

Introduction

Technologies and infrastructures of trust

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Abstract

What do we mean when we talk about trust? Contemporary discourses figure trust variously as a problem, an aspiration, an object of intervention, and something to be dispensed with all together. While the current moment demands new ways of thinking about trust, so too does scholarly work on trust demand similar renewal and reconsideration. To accomplish this, we depart from approaches that engage trust as a diagnostic for analysing other phenomena or objects of study, often with an emphasis on its instrumental importance. Our special issue instead approaches trust as something that itself needs to be problematised. The individual articles demonstrate the theoretical and methodological possibilities afforded through ethnographic study of the practices, technologies, and infrastructures that are often claimed as necessary to produce or sustain it.

Keywords: ethnography, infrastructure, social theory, technologies, trust

This special issue develops a critical anthropology of trust, and inquires into the technologies, infrastructures, and material practices that accompany efforts to identify, enunciate, and stabilise it. As concerns with ‘fake news’—from COVID-19 conspiracies to climate denialism to the ‘Big Lie’ of US election fraud—dominate popular narratives and preoccupy liberal political institutions; when major audit firms locate the production of trust at the core of their business while Bitcoin advocates herald a new age of trustlessness; and as artificial intelligence and blockchain inaugurate real-time material transformations of the relations in which trust is embedded, we seek to stimulate ethnographic attention to the technologies, infrastructures, and material practices through which trust is said to be made, managed, obviated, or transformed. While ‘trust talk’ (see Corsín Jiménez 2011) often centres on how to build trust, or what enables and sustains it, such conversations increasingly hinge on whether trust is necessary or on how the need for it might be overcome.



In this introduction and the articles that follow, we investigate the theoretical and methodological possibilities afforded through ethnographic study of the practices, technologies, and infrastructures that are often claimed as necessary to produce or sustain trust and, increasingly, to circumvent it altogether. Though trust has long been associated with personal or social ties and intimacies (Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016), this collection shifts focus toward the material, institutional, and social practices and technologies that seek to produce trust. Putting technical and infrastructural work at the centre of our inquiry, then, this special issue asks how thinking through the material and social technologies of trust can expand ethnographic understandings of the work trust does across contemporary social worlds. What work do trust talk and trust technologies do, and what else is made to work in the name of trust? How is trust salvaged by, obviated by, or emerging out of, a proliferating array of political technologies and infrastructures?

Defining exactly what trust is has been the subject of scholarly reflection across a range of disciplines. Trust is a conceptual stalwart of liberalism, economics, and philosophy, and has served as a vehicle for powerful normative aspirations to the point that it is taken for granted as a universal human affect. In this sense, trust—as a sentiment, an aspiration, or a culturally meaningful ideal—is one possible answer to the problem of human intersubjectivity. Over the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, modes of audit, certification, inspection, and surveillance have proliferated with the aim of generating and maintaining trust, moving from realms of finance and accounting into public services such as health and education, and further still to agriculture, food production, human rights, development practice, environmental management, and beyond. Such technical and infrastructural transformations of trust are not unprecedented; from double-entry book-keeping and handwritten signatures to body cams and two-step verification, technical objects and practices have offered an abiding means to intervene in, create, or supersede trusting relations. But at a time when rising authoritarianism and rapid digitalisation challenge liberal ideologies, while liberalism's own illiberal foundations fracture it from within, how actors conceive of the forms and contours of trust—even its importance or necessity as a normative virtue that have long bound it to liberal institutions—necessarily shift too.

Just as much contemporary social, political, and economic life demands new ways of thinking about and theorising trust, so too does scholarly work on trust demand similar renewal and reconsideration. As we detail in this introduction, a necessary step in this process involves examining and provincialising extant scholarship on trust itself, probing why and how trust appears as a particular preoccupation of liberal political world-making (Giddens 1990; Luhmann 2017; Putnam 2000). This special issue thus also presents an effort to understand, as Marilyn Strathern proposed in her EASA 2020 keynote lecture, how and why 'for a certain kind of modern subject, trust is a default position' (2021) and to query this supposition and its 'terms of engagement'. Building on this insight, we suggest that contemporary debates around trust and its contours point not only to problems of fraud, misinformation, and political polarisation but also to increasing recognition

of the limits of the subject who can default to trust (to paraphrase Strathern). Amid structural racism, austerity, extraction, and harm, the fragility of trust becomes a site for interrogating the historical legacies and contemporary transformations that sometimes articulate as mistrust and suspicion, as well as solidarity and steadfastness, in the present.

This special issue departs from approaches frequently taken by other disciplines that often engage trust as a diagnostic for analysing other phenomena or objects of study. Recent debates about increasing COVID-19 vaccination rates illustrate this well, as ‘mutual trusting relationships among institutions, experts, and citizens’ (Bucchi 2021; OECD 2021) came to be frequently identified as a crucial factor to improve vaccination rates. Our inquiry takes statements such as these not as conclusive, but as points of departure. Yet ethnographers, we note, are not immune from trust’s insistent and slippery analytical claim. For instance, when presenting her research on how smallholder farmers in northern India navigate the organic certification process, Shaila Seshia Galvin has reflected on the frequency with which she was asked by academic audiences ‘so, were these farmers really organic?’ Over time, she notes that she came to see this question as ethnographically significant in its own right, for it too sheds light on how the contours and relations of truth, trust, and mistrust are fashioned not only in the certification processes she sought to understand but also through the cumulative weight of often unspoken expectations surrounding the ends of ethnographic practice itself. As this example shows, claims regarding trust and mistrust are relational and dynamic, sometimes foregrounded, at other times surfacing unexpectedly during the course of research practice. Taken together, they shape a multivalent political, affective, and ethnographic object, which appears as often as absence or uncertainty (can you really trust it?) as it does a positive claim (trust me!).

Following these ethnographic queries, then, we argue that for trust to be analytically useful it demands empirical investigation in its own right. In this approach, we depart from scholarship that employs trust as an explanation for other things (ranging from vaccination rates to societal cohesion, institutional stability, neo-liberal governance, and so on). Instead, together with those things with which it is so often bound in tense and complex relations—uncertainty, doubt, suspicion, and mis- or dis/trust—it constitutes an object of study (Trouillot 2003). Trust, we argue, is something that itself needs to be problematised, its status as a liberal political ideal and a subject of scholarly production (as well as the relation between these two) should not be naturalised (Mühlfried 2018).

Toward a critical anthropology of trust

To problematise and de-naturalise trust in the ways we have described thus far, we attend to what we call the infrastructures and technologies of trust. Like more familiar forms of infrastructure such as shipping networks, logistics systems, built environments, and media, what we are calling infrastructures and technologies of trust constitute ‘dense social, material, aesthetic, and political formations’ (Anand

et al. 2018: 3). By thinking with technologies, we follow scholarship in science and technology studies that conceives of technologies as material objects together with ‘the assemblage of skilled practices and associated logics’ on which those objects rely (Suchman et al. 1999). Accounts of infrastructure, meanwhile, have emphasised the systemic qualities that allow them to act as ‘substrates’ (Star 1999). Infrastructures, in this view, ‘create the grounds on which other objects operate’ (Larkin 2013).

Like other domains of infrastructural practice, then, technologies and infrastructures of trust assemble material objects, practices, logics, and modes of organisation that enable broader projects of politics, market-making, development practice, and social relations. They also may require invisible or unrecognised forms of tinkering and caretaking (Knorr-Cetina 1999; Mol et al. 2010). And, just as large socio-technical systems are often theorised in and through moments of breakdown (Dourish and Bell 2007; Star 1999) so too do moments of rupture and failure make evident expectations and practices of trust-making (Degani 2021; Jackson 2014). Most crucially, however, approaching trust through the technologies and infrastructures within which it is articulated, negotiated, or obviated transforms an irresolvable intersubjective problem (can you really trust them?) into a space of ethnographic engagement with the many ways that intersubjective relations are constituted.

Cumulatively, this collection seeks to better understand these dynamic qualities by tracing the technologies, infrastructures, and material practices through which trust is claimed to be made and made visible. Rather than mobilising trust as an object whose meaning is always already given or assumed, it instead enquires into diverse projects that seek to produce it. Following feminist interventions into trust (Baier 1986; Yanagisako 2002), we centre questions of power and hierarchy in order to examine how relationships of obligation and inequality complicate liberal understandings of trust. Highlighting development practice, pharmaceutical regulation and provision, extractive capitalism, and human–animal encounters, the articles attend to the technologies and infrastructures through which trust and adjacent terms—including mistrust, suspicion, faith, and solidarity—are produced, managed, eroded, and contested. In so doing, the articles suggest that projects to create, maintain, or obviate trust through technologies of power, governance, transparency, and surveillance become sites for understanding how histories of colonial and neoliberal extraction, aid, and austerity generate affective and technical politics in the present. These approaches reveal technologies and infrastructures of trust as ‘non-innocent’ (Murphy 2016), not simply resolving conditions of mistrust or suspicion but also entangled with and shaped by the histories that generate ‘ugly feelings’ of scepticism, suspicion, or fraud (Ngai 2007).

The collaboration that has led to this special issue began in the few months before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In those bewildering early weeks of lockdowns, stuck at home and confined to our Zoom boxes, puzzles about trust and its relations which had initially been piqued by our respective research (Galvin 2018; McKay 2022; Weichselbraun 2019) spilled well beyond them as we reflected on how the sites and interplay of trust, uncertainty, suspicion, doubt, and mistrust

seemed to shape and be shaped by government and institutional responses to the pandemic. Here, trust was deeply and visibly imbricated in multiple mutual relationalities. At times, a Durkheimian drama of the sources of social order seemed to play out before our eyes, but in ways that starkly situated the pandemic in relation to deep and painful inequalities and forms of violence. This moment thus attuned us more acutely to the ways in which infrastructures and technologies of trust are inescapably entangled with historical and ongoing sedimentations of power. It is, then, also out of these conditions of our collaboration that we articulate the possibilities of a critical anthropology of trust.

Provincialising and problematising trust

Trust has been a central concept in much of twentieth century social science and has served as a core explanation for the very possibility of the constitution of complex social order. It has been characterised as a feature of individual or social psychology (Tanis and Postmes 2005), a choice or strategy of rational actors (Gambetta 2009; Hardin 2006), a sentiment or affect (Yanagisako 2002), as well as a more generalised disposition or attitude (Giddens 1990; Putnam 2000; Simmel 1950). It has been understood as a result and/or condition of proximity, familiarity, and intimacy, conceived of as a manner of relating the future to the present and of managing social complexity that arises from ‘the freedom of others’ (Luhmann 2017). Invariably, in this scholarship, trust is taken to be indispensable to social life: it is the glue that holds society together, or more poetically, the ‘atmosphere’ in which all that which matters to humans is said to thrive (Bok 1978). Trust, whether as analytic or as social experience, describes so many different yet overlapping qualities that it must be described as polythetic (Needham 1975).

Contemporary scholarship across the social sciences has situated trust as a defining characteristic and core concern of modernity. Matthew Carey observes that in many disciplines trust forms the core object of study (2017: 1). Various efforts to prise open the black box of trust, to describe it analytically in terms of what it is and what it does have yielded proliferating definitions, categories, and subtypes. Yet, with a few exceptions (Frevort 2013; Seligman 1997; Shapin 1994), the situated historical and social conditions and circumstances in which trust emerges as a normative, if not to say, ideological, concern, have largely remained unexamined. Instead, trust has often been implicated in evolutionary and hierarchical accounts of modernity, and their associated progress narratives. Setting up what has become an entrenched distinction between particularised and generalised trust, Anthony Giddens (1990) cites the shift from trust located in personal relationships to impersonal trust in institutions as a defining characteristic of modernity (Schilke et al. 2021). Francis Fukuyama’s (1995) distinction between high- and low-trust societies has yielded many ideologically loaded efforts to quantify, measure, and rank trusting relations—levels of trust have been plotted against GDP per capita, as well as levels of corruption and crime (Kalish et al. 2021; Wilke and Holzwart 2008). By positing trust as fundamental to modern social and political life, significant

strands of social theory and the social sciences are also necessarily implicated in these approaches.

Expectations for trust have also been powerfully mobilised in the authoritative production of knowledge and the legitimacy of modern institutions such as science and the university. In his account of the emergence of modern science, for instance, Steven Shapin observes that trust is the ‘moral [aspect] of the collective nature of knowledge’ (1994: 7), linking dispersed practitioners and observers into shared projects of truth-making. Yet the role of trustworthy and thus truthful observer was, in the eighteenth-century scientific worlds with which Shapin was concerned, reserved for gentlemen who were able to speak freely and without constraint and thus to be reliable sources of knowledge. Bruno Latour, too, places trust at the centre of science and its institutional development, arguing that the emergence and endurance of scientific truth claims depends on unfolding trust in institutions over time (2013). These examples reveal how concerns with trust have been central to the formation of liberal institutions, including universities, yet also often leave implicit the manifold ways that trustworthiness comes to rest on formations of race, class, and institutional and intersubjective power. As a result, questions of power, difference, and coloniality have been obscured.

Anthropologists and historians—for instance, in the work of Ute Frevert (2013) or Adam Seligman (1997)—have made productive inroads to *provincialising* trust as a concept that, while rooted in a particular genealogy as we have described, nonetheless frequently projects a universalising analytic force. Scholars such as Alberto Corsín Jiménez, Carey and Florian Mühlfried have questioned the normative hold which trust as a sociological category and exemplary notion of modernity has held on the social sciences. While Corsín Jiménez implores us to ‘resist the temptations of a sociology of trust’ (2011: 178), Carey and Mühlfried problematise trust’s absences. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the Moroccan High Atlas and the Georgian Republic—contexts in which, it is suggested, trust is not the ‘default position’ of a ‘certain modern subject’—Carey and Mühlfried respectively interrogate what mistrust is doing, what it enables, how it operates. They observe that the absence of trust does not spell the absence of social relations. Still others have examined how suspicion, mistrust, or betrayal may be more generative sites of analytic investigation, through studies of witchcraft (Ashforth 2005; Geschiere 2013), magic and cons (Newell 2019) capitalism and kinship (Yanagisako 2002), health and medicine (Geissler 2013), and domains of state and private action (Elyachar 2012). By being alert to the normative weighting of trust which tends to reify its relation with the social, this special issue also attends to how material, technical, and infrastructural work, purportedly in the service of trust, generates less-than-trusting social relations.

In many settings, lamentations about the absence of trust, or its corrosion, communicate that whatever it is, it would be better *with* trust. Scholars have frequently described trust as a positive precondition, an affective orientation that enables solidarity or collective action, or that is cultivated, policed, or ensured through practices of making trustworthy. As Julie Billaud argues (this issue), these

approaches seek to ‘operationalise’ trust. Often, infrastructures are erected in order to (re)produce trust as affect by generating security (see McClellan, this issue). Yet others have observed that claims to and about trust often appear not in conditions of certainty or stability, where it may be implicit or seen as unnecessary but in conditions (and in spite) of uncertainty and upheaval in order to achieve specific ends. Describing efforts to move medicines across the Iraqi border, for example, Kali Rubaii (2020) notes that ‘trust networks’ assembled disparate actors with diverse, sometimes competing, motives, and few expectations for successful outcomes. In such conditions, she argues, to articulate mistrust is to corrode the fragile and fleeting arrangements through which such networks are assembled.

Attending to work undertaken in the name of trust highlights a central paradox illuminated by the articles in this issue. By articulating or even demanding trust, the technologies and infrastructures engaged in these efforts not only fail to overcome mistrust but may also intensify it. For example, audit logics create a receding horizon for the ‘locus of trust’, leading to a ‘regress of mistrust’ as Michael Power identified (1994: 11). Deployed in the name of transparency or good governance, technologies of trust also articulate relations of historical suspicion. When some medicines and not others are subject to inspection (McKay, this issue), or when global health projects audit per diems and payments (Biruk, this issue), efforts to ensure trust also reveal the historical and colonial dynamics that shape contemporary global health. In this way, technologies of transparency and the operationalisation of trust as a tool of governance are premised on and may intensify mistrust and suspicion. Tracing the technical and infrastructural dimensions of such trust-making efforts, then, reveals persistent, socially and historically contingent entanglements between trust and its adjacent and opposite sensibilities and dispositions.

Most critically, this opens up questions of power and politics. Engaging trust ethnographically demands attending to how trust operates hierarchically and within diffuse relations of power. In this regard, both the eighteenth-century gentleman-scientists described by Shapin and contemporary voters whose preferences are measured by trust barometers, underscore how positing trust as a ‘social asset’ (Corsín Jiménez 2005: 65), or a form of social and even material capital, is ideologically and normatively inflected work. More often than not, trust is unevenly distributed, and what is claimed as generalised trust is unequally accessed, and constitutive of diverse political and governmental orders. Feminist philosopher Annette Baier, for example, criticised accounts of trust that presumed ‘cool, distanced relations between more or less free and equal adult strangers, say, the members of an all-male club’ (1986: 248). Departing from an analysis of what characterises trust between a husband and wife, Baier notes ‘exploitation and conspiracy, as much as justice and fellowship, thrive better in an atmosphere of trust’ (1986: 231–32). We posit that injunctions to trust and complaints about insufficient trust often conceal hierarchies, role expectations, and power relations, notions which have largely been underspecified in much of the literature on trust. Let us train our ethnographic alertness; when people lament a lack of trust, we should ask: who is asking for it, from whom, and why?

Tracing trust ethnographically

By training ethnographic attention on how and from whom trust is invoked, assessed, and even demanded, the articles in this special issue are concerned with the complex range of sentiments and relations that trust encompasses and generates including faith and solidarity as well as uncertainty, doubt, suspicion, and ignorance. They trace the deep historicity of power relations through which technologies and infrastructures of trust condition, promise, or even demand relations of trust, as in Julie Billaud's description of development interventions that posit trust as both the problem and the solution to political violence and in Cal Biruk's description of how global health worlds rely on and disavow the colonial infrastructures that condition contemporary mistrust and suspicion.

None of us set out to study 'trust' but rather encountered it in different sites in different ways: as surplus, as lacking, as constantly contested. In contrast to high-level sociological theorising of trust, anthropological approaches can trouble trust by examining its normative dimensions and its culturally organising force. Through long-term empirical research in specific settings, anthropologists unsettle dominant practices and assumptions regarding who is perceived to be rich or poor in trust and in what contexts. In these articles, infrastructures and technologies of trust emerge as key sites through which to understand divergences in interests, power, and knowledge.

Kate McClellan's account of 'Refuge: Vital Trust beyond the Human', for example, demonstrates the centrality of trust—between humans and captive non-humans, and between animal rehabilitation experts and their Jordanian neighbours—to enable practices of animal refuge and rehabilitation. At Al Ma'wa, a wild animal sanctuary in northern Jordan, caretakers rehabilitate dozens of animals rescued from warzone zoos in Syria, Iraq, and Gaza through practices and activities designed to heal trauma and build bonds of trust by providing an environment in which animals can feel safe. Through painstaking adherence to a regular feeding schedule as well as carefully chosen 'enrichment' activities, the caretakers take pride when the animals indicate through their behaviour that they have learned to 'trust' this new environment. The site itself is designed to build trust into the landscape. Its infrastructure, geography, and security measures all enable 'a promising rather than forbidding component of the animals' post-war refuge'. McClellan's account thus highlights how material infrastructure and practices entailing intensive securitisation engender claims to trustworthiness across human–nonhuman divides and across divergent political and social orientations, while also naturalising hierarchical relations of domination between captors and captives as relations of trust.

Landscapes of securitisation are similarly apparent in Julie Billaud's study of how trust becomes an operational strategy and political technology in humanitarian interventions of the International Committee of the Red Cross. For humanitarian workers and organisations, Billaud observes that trust is a 'governing technology' and 'an important resource whose value is proportional to its inherent elusiveness

and scarcity'. As an operational strategy, it is mobilised in and through the figure of the ICRC delegate, as well as in evidence-based, technocratic procedures that link the management of data to the biopolitical management of populations. Yet, as with other articles featured in this special issue, mistrust and suspicion are insistently present alongside these varied efforts to mobilise trust, caught up here in enduring entanglements of humanitarian care and control.

Cal Biruk's article, 'When partners are suspect(s): Trust, transparency and racialised suspicion in global health infrastructures', also asks how, for, and from whom trust becomes a demand, this time in global health settings. Biruk considers how tools and technologies of audit and accounting that are mobilised in the name of trust and transparency obscure, even as they amplify, the racialised suspicion that is the grounds upon which trust becomes a concern in global health governance. Attending to aid distribution mechanisms in Malawi, Biruk shows how long-standing colonial tropes of Africans as untrustworthy, unreliable, and greedy, figure into contemporary suspicions about corruption or 'leakage' of money and other resources in aid ecosystems. Analysing the rollout of mobile money technology for distributing per diems to African partners in the name of transparency—and the celebratory discourse around it—they show how a tool meant to increase trust within a system gave way to strained relations and mistrust within interpersonal relations, all the while reinforcing the idea that African partners are suspects who are not to be trusted. Analysing trust talk and trust-building tools common to global health and development worlds from the vantage of unequal relations that span the Global North and Global South reveals that such discourses and technologies are premised on racialised suspicion and mistrust.

While Biruk's contribution examines the intensification of colonial practices, Adela Zhang's article, 'Trust as affective infrastructure: Constructing the firm/community boundary in resource extraction', describes how practices of extractive capitalism in Peru transform local hierarchies and social relations in ways that renders them unfamiliar. Zhang shows how trust as sentiment is conceptualised as an infrastructural asset—a resource for resource extraction. The mining company's efforts to build trust produces a *desconfianza* that is widely lamented, as locals can no longer rely on established trust routines. Zhang demonstrates how capitalist practices that attempt to secure the trust and goodwill of the community end up generating feelings of betrayal by compromising previously trustworthy community actors as direct or indirect beneficiaries of the mining company's activities.

The final article in the collection, 'Essentialising medicines: Trust, markets, and industrial origins in pharmaceutical "track and trace" programmes' by Ramah McKay, also situates trust and trust-making practices within historic and contemporary formations. Following digital technologies used to ensure drug safety, McKay shows how they not only aim to make medicines trustworthy but also mobilise and contest long-standing narratives of solidarity and suspicion, often couched in terms of national origin and identity. Following these technologies as they move medicines from sites of production to consumption shows how, rather than displacing social knowledge with data, technologies of trust rely on situated knowledge and

animate social identities that also help to stabilise notions of trustworthiness and suspicion in medical markets.

Together, these articles complicate the common sense of both sociological as well as lay notions of trust as 'social glue'. They do so by demonstrating the extensive technological and infrastructural investments required to render projects of health, development, extraction, care, securitisation, and surveillance successful from the perspective of those who advocate trust. Analyses of transparency regimes have often claimed that practices of audit and investigation both promise and require trust—in bureaucracy, technology, and transparency itself. Similarly, acts of technological faith animate many of the trust infrastructures described here, as when mobile technologies are used to cultivate faith in pharmaceutical safety or alleviate suspicions of corruption in global health aid distribution systems. Yet through historicised ethnographic attention to how and where trust becomes a problem, and for whom, the articles in this collection also demonstrate the many domains in which trust has become an unreachable political horizon. They show how histories of inequality, extraction, and suspicion often haunt techniques of transparency, verification, and solidarity that promise, but often cannot deliver, trusting relations (von Schnitzler 2016). Taking technologies and infrastructures as a starting point for ethnographic analysis, the articles dwell on the broader conditions in which medical safety, extractive politics, global health knowledge-making, or peace-building initiatives are rooted and the role of technological and infrastructural logics within them (Mains 2012). By situating technologies within the density of historical and political circumstances, they reveal the close and complex interlinkages between technologies of trust as material techniques of governance and the relations of power they help to constitute.

Trust as method: Ethnography and 'rapport'

We began this introduction with an anecdote in which the ethnographer was asked a version of the question, can you really trust this? We conclude by reflecting briefly, as many of the articles do in more detail, on the resonance between ethnographic investigations of trust as an object and ethnographic engagements with trust as a method. Throughout this special issue, we attend to how trust and related concepts appear in our ethnographic engagements, the social and political work they do, and the collectivities of human and nonhuman actors, knowledges, technologies, and material and political infrastructures they assemble. Yet trust is not only an ethnographic object but also a key technology for ethnographic practice, glossed by terms like 'rapport', implicit in fraught notions of 'access', and governed (often inadequately) through practices of 'consent'.

Like the technologies of trust described in these articles, in ethnographic practice 'rapport' too brings affective connotations (in this case of amiability) to technical practice (generating knowledge) across relations of power (the researcher and the researched). Like other technologies of trust, rapport both exceeds and is inextricable from anthropology's colonial legacies and the liberal institutions of knowledge pro-

duction and regulation that continue to govern much of academic anthropological practice and the institutions in which it is embedded. And, like other practices of trust, rapport becomes both an affective substrate through which knowledge can be generated and a quality that is most obvious at moments of breakdown or absence (Star 1999), as when ethnographic relations meet their limits (Strathern 2021).

Following the technologies and infrastructures of trust, these articles build on the feminist insight that the material, technical, and embodied dimensions of affective and emotional states, including trust, are politically important (Ahmed 2004). As technologies of trust move through and structure the fields with which these articles are concerned, they serve an orienting function, shaping how trust moves, is distributed, demanded, and deployed (Ahmed 2006). Technologies of trust thus not only make visible but also maintain long-standing and often colonial hierarchies of power articulated in atmospheres of suspicion and mistrust that technical interventions aim to resolve. By articulating and enunciating the affective grounds on which trust-making practices rest, technologies and infrastructures of trust also render visible, present, and sometimes irresolvable the forms of unknowing, misrecognition, and incommensurability to which they are addressed. At the same time, the articles bring to the fore the ethnographic relations through which trust becomes visible as a technical problem and which themselves rely on relations of trust, vulnerability, and rapport.

As a method, ethnography simultaneously summons and problematises ‘trust’ as Kyrstin Mallon Andrews (2023) compellingly argues. It demands relations of vulnerability, mutual risk, and obligation even as it stages power relations and hierarchies (Leighton and Roberts 2020). In this issue, the articles collectively unpack how the ethnographic encounter itself produces situations in which trust or mistrust become salient and ongoing sites of reflection. Technologies of trust, this special issue suggests, not only operate in the technological and infrastructural fields of animal rescue, humanitarianism, global health, and capitalist extraction but also structure our own ethnographic research tools, technologies, and infrastructures—from the conditions that enable interviews and participant observation to the writing of articles and the circulation of knowledge. Asking for whom, and under what conditions, trust is a problem as well as from whom, and under what conditions, it is cultivated, solicited, or demanded, is therefore not only a powerful empirical tool with which to trace technologies and infrastructures of trust in the world but also a site of generative ethnographic reflexivity that opens up broader questions on the forms of subjectivity, relationality, and power on which ethnography also relies.

Our goal has been to show how technologies and infrastructures of trust serve as mechanisms that attempt to constrain and control both intentions and reactions. Here we see what ethnographers might have in common with a mining company: we, too, are concerned with managing how others see us and engage with our projects. At the same time, such management is never completely possible. To examine technologies and infrastructures of trust is to be more attentive to how cooperation shades into control; for it is in the name of trust that power moves through sentiment, aspiration, and ideal across a variety of relations and technical practices.

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