mother, divorced, faced a prison sentence of four months for cocaine trafficking, and became an interim bar owner while paying for her younger brother's mathematics degree in Conakry.

In this article, I am particularly interested in how N.'s biography, and our co-construction of a text about her life, can enrich sociological reflections about the role of uncertainty in transnational life courses like hers, and also how to reflexively situate uncertainty within the biographical research situation at the interstices of sociology, postcolonial critique, and area studies. The article is organized as follows. The first section situates this article's interest in uncertainty against the backdrop of an ongoing research project on so-called "conspiracy theories," which coincides with my research for N.'s biography. While N.'s biography is by no means bound to the theme of conspiracy theories, our work on her life course helps explain why many widely-held assumptions about conspiracy theories do not hold true in the physical and virtual places that N. lives in. The first section then also explores the literature on uncertainty in life-course research, siding with a conceptualization of uncertainty as a general condition of social life rather than an exceptional circumstance in situations of crisis. Sections 3-5 then describe uncertainty on three different levels: on the empirical level of biographical uncertainty, on the methodological level of the relationship between the researcher and N., and finally on the level of inter- and transdisciplinary theory-building. The conclusion ties the different threads together.

³ The corpus consists of over one hundred recordings. Some of them are specifically geared to N. speaking about her biography; others, like the one above, are free-flowing conversations in which N. has almost entire control over the direction they take. In our exchanges, I usually refrain from commenting on what N. says; the case above is an exception in that regard.

2. Conspiracism and Uncertainty in Everyday Life

As the introductory conversation suggests, N. could be labelled a conspiracy theorist, i.e., as someone who harbors political suspicions and explains events with a main causal reference to “a small group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit and against the common good” (Uscinski 2019, 48). However, since that label constitutes first and foremost an “accusation” (Boltanski 2014, 199), there is no interest in using it. Indeed, our ongoing collective research project, “Politics of the unknown: conspiracism and conflict,” situates itself as part of a strand of conspiracy theory research that is fairly skeptical about the use and function of the concept in public and academic discourse (see also Anton 2011; Anton, Schetsche, and Walter 2014b; Anton and Schink 2021; Boltanski 2014; Walker 2019; Orr and Husting 2019; Fassin 2021). What we would like to draw attention to is the connection between conspiracy theories and uncertainty, which recently gained prominence against the backdrop of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Butter and Knight 2023). Feelings of uncertainty, whether with regard to individual health risks or fears of social, political, and economic collapse appeared as a fertile hotbed for conspiracy theories. “Conspiracy theories thrive,” argue Lewandowsky, Jacobs, and Neil (2023, 26), “whenever people feel that they have lost control over their lives.”

Of course, the heightened public attention to conspiracy theories predates the COVID-19 pandemic. Already in 2016, for instance, “post-truth” was named the Oxford Dictionary Word of the Year. Describing “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Flood 2016), it emerged as a popular explanation among journalists, academics, and commentators on contemporary public affairs in the wake of Brexit and Donald Trump’s presidency in the US (Angermuller 2018; Fuller 2016; Aradau and Huysmans 2019). A precursor of the so-called “infodemic” (Gagliardone et al. 2021) during the coronavirus pandemic, it expressed concerns over a seemingly disappearing public consensus as to what is factual – whether with regard to politics (*deep state*; *QAnon*), migration (*Le grand remplacement*), the media (*Lügenpresse*), or environmental change (the global warming hoax). In a virtual context of highly heterogeneous information flows and the lucrativeness of so-called fake news (Bakir and McStay 2018; see also Krämer 2021), many post-truth pundits see the public sphere to be in danger of falling victim to disinformation and polarization between the political right and left, and the viability of democratic institutions threatened (Kelkar 2019). The prefix “post-” serves as a nostalgic reference to a presumably more “truthful” era of precedent, focused mainly on a consolidated Western media system.

Going beyond this contextualization is one aim of our collective research project, “Politics of the unknown.” Focusing on different cases in West Africa allows us to reflect on the Eurocentric conditions under which the phenomenon delineated by the term “conspiracy theories” becomes a sociological problem. Most scholars, for instance, tend to consider conspiracy theories as “heterodox,” i.e., as gaining political significance in their opposition to a more or less coherent mainstream public discourse (e.g., Anton, Schetsche, and Walter 2014a; see also Schnettler 2018). This is not the case in the West African contexts we study (see Boukari and Philipps 2023; see also Philipps and Sagnane 2023; Philipps and Gillier 2023), nor in N.’s everyday environments in France. Characterized by a relative absence of, or distance from, mainstream public discourses, these transnational contexts intertwine a variety of social, religious, spiritual, communal, and political discourses that eschew different attempts at “organizing and unifying reality” (Boltanski 2014, xv), notably by the state, which lacks legitimacy and trust; but also by established media channels that are gradually being superseded by exceedingly diverse social media networks (see Dwyer and Molony 2019). Moreover, given the relative frequency of real conspiracies, whether in Guinea’s extractive mining industry (Keefe 2013; Kochan 2013), in national and international politics (Borrel et al. 2021; Faligot and Krop 1985; Foucher 2023), or simply in terms of everyday corruption (Smith 2008) and collusion (Bubandt 2023), conspiracy theories are not easily identifiable in a sea of plausible suspicions of a political system that can be best conceptualized in Machiavellian terms as “parapolitics” (Wilson 2009). Conspiracy theories are thus impossible to identify in isolation. They are interconnected with longer-term anti-colonial discourses (Lee, Meek, and Mwine-Kyarimpa 2021) and suspicions about state capture by small elites, and blend into quotidian exchanges without being remarked on or stigmatized as something specific. In the case of Côte d’Ivoire, for instance, “conspiracies” were used as a synonym for “politics” (Boukari and Philipps 2023, 115).

Interestingly, in spite of the massive expansion of scholarship on conspiracy theories across disciplines (for overviews, see Bowes, Costello, and Tasimi 2023; Butter and Knight 2019), biographical approaches are virtually absent from the large array of methods that have been employed in attempts to better understand the phenomenon. This should not come as a surprise, however. Since Hofstadter’s (1964) classic essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” the figure of the “conspiracy theorist” has become a caricatural and highly political figure, who is usually portrayed as gullible and dangerous. Hardly anyone would like to have their life story framed as the biography of a conspiracy theorist. In turn, however, biographical methods can be very suitable for studying the world views labelled as conspiracy theories and for illuminating the varied social contexts in which they circulate. First, replacing the caricature with a real person can counter some of the deeply

ingrained scholarly biases associated with the label of the “conspiracy theorist.” As Howard Becker (1976, 71) argued, one of the most profound advantages of biographical methods is that, “by putting ourselves in [other people’s] skin, we can feel and become aware of the deep biases about such people that ordinarily permeate our thinking and shape the kinds of problems we investigate.” Secondly, and more importantly, the biographical method allows a phenomenological approach, in which “[s]ubjectivity is not an obstacle for sociological analysis [but] a necessary precondition to be systematically taken into consideration” (Eberle and Schnettler 2019, 10). Rather than depreciating conspiracy theories *a priori* as false beliefs held by misinformed groups and individuals, the phenomeno-logical lens allows them to be normalized as a general pattern of meaning-making in which the subject combines their own experiences and other available knowledges to cope with human existence (Schnettler 2018, 217, 221). Such an approach, thirdly, would also help reintroduce everyday life into scholarship on conspiracy theories, which increasingly takes place “on a level of meta-theory, where conspiratorial debate is tackled as ‘theory’” (Rakopoulos 2022, 45).⁴ Indeed, it becomes more and more difficult to know what debates on “conspiracy theories” actually refer to outside of academia, i.e., in everyday life “dominated by sociality, communication, and the pragmatic imperative” (Eberle and Schnettler 2019, 5).

In this article, the semantic and conceptual bridge between N.’s biography and the phenomenon of conspiracy theories is *uncertainty*. As conceptualized by Luc Boltanski (2014, xv), conspiracy theorizing thrives on the suspense, mystery, and ultimately the uncertainty as to whether the widely known reality is actually the real reality or whether it is a façade under which the true reality is lurking.⁵ This paper asks how such uncertainties about real and false realities are embedded in N.’s everyday life and her narrations thereof. As this article will show, N. navigates transnational contexts where rumors, half-truths, gossip, conspiracy theories, and vastly diverse and contradictory interpretations of reality are the norm. This produces a kind of uncertainty that cannot be reduced to a lack of certainty. Rather, it bespeaks a contingency and malleability of meaning that leaves space for an experimental concept of reality, where uncertainty becomes a resource. As AbdouMaliq Simone (2008, 22) puts it, “there is much room for dissimulation; much room for making things seem as if they are real when they are not, or making them real simply

⁴ Similar trends can be observed in sociology, STS (science, technology, and society) scholarship, and cultural studies (see Dentith 2019).

⁵ Dozon (2017) has compared it to the idea of a double reality, the visible and the invisible, and highlights overlaps with how witchcraft is perceived and performed in West Africa (see also Fassin 2021, 130). Latour (2004, 228-9) has polemically compared the epistemological dynamics of conspiracy theorizing to a “popularized” version of critical social theory.

through the sheer mobilizing of money, interest, or support on the part of those schemed or part of making a scheme.”

In contrast to the concept of “conspiracy theories,” uncertainty has frequently been approached through biographical methods. In her classic work on biographical insecurity (“biographische Unsicherheit,” which can also be translated as biographical *uncertainty*), Wohlrab-Sahr (1992, 10) starts out by considering uncertainty “the most ordinary thing in the world.”⁶ If uncertainty seems pathological at times, she adds, it is because of the manifold “security fictions” (“Sicherheitsfiktionen”) that are constructed both in social life and in the sciences. In a time of de-institutionalized life courses, especially among women, she argues, uncertainty is reintroduced into the biography, giving rise to individualized decisions about one’s life, and concomitantly, a heightened knowledge about the complexity of life courses and a heightened consciousness about their contingency (Wohlrab-Sahr 1992, 12). Yet, one can also find in biographical approaches a focus on uncertainty as an exception. Here, it stands for the feeling produced by particularly dramatic moments that shatter the “coherence or unity of our lives, which we usually take for granted” (Vigh 2008, 5). Burchardt (2010) describes such uncertainty in terms of South African women’s reactions to being diagnosed with HIV, while Reiter (2010) analyzes how certainty is being constructed in the face of young people’s unemployment risks after the end of communism in Lithuania, and thus in the context of a major socio-political upheaval.⁷ Other biographical studies focus on how uncertainty is coped with in inter- and transcultural experiences of migration, i.e., in transitions “between different ethnic and cultural contexts,” and on how people narrate their identity across these contexts, e.g., by constructing a “cosmopolitan self” (Tsiolis 2012, 123).

As the following section will show, N.’s life has been marked by a great number of traumatic and exceptional experiences of uncertainty - indeed, arguably way more than an average person’s life. At the same time, N. also narrates her life in terms of an affirmative embrace of uncertainty, contradictions, unruly paradoxes, and contingency. She is thus not seeking the integration of divergent norms, world views, or concepts of the self (see Zinn 2004, 214). Depending on her mood, she may present herself as being lonely, or as having a large social network of friends and family who care for her. Depending on whom she speaks to, the professional future she says she aspires to can differ radically, from being a pimp to directing an NGO working towards the reintegration of sex workers. This malleability and multiplicity of meaning is more than just a personal characteristic. A social fact in its own right, it permeates the social contexts in which N. grew up and in which she continues to live.

⁶ Wohlrab-Sahr cites Krelle, Wilhelm. 1957. Unsicherheit und Risiko in der Preisbildung. *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft* 113: 632-77. See also (Boltanski 2011, 55).

⁷ See also Faircloth et al. (2004); Zinn (2010, 3).

This malleability or multiplicity of meaning is encapsulated in a saying that started to circulate around 2005 amongst Conakry's youth. "Même atamara atanara" means "That's it, even if it's not!" in French and Sosso.⁸ The phrase would be thrown into a conversation in which people started to disagree and potentially fight over some kind of statement. At that time, conflicts between rival urban groups of young men, so-called "clans," had cost the lives of hundreds of young men in Conakry who emulated American gangsta rap and violently competed over territory and fame (Philipps 2013). "Même atamara atanara" was a way to ease the atmosphere in situations that might otherwise deteriorate. Allowing for simultaneous agreement and disagreement, the phrase accompanied a steady decline in clan violence since the mid-2000s, and was soon being used widely beyond the milieu of the so-called "ghetto." During our research trips to Conakry in 2022, N. usually said it after making a particularly strong and potentially exaggerated point, in a mixture of irony and defiant insistence: even if reality is not what she assesses it to be, her assessment of reality remains true in its own right. That is, even if her assessment of reality may be inaccurate in a given instance, it may hold true as a general observation. Or, if her assessment contradicts a previous assessment she made, it could still hold true in the specific context in which she speaks *now*. And if her assessment were exaggerated or an outright lie, it may remain true in a performative sense, i.e., in the sense that drawing attention towards a given reality and creating an awareness of it often demands some kind of emphasis or exaggeration, notably in social settings where people share different preoccupations and ideas about the world. "Même atamara atanara" thus captures N.'s nimble-witted embrace of multiple truths: "L'être humain devant chaque situation se transforme," says N., "il faut le remarquer": human beings transform themselves in each situation (see also Collins 2005, 44).

In N.'s biography and everyday social life, then, uncertainty "cannot be delineated as an aberrant moment of chaos or a period of decisive change," but rather is a more or less constant "terrain of action and meaning," as Vigh (2008, 5) argues with regard to the concept of crisis. Just as the world around her is prone to changing rapidly and in unforeseeable ways, her self-conceptions and conceptions of the world are uncertain in the sense that they are contingent on the present situation and the potentials that a given (self-)conception can bring. As Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman (1995, 325) argue, becoming a "subject" in contexts of normalized crisis involves a "splitting of identities" and living along with "a register of improvisations." Uncertainty becomes the basis of these improvisations. As such, it is not just a "negative and constraining" element of social life but is highly "productive" (Cooper and Pratten 2015, 2), notably in allowing for experimentation and improvisation with one's surroundings that would be foreclosed if these

⁸ Sosso is the lingua franca of Guinea's capital city Conakry.

surroundings were understood as clearly defined and not apprehended in their contingency. For instance, N. often talks about how she creates impressions of herself, and how these impressions, when believed by the right people at the right time, have opened up unforeseen opportunities and realities for her, despite being discoverable as fake, thus causing the façade to collapse.

On a more perceptual level, and as previously mentioned, N. experiments with a multitude of systems of thought, opening up a multiplicity of possible realities relative to the interpretative frame that she employs, whether deliberately or because these frames seem to impose themselves. This affects the tenor of how N. deals with reality. Permeated by the speculative, hypothetical, mystical, and imaginary, it affects her narrations, aspirations, and interactions with people, often being informed by what Wagner-Pacifici (2000, 3) calls the *subjunctive mood*, i.e., “a subjective world in which strong emotions (statements of superlatives), uncertainty, and ambiguity are foregrounded.”⁹ In a similar vein, N.’s conspiracy theorizing is thus not a staunch belief in a single conspiracist truth, but a situational practice whose meaning depends fundamentally on the context. It can be ludic and playful, as authors like Birchall (2006, 23) and Knight (2001, 2-3) have argued, or it can be damning in view of the world’s most profound injustices, as emphasized by authors like Fassin (2021).

3. Biographical Uncertainty

In a poetic WhatsApp message from N.’s younger brother, he describes his sister to me as follows: “N. is the general rule for all lifestyles, as she adapts easily to all of them... N. is a feminine verb that can be conjugated in all tenses, as she is open to any state of mind... [...]. N. is a wind that blows through every city without asking permission.”¹⁰ Equipped with equal amounts of curiosity, recklessness, and adaptability, N. may indeed fit the anthropological description of a transnational “trickster” (Hynes and Doty 1997, 1, 9), someone whose “kaleidoscopic nature” make her “metamorphose into surrounding types with variant or different orientations,” representing “all those possibilities of life that your mind hasn’t decided it wants to deal with.”¹¹

N. is growing up with her aunt, whose name she carries, in a different neighborhood of Conakry than her parents and her two brothers. She enjoys living with her aunt, an independent-minded businesswoman and an early

⁹ A subjunctive statement comes “in the form of ‘if X were to occur, then Y’” and “expresses speculations tinged with emotions of a certain sort (doubt, hope)” (Wagner-Pacifici, 2000, 160).

¹⁰ WhatsApp message from N.’s brother, October 2022.

¹¹ Hynes and Doty (1997) cite Campbell (1988) on page 1 and Beecher (1987) on page 9.

source of N.'s sense of autonomy and negotiating skills. At an early age, she starts escaping across the property fence. Her explorations of Conakry's nightlife – or as she calls it: *the heat* (“le chaud”)¹² – are haphazard. At first, she feels like she lacks a person to show her how to situate and protect herself, but then she slowly finds her place in the intricate markets of relationships, money, power, friendships, adventure, sexuality, and upward (and downward) mobility, notably at a time when Transparency International (2007) considered Guinea the most corrupt country on the African continent. President General Lansana Conté, who had succeeded Sékou Touré in 1984, headed a façade of a state. Below the veneer, his son Ousmane Conté and other military-related officials had established a major cocaine-smuggling network linking South American drug cartels with African and European markets. As a drug courier, N. travelled to Morocco, Mali, and Sierra Leone, sold cocaine to expat high-school students at Conakry's *Lycée Français*, was befriended by the sons of the generals and Nigerian trafficking networks, and became part of what she vaguely calls “le POWER,” an opaque and ever-shifting constellation that connects the self with opportunities for advancement. “Le POWER” is both a network of people and a kind of conjuncture that one must maintain to advance.

But anything can cut anyone's power at any time. When President Lansana Conté died in 2008, power vanished in places where it had been ubiquitous. The new military junta, the National Council for Development and Democracy (CNDD), threw the ex-President's son into jail, destroyed the bars where N. would spend much of her time, cleared motels, and arrested hundreds of sex workers (and a few of their clients), driving them to a military camp where, in front of running cameras, the soldiers shaved off the girls' hair. “Le POWER” was reconfigured. Preparing for presidential elections, politicians poured into the neighborhoods to address their future constituencies. N. would join some rallies where they gave out T-shirts and money, but she mainly campaigned for Alpha Condé, the opposition candidate who would become Guinea's new president after a highly controversial election. N. had quickly readapted to this new conjuncture, had made new friends, and formed new relationships. She now had her own apartment, her own car, and was paying her younger brother's school fees.

In 2011, her older brother passes away after a long period of severe mental illness. Her mother believes her fetishes. They seem to indicate that her deceased husband's relatives had bewitched her son in a family conflict over property and heritage, which had left N.'s mother and her three children to fend for themselves. N. blames the hospital and the fact that her brother was socially rejected when he “went crazy”:

¹² “Le chaud,” literally the heat (in French), can mean many things for N., ranging from her high energy levels to her attraction to nightlife, clubs, and bars, to a sense of motivation to keep pushing the boundaries of her social existence and her financial net worth.

My brother was a victim, I tell you, my brother (.) had mental problems. My mother took him to [a psychiatric hospital], they gave him injections he shouldn't have had, so it broke him until he died in 2011. He even went crazy, my own brother. [...] I told my mother we killed him. We killed him [...] Because we rejected him. [...]. As a result, I discovered a lot of drugs. I smoked everything, coke, everything that was in Guinea, shit, I took it all to see if it can kill someone or drive someone crazy who is intelligent.¹³

When her beloved maternal grandmother passes away only one month later, N. escapes into a new life in Freetown (Sierra Leone), Accra (Ghana), and other cities across West Africa. She experiments with a new personality, changes her name, and becomes A., the “Peulh Princess,” playing on her aristocratic Fulani origins. She meets a rich businessman, whose yacht becomes a new home. But at some point, one of her friends exposes her fraud to him (“She had all the proof”), and her rich new boyfriend throws her out. N. leaves Freetown in mid-2012 without any money or prospects regarding what to do with her life. Back in Conakry, she avoids her family members and stays with friends, going out to look for opportunities.

One evening, her taxi bumps into another person's car, which three well-dressed men exit in fury. N. tells the taxi-driver to leave and cites a proverb in front of the three agitated men: “The poor man is always right, even when he makes a mistake.” They get into a conversation, which continues in a bar on the roadside, where N. explains her situation. When she finishes, one of the three men tells her to choose between them: all have different jobs as managers – one is working for the national post office, another is a businessman, and yet another is a politician with a side business. Whom would she want to follow? N. chooses the man who asked, the politician with a side business. She likes his looks, his dark cynicism, his audacity. As an intellectual, he is known for boasting the most objectionable truths. N. loves how unashamedly he crushes taboos, how he frees and guides her into a new terrain of being. She becomes his girlfriend, political party affiliate, and business partner. Her business hours are at night. She finds new clients in night-clubs and bars, understands how to provoke and tease them, how to make them laugh, and how they end up considering her offers. As a personal assistant to the politician, she travels to Brussels and Paris to liaise with the diaspora, supplies other politicians with official-looking business cards, and sets up e-mail accounts for them if needed. She re-enters “le POWER.”

In 2013, N. falls seriously ill. In January 2014 she is diagnosed with HIV:

Whatever they tell you when you have HIV is what you go through. You don't know if you're going to die, if you're going to stay, what your virus is, what level it's at, you don't KNOW. All you know is that you've been given something complicated. You change, you automatically become another person. [...] After two months, you come back for another dose. You don't

¹³ Interview with N., France, 3 March 2022.

have tablets to take every day, so one day it'll be an injection for a year or a tablet for a year. They're going to keep going until one day it comes.¹⁴

After the diagnosis, she has panic attacks and loses weight. Most of her friends shuns her; bouncers bar her from clubs and bars. A former friend is an international doctor, who provides her with information and medication, and successfully urges her to get better treatment in Senegal. Back in Guinea, she finds a book with Buddhist mantras, which she repeats every day. She even meditates with a small Buddhist community in Conakry, which gives her strength at a time when “I just feel like my head explodes. Sometimes I just wait for it.”¹⁵ She hears rumors among her family, debates about the different spiritual, invisible, and/or devilish forces that may have caused her misfortune. And yet, she also experiments with a new start. Though her politician partner takes some distance from her since becoming an MP, he still supports her in running an NGO for young sex workers. The NGO wants to provide practical education and guidance in this taboo sector. N. wants sexual health workshops, with all the nitty-gritty details that one needs to know. She attends European Union conferences and establishes contacts, but quickly finds herself baffled by the development industry's bureaucratic sloth and hypocrisy: “That's what I told that lady from the EU the other day: if all those politicians and religious leaders and even you development people call it a taboo, how do you expect these girls to educate their daughters so that they don't have to go through the same thing?”¹⁶ It was at that time when N. and I first met.

In 2015, N. leaves for France, with the help of her politician boyfriend, who manages to get her a tourist visa. She is desperately searching for a new life and a new truth: medical, scientific. She gets the treatment, consistently starts feeling better, and ultimately recovers fully. After a brief return to Guinea, a friend connects her with a white French landscaper in his fifties in a medium-size city in France, who later becomes her husband and the father of her daughter. His family is kind, though sometimes she calls them racist. N. finds out that she likes agriculture in the French countryside, but also still wants to realize her NGO idea in France, focusing on migrant sex workers. That means she has to do her research. The “heat” (*le chaud*) pulls her in again. Starting with her contacts from a salesperson's apprenticeship, her connections with friends and acquaintances grow larger, becoming a trans-continental network that intertwines people and histories from Cameroon and the Caribbean, Congo, West Africa, and the Maghreb. Some are born in France, others not; some look or sound like they could be French, others do not. Polemic labels abound. There are the “*blédards*” (from the Arabic term “*bled*,” بلاد, literally meaning village or country), which N. uses to designate foreigners born outside France (N.: “Moi, je suis *blédard*, moi!” – Me, I'm a

¹⁴ Interview with N., France, 5 March 2022.

¹⁵ Interview with N., Camayenne, Conakry, Guinea, 12 May 2014.

¹⁶ Ibid.

blédard!). Then, there are the “*wesh*” – another originally Arabic expression¹⁷ that now describes a whole urban subculture, with negative connotations when seen from the exterior, but potentially positive ones from within. N. often uses “*wesh*” in comparison to *blédards*: whereas a *blédard* is clearly born outside France, a *Wesh* is French without being typically French; being *wesh* also implies a clear distance from French society.

The new cross-cultural ecosystem is replete with rumor, even more so than Conakry, N. adds. What is called “*souloumou souloumou*” in Conakry, the “noises that move around,” is called “*kongossa*” in the new city. As Ondo (2009) describes in the case of Libreville, Gabon, *kongossa* proliferates as a way of spreading information to deride and expose powerful people and institutions by linking them to scandalous events (assassination attempts and other plots, witchcraft, treason, homosexuality, etc.). Operating along the “now indistinguishable borderline between the real and the unreal,” *kongossa* “become ‘an unconventional form of political action’” (Ondo 2009, 76, citing Darras).¹⁸ The politics in N.’s new city are more tightly organized around certain individuals with money and power. It is concentrated in a micro-cosmos of aspirations and jealousies, in which groups, networks, and “clans” frequently change their shape and position themselves through *kongossa*, i.e., by gossiping, sharing secret information about the other, spreading rumors, and conspiring against one another. People rise and fall quickly, from drug-dealing and trafficking of different substances to real estate and ananas export in Cameroon, from Internet scams and prostitution to jail and probation, from manipulating the game to being manipulated by one’s closest associates. In 2019, N.’s network is apprehended by the police for cocaine-trafficking. In a haphazard moment of wanting to come clean, N. spills all the details about the trafficking network and goes to prison. N. usually talks about it self-confidently, as so often, with the idea that life is an array of challenges that one needs to embrace, whatever the consequences. Only sometimes does she hint at the psychological trauma and extreme loneliness of her time in prison. We had lost touch back then, and I only heard about it months later, when N., as a precondition for leaving prison after four months, had returned to the house of her ex-husband. At least she could spend time with her daughter again, over whom she had lost child custody.

Throughout her time in France, her contacts with friends and family in Guinea remain intact. In October 2020, she is invited to Conakry to partake in a plot to meddle with the Guinean presidential elections. The elections were highly controversial and took place in the midst of political protests and violent repression. President Alpha Condé had succeeded in changing the constitution and was now eligible for a third mandate, which he labelled the first

¹⁷ *Wesh* started as a slang term of interrogation amongst youth between France and Algeria, with a meaning akin to “what?” in English.

¹⁸ The citation “an unconventional form of political action” is taken from Eric Darras (1998).

mandate under the new constitution. N. supported the opposition and would join a team of political brokers and IT specialists to hack the vote-counting software and do the connection work behind the scenes so that key political actors would know what to do once the results were out. But the team was a scam too. N. was passed off as a famous blogger, a young lady who looked slightly similar and lived abroad as well. Nobody knew whether the two hackers were actually experts in their field or not, but certainly they were incapable of rigging the software. After two weeks in a high-class hotel behind computers and telephones, it was clear that the plan would fail entirely.

It was certainly not the only plot in this election. Ever since I started working on the issue of conspiracies in Guinea, my interlocutors conveyed to me that political institutions were shot through with intrigues – not necessarily violent ones, but intrigues nonetheless. One of my earlier interviewees was working at the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) during the 2010 elections. During her time at the Communications Office, she witnessed how parallel electoral lists were issued by unknown sources, how documents and ballot boxes went missing, how offices were set alight by unknown arsonists, how suitcases full of money were found in front of offices, in each case accompanied by different suspicions as to who was behind the sabotage. At the same time, she and another technical commissioner insisted to me that nobody ruled the CENI (“personne n’avait la main mise sur la CENI”);¹⁹ it was not one big conspiracy but a multitude of conspiracies happening in parallel. As a result, they argued, the elections were indeed fraudulent, but not in the sense that everything went as planned by one powerful institution.

4. Translational Uncertainty

If “one of the main tasks of sociology is to demonstrate the importance of uncertainty in social life” (Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen 2014, 594), this also applies reflexively to sociological analysis itself. As Schindler (2018) has made clear, a research situation is also a social situation, in which the presence of the researcher affects the object of study and in which the specific relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee determines what data is available in the first place (Fujii 2018). Moreover, multiple translations and transformations occur at various stages between the studied phenomenon and the academic account of it. In the case of N.’s biography, for instance, there are crucial differences between her life and her narration of that life (see Rosenthal 1995), between her narration and my written text (see Schindler and Schäfer 2023), and between her and my understandings of the

¹⁹ Interview with Kadijah Diallo, Dixinn, Conakry, Guinea, 24 November 2016.

phenomena at stake (see Cappai 2008). What kind of account can emerge from these multiple translations and transformations, especially when interviewee and interviewer simultaneously seek to cope with historical divisions of race, class, and gender (see Crenshaw et al. 1996), while working across languages and “cultures” (see Mijić 2013)? Finally, since all of these differences and complexities bear their own uncertainties, whose uncertainties is this research ultimately about?

Biographies like N.’s evoke these methodological and ethical questions in a particularly drastic way. My subjectivity as a basis for understanding her life and my academic take on her everyday sociability become salient problems, especially in cross-cultural research and in a context permeated by various power imbalances. Since the latter frequently make me question whether I am a legitimate chronicler of her lived experiences, I am all the more grateful that N. routinely puts these issues on the table, as when she saw me explain our project to friends and colleagues as a project about uncertainty. Even the word “uncertainty” (in French “incertitude”) sounded strange to her. What was this supposed to mean? That her life was a life of uncertainty? Was this how I was going to frame her? Besides the fact that it sounded negative, and that N. did not want her life to be framed around an absence of anything, her own feeling was not that she lacked certainty, and by no means more than anybody else. As a provider of stability, at least to her family, and given her agile sense of business, N. is actually mostly quite confident that she will end up proud – and rich, too. So whose uncertainties was I talking about?

Importantly, N.’s irritation was not just about the concept, which she later accepted. It was more generally about who has the power over the overall frame. Who is this biography for? What is it good for? In whose interest is it? As N. observed in a conversation with me and two other European members of our research team:

Modern colonization, we’re still in that [...]. You’ve colonized us, we’re still in it because we still need to be you to feel good. Here, we, we follow you, we imagine you, all our reflections, everything, it’s you. But what do you do to make us autonomous and independent? What do you show? You just say, “Ah you see, that’s what happened, it’s very interesting.” You’re ahead of the game, you know that, we are [inaudible]. But what can we do about it, it’s already happened. You see. Mmm, I don’t know if you get it.²⁰

The end of this extract (“Mmm, I don’t know if you get it”) leaves it open whether N. believes that I, or we as academics, understand where she is coming from and whether we can do the right thing with that understanding. In the same vein, it remains an open question whether N. and I can understand her life in sufficiently similar ways – and who defines what “sufficient” means? N. has responded to this question, as usual, in radically different ways, ranging from “We are together. You are me” (“Won tan. Toi, c’est moi”)

²⁰ Conversation between N. and Aurélien and E., Minière, Conakry, Guinea, September 2022.

to “You are a bourgeois son. You know my side [perspective]?” (“Toi, t’es un fils bourgeois. Tu connais mon côté?”) – the latter as a rhetorical question with an implied negative answer. In the middle of that spectrum, she also argued that working on her biography is not a question of whether it succeeds or fails, or about arriving at a correct interpretation, but about trying to develop an evolving sense of mutual understanding, including an understanding of our misunderstandings and perhaps unbridgeable differences in interpretation (see also Diagne 2013, 7).

The possibility of unbridgeable differences in understanding N.’s life is accompanied by the risk that N. and I may have different interests as to what audiences and purposes the biography should serve. Both our motives have shifted over time. While N. may have initially sought to situate her “self as capital in the narrative economy,” as Burchardt (2016) aptly terms it when speaking about HIV-positive AIDS activists in South Africa, her HIV infection is no longer the center of interest of the biography, and N. even wanted to erase her HIV diagnosis from her biography at some point, especially when the *kongossa* in France ran high about her infection. At a later point, her strategy of anonymizing her biography was geared towards being able to tell the truth about what marked her, and certainly not towards her visibility in the realm of NGOs and international organizations. From our recent conversations, in which N. also mentioned that she fears that she might die prematurely, my own impression is that N. tells her life increasingly for herself, for her family, and to leave a trace for society – and perhaps also for sociology. Indeed, when I asked her in 2023 what she wants the book to be about, N. said “I’m not like them. But I want them to know that there are many like me.” The pronoun “them” was, as far as I understood, a reference to “normal” society, the people usually studied by sociology, my discipline that we had talked about several times. While N. acknowledges and appreciates sociology’s commitment to careful and non-judgmental observation, she also assumes, quite correctly I would argue, that life-worlds like hers are sociologically underrepresented. “My life is the night,” N. would say, for example, arguing that social relations are completely different from the daytime settings in which most sociologists do their research (see also Kosnick 2018). I imagine there to be a slightly subversive aspect of N. in telling her story that relates her motivations to mine as a sociologist.

My own interest in N.’s biography initially revolved around N. as a corrective to my own understanding of Conakry’s urban micro-politics, which I had been studying mainly from the perspective of young men involved in anti-government protests (Philipps 2013). As a woman and as part of “Le POWER,” N. was the opposite, and following her across Conakry and listening to her opened up perspectives to me that I had previously ignored. Moreover, and as mentioned above, her critical stance on what scholars like Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) call the “coloniality” of contemporary power relations and

hierarchies of knowledge overlapped with my own dilemmas as a white European Africanist. Following her subjectivity may have seemed like a way of circumventing some of the epistemological problems associated with my own subjectivity, of (mis)understanding and “writing” cultures in ways that would ultimately resonate with my own frames of reference and those of my academic circles, rather than those of the people I was writing about (Clifford and Marcus 1986). While such an escape is clearly delusional, N. has helped me to situate subjectivity, both hers and mine, as inevitable starting points for understanding the world, and concomitantly as the source of “radical uncertainty,” as Boltanski (2011, 55) calls it.

In relation to the ongoing research project on conspiracism and uncertainty, the risk for the biographical book project on N. is that I impose a theme that bespeaks my institutional situation more than N.’s own concerns. A key challenge will be to make N. a genuine co-producer of the manuscript while delivering on the promise to my employer and producing a text that ideally communicates across sociology and critical African studies. Whatever materializes, in whatever form, must thus straddle a number of divides between different social worlds, donors, speakers, and audiences. As Clifford (1986, 2) argued in the introduction to *Writing Culture*, this liminal character is inherent in ethnographic writing, which poses its questions “at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders.” But while the “Writing Culture” movement initially questioned the ethnographic endeavor with a tentative sense of “liberation” from the previous self-image of producing “true” accounts about “the other” (ibid., 25), today’s concerns over who can legitimately speak for whom is regaining prominence in a comparatively tense political and academic context in which the question of identity looms large (Philipps 2022). Issues of how power relations play into the making of N.’s biography will need to be carefully reflected on without dominating N.’s own account of her life. Again, I am grateful to N. for putting things squarely on the table in this regard. As she made clear in one of our very first conversations in 2014: “But our problems, our problem is that (.) we don’t want you to use us anymore. If we think about the PAST (voice trembles), it hurts us to put up with you. [...] To TALK to you, to BE with you, it really hurts.”

The basis for the present text and the biography in the making is the relationship between N. and myself. Since our first encounter in 2014, this mixture of friendship and research relationship has waxed and waned, but ultimately remained fairly even: it never veered into a romantic relationship, and compared to the ambiguities and crises that we speak about, it featured no major upheavals. Interestingly, nor do I see a big change in how N. talks about herself and the world around her. While she may radically change her positions on a variety of issues, as we have seen, her confident voice and tone have been sustained from the start, and are part of a personae that I have witnessed breaking down only very rarely. For instance, her ways of speaking

hardly change when other people enter the setting in which she is speaking, whether it is her mother or an unknown person, a person of high or low status, a local or a foreigner. My ethnographic observations of her life, as well as conversations with her family and friends in France and Guinea (with and without N. being present), have produced a variety of data beyond the recorded interviews that corroborate the image of an unusually versatile and rhetorically gifted person whose life is a tragic-heroic reiterative process of losing and finding herself.

Introducing N. to the broader research team, including Saikou Sagnane, a Guinean anthropologist, and Aurélien Gillier, a French photographer, and meeting her friends and family in Conakry and France has been crucial in this regard (see also Philipps and Gillier 2023). Allowing for an intersection between different perspectives on N.'s life and social life in general, it has inspired and challenged us, for instance, to go beyond N.'s strong personae as it emerges in the stylized text above. However, building a less heroic and dramatic storyline proves to be a key challenge, first because N.'s "narrative identity" (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann 2004) had initially been driven by the idea of telling her life story to young women diagnosed with HIV and inspiring them to believe in their future, and secondly because of the patterns that emerge from the practice of writing (see Schindler and Schäfer 2021, 2023). Here, the risk in biographical writing is that it all-too-easily succumbs to the "biographical illusion" of life as a story (Bourdieu 1986). In the present article, something curious happened in that regard. As much as I had criticized interpreting uncertainty as a *temporary* crisis and insisted on a more permanent concept of uncertainty, the very pattern of uncertainty-as-crisis reemerges in the previous sketch of N.'s biography. Here, N. finds herself in situations of relative success and power, followed by different kinds of incisions, after which she readjusts, only to be struck again by crisis and uncertainty. I decided to leave that storyline untouched as a cautionary example of how practices of writing can impose their own logics.

5. Discussion

"What makes the topic [of uncertainty] very difficult," argues Achille Mbembe (2000, 265), "is that we, as social scientists, are ourselves in a state of uncertainty regarding the very foundations of our disciplines." This uncertainty runs deep, as Hilary Lawson (2001, ix-x) writes with reference to "our post-modern relativistic age":

We have no body of knowledge, but a range of alternative cultural descriptions. It is not simply that our thoughts and beliefs are seen to be relative to experience, culture, history, and language, but that without access to facts that are not vitiated by the perspective of the observer we have had to

abandon the very possibility of neutrality or objectivity in their traditional sense. Without the possibility of neutrality or objectivity we have in turn lost the capacity to give a description of things, people or events which is not at once at risk of being overturned or abandoned in favour of an alternative perspective. Without the possibility of being able to give such an account of our circumstances we have thereby become unable to give an account of what we mean by what we say, for we have no fixed point from which to identify any particular meaning.

Post- and decolonial scholarship add normative overtones to this predicament, arguing that academic disciplines have themselves contributed to hegemonic perceptions of reality rather than to a valid sense of truth (Srivastava 2012). As the intellectual task of “[u]nmasking is turned back against itself” (Collins 1998, 11), a key focus of postcolonial and decolonial theory is thus to describe and critique knowledge production itself, especially when it gives authority to dominant Western or Northern interests (Mbembe 2008; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Seesemann, and Vogt-William 2022; see also Philipps 2023). While strongly institutionalized disciplines and schools of thought may rely on established scholarly routines and sidestep some of these controversies, inter- and transdisciplinary scholarship is confronted with high levels of uncertainty as to what theoretical battles to pick in this context, and where to situate the empirical material and analysis. This also goes for our biographical research on N. at the interstices of African studies and sociology.

On the one hand, N.’s biography may well be a case in point for the benefits of a stronger integration of sociological, anthropological, and Africanist approaches (see Cappai 2008). Highlighting that, as Comaroff and Comaroff (2012, 5) put it, there is “much south in the north, much north in the south, and more of both to come in the future,” N. simultaneously lives in different geographical spaces. Her transgressions of milieus, norms, and systems of thought make her a vivid example of the late modern subject who is faced with a “multiplication of coexisting interpretations of reality” not only around her but also *within* her, which makes the dividing line between orthodoxy and heterodoxy increasingly difficult to draw (Schnettler 2018, 231, with reference to Peter Berger). Other issues are less amenable to classic sociological frameworks. For instance, the state in Guinea does not reduce complexity or create predictability, quite the contrary: the various contingencies produced by collusion and corruption at the heart of Guinea’s political institutions produce even more uncertainty (Monenembo 2023; Barry 2004), which is arguably contrary to the concept of institutions or systems to begin with (e.g., Luhmann 2002; Boltanski 2014). The plausibility of seeing politics through the lens of conspiracy for N. is a product of growing up in such dynamics of normalized collusion (Bubandt 2023), and of actively trying to harness them to her advantage. In France, the state is equally a producer of uncertainty for N., in the sense that she and many of her friends without legal papers or

French nationality constantly live in fear of being apprehended by the police and endure hyper-precarious circumstances. But the state also gave N. the drugs she needed to survive, and unemployment benefits when needed. N.'s experiences of being a "migrant" in France thus diversify and complexify her thinking about the liminal and mixed-up spaces she lives in. But how does the social scientist deal with these simultaneous overlaps and differences theoretically?

On the other hand, then, while N.'s life may be interpreted as a call for integrating area studies scholarship and sociology, such endeavor is confronted with massive contradictions between heterogeneous academic fields. Even when looking at some of the foundational theories that have inspired the present text, inconsistencies abound as to what kinds of science the respective authors aspire to. AbdouMalik Simone (2022, 23-4), for instance, situates his scholarship in the realm of *abolition*, i.e., as an explicitly political theory working towards "changing everything" in a "world where an atmosphere of anti-blackness prevails." Luc Boltanski (2011, 23) on the other hand highlights the dilemmas of a politically oriented or *critical* sociology when combining "descriptive orientations and normative aims" because the latter tend to overdetermine the former.

Besides this general heterogeneity of social theory frameworks, specific uncertainties also concern the question as to what biographies are good for in sociology. Compared to half a century ago, when Howard Becker defended biographical methods in his classic article "The Life History and the Scientific Mosaic" (1976),²¹ this question appears more difficult to answer today. Becker's concept of the "scientific mosaic," for instance, in which "[each] piece added to a mosaic adds a little to our understanding of the total picture" (Becker 1976, 65-6), rests on a cumulative understanding of knowledge production in the social sciences that has since been called into doubt (Pumain 2005). His concern with scientific theory-building and variable-based explanations speaks to a sociology of the Chicago School that was reaching a state of maturity and consolidation which differs profoundly from today's era of ambiguity, disintegration, and conflict between antagonistic strands of skepticism and scientism (Berthelot 2010, 174). And while Becker believed in the biographical method as a means to promote a "conversation between the classes" and send a "vibrant message from 'down there'" (1976, 70), this conversation has not only failed to bring about the socio-political changes it may have wanted to contribute to. The underlying idea of capturing the voices of the subaltern has also been critiqued as inherently paternalistic and misplaced (Macharia 2016; Spivak 1988; Alcoff 1991). Fourth, and finally, the Chicago School revolved around the idea of an observable, measurable,

²¹ A contemplation about the Chicago School, Becker's ideas were originally published ten years earlier as an introduction to Clifford R. Shaw's "The Jack-Roller" (1966), a biography of a young "delinquent."

patterned, and structured social order, in which social boundaries and spatial borders were largely repetitive and durable (Venkatesh 2013). Many phenomena in today's global context of cultural bricolage (Appadurai 1996), multi-sited realities (Marcus 1995), and situational emergence (Simone 2008) elude such ideas of a stable, measurable, and predictable order (Bröckling et al. 2015; Simone 2022). As Appadurai (1996, 47) argued with regards to “the great traditional questions of causality, contingency, and prediction in the human sciences”:

in a world of disjunctive global flows, it is perhaps important to start asking them [these questions] in a way that relies on images of flow and uncertainty, hence *chaos*, rather than on older images of order, stability, and systematicness. Otherwise, we will have gone far toward a theory of global cultural systems but thrown out process in the bargain. And that would make these notes part of a journey toward the kind of illusion of order that we can no longer afford to impose on a world that is so transparently volatile. [...] This does not mean that the causal-historical relationship among these various flows is random or meaninglessly contingent but that our current theories of cultural chaos are insufficiently developed to be even parsimonious models at this point, much less to be predictive theories, the golden fleeces of one kind of social science.²²

In their diversity and complexity, the above-mentioned issues call for different specific answers, ideas, and approaches that I cannot attempt to address here. The much simpler point I am trying to make by raising them is that uncertainty is not an external phenomenon in the social world, but an integrative part of research and theorizing. While biographical methods are particularly suitable for illustrating how individuals deal with the multiplicity of meanings in increasingly transnational contexts, uncertainty should not be projected or externalized as the biographed person's problem, for it is also a problem for the biographer, at least in the case discussed here.

Finally, if uncertainty can be thought of as a productive condition in everyday life (Cooper and Pratten 2015), there are good reasons for assigning it a similarly positive connotation in academia, especially in interdisciplinary research, which arguably thrives on uncertainty. While the “theoretical understanding of [interdisciplinarity] is often very vague, and sometimes outright confused,” as Macamo and Weber (2021) argue, its productive tension comes from combining “unlikely bedfellows” with contradictory perspectives that necessitate some kind of “overstepping boundaries” from its participants. As such, it can also be thought of as an experimental academic space in which scholars are bound to conceptualize certainty not as the norm, but as a product of their respective theoretical frameworks and disciplinary paradigms, a certainty that may look fairly artificial from the outside. Thus, deep though the contradictions may run between disciplines and academic fields,

²² Italics in original.

interdisciplinary research is still particularly well-equipped to dealing with uncertainty in academic and other social spaces, and also particularly suitable for biographical research, since individual lives naturally fuse psychological, social, economic, political, aesthetic, and ethical concerns.

6. Conclusion

This article has teased out different facets of uncertainty in N.'s narrations of her life and in turning these narrations into an academic text. What makes her life story illuminating with regard to uncertainty is that N. approaches uncertainty as a normal quotidian condition: she routinely accepts it as a companion, casually adding sentences like “Je ne suis plus sûre même de rien” (“I’m not even sure of anything anymore”) to her interpretations in interviews. Biographically, her “certainty constructions” are situational at best – or “contextual” as Zinn (2004, 231) would say: she sees an overall certainty “as fictitious” and uncertainty no longer “in a fundamentally negative manner, but considered to be an opportunity for new events and experiences.” Her juggling, bricolage, and experimentation with multiple repertoires, old and new, is contingent on the particular task at hand. That task may be finding the right connection with the person in front of her – as in grasping the opportunity of bumping into the car of the politician who would later become her partner and key life support – as it may be dealing with profound crisis: although the Buddhist mantras were entirely new to her, N. relied on them as a source of perseverance after being diagnosed with a life-threatening disease that she knew hardly anything about.

As to its social contexts, N.'s biography illustrates a mosaic of mostly urban life-worlds that are often characterized “by a lack of gravity that would hold meanings to specific expressions and actions” (Simone 2008, 30). As exemplified in section 2 by the dictum “Même atamara atanara” (“That’s it, even if it’s not!”) that circulated among Conakry’s youth in the mid-2000s, the question of what is truly the case and what is not is frequently blurred or left ambiguous. As Simone (ibid.) puts it, “there are no bearings, and disorientation is guaranteed. Yet the crisis is dissipated: there is no normality to refer to” (ibid.). These social contexts elude some of the more classic frames of social analysis. They are at odds with methodological nationalism, i.e., the idea that “society” is synonymous with the nation-state, but also with classic anthropological frameworks of ethnic communities. Though her friends in Freetown call her the “Peulh princess,” N. plays with multiple ethnic identities: she is N. when she is Soussou, and A. when she is Peulh), a cultural flexibility that

far exceeds the cultural frameworks that anthropologists have ascribed to Peulh (or Fulani) communities in Conakry (Gordon 2000).²³

While her social environments in Guinea and France differ in various critical respects, N. tends to depict them in their shared pluralistic diversity that limits the extent to which overarching forms of orthodoxy can take hold and specific forms of heterodoxy can be identified. Though N. would reject any kind of reductive pessimism, she also describes them as environments of widespread precariousness and suffering, volatile success, intrigue, and jealousy, especially in France. Akin to what Ashforth (2005, 311-2) calls “spiritual insecurity,” N. and the people around her “live with a vivid apprehension that their sufferings and misfortunes can be products of natural, spiritual, or personal forces and events. Distinguishing which forces are responsible for misfortunes, however, can be extremely difficult” – giving rise to a multitude of rumors, so-called *souloumou souloumoui* in Guinea and *kongossa* in France. In such contexts, “getting to the bottom of things” proves to be a difficult if not useless endeavor, for there are simply too many dissenting voices and varied frameworks of explanations for a true consensus to emerge (Simone 2022, 56).

In this regard, and to return to our initial concern, the conspiracy theories that N. would give vent to, sometimes casually, sometimes fiercely, sometimes ironically, are often metaphorical and tentative in nature, and not embedded in a consolidated ideology, as suggested by most Western scholarship that views conspiracy theories through the lens of contemporary right-wing populism (Kelkar 2019; Sampson 2021; Tucker et al. 2018; Hochschild 2016). Rather, they are based on her own experiences of politics as an art of collusion, whether in the transnational settings in Conakry, or in the micro-politics of the French city she lives in. And finally, they are an outcome of her position as an African living in Europe who is seeking to make sense of the injustices and the suffering afflicting her and her people, to which she says “sometimes I blame the people, sometimes I blame the system.”²⁴ The uncertainties implicit in such liminal positions are myriad, inevitable, and potentially disorienting. At the same time, as this article has shown, they can be used productively and should be considered with a critical distance from the security and certainty fictions constructed both in social life and in the social sciences (Wohlrab-Sahr 1992, 10).

²³ Moreover, it is important to point out that the transnational backdrop to N.’s biography is not a product of her moving to France. The urban spaces that N. navigated in Conakry are already deeply cosmopolitan and multiple in nature (Simone 2020).

²⁴ Interview with N., Minière, Conakry, Guinea, September 2022.

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Introduction

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Doing Global Sociology: Qualitative Methods and Biographical Becoming after the Postcolonial Critique
- An Introduction.

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Contributions

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“Stop it with Mommy and Daddy!” Analyzing How Accounts of People in Prison Change with Their
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