How Not to Fall in Love

Mistrust in Online Romance Scams

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Hello my name is Seidu just saw your profile and just cant believe it we still have people like u on earth,well I can see my destination and i can hear my call,no more hesitation this time i am going for all out cause i know where light this road leads to and i therefore will rise and believe this dream will come true and will soul the sky.I love to get in touch with some one special just like u, .would love the one to guide me and stay by me and set me free therefore know it will come to pass.but i wish I could read your mind and u could read mine as well. (...) take care love and light. (Email from Seidu, 2010[1])

These lines are from an email that Seidu, a 24-year-old Ghanaian scammer, sent to Lina, a 50 year old woman from Lithuania.[2] It marks the beginning of an exchange of romantic emails. Seidu took on a fictional persona, a construction worker from Alaska called Albert Duncan. After one month of writing ever more passionate love emails, he wrote that his son got ill during his business trip in Ghana and his credit cards had stopped working. Naturally, he asked his newfound love for money. This is a standard script – referred to in scammers' vocabulary as 'format' – for a romance scam.[3] Since the 2000s, romance fraud has become one of the most widespread and successful forms of cybercrime.

When I was given access to Seidu's email account, what astonished me most was how many of the women responding to his emails perceived them as credible and to what extent they imbued them with emotions and meanings. A Chinese woman writes: 'I feel I come back to the teenager when reading and

1 | Spelling unchanged.

2 | Names, dates and locations have been anonymized.

3 | A 'format', the word scammers use for a genre, consists of both the story and the procedure of a certain type of fraud. In other words, a format is both about content, for instance a tale about hidden gold, and the script, for instance the use of an arc of suspense in romance scams.

writing to you (...). We love each other even before we meet in person, unbelievable for me! But I hope we will love each other more an more after meet, and have a lasting relationship, live with each other, and our John (Seidu's fake son) forever.' A woman in the US writes: 'You have made the sunlight shine in my life, more than you'll ever know.' A British woman first recognized that Seidu was a scammer, but then apologized and sent money again because she felt so enamoured. These women were convinced that they had fallen in love. In other words, they thought they had started a genuine romantic relationship. Yet these feelings solely originate in an online email correspondence with someone who lives far away.

From an anthropological perspective, our astonishment about people believing so strongly in emails from someone they have never met offline is as interesting as the respondents' genuine reactions. This astonishment suggests a shared understanding of online interactions as being initially untrustworthy and as not being able to foster genuine romantic emotions by themselves. It is this mode of generalized mistrust that scammers have to engage with in romance scams. They have to convince their targets to suspend their mistrust to such an extent that they send money to someone they have never met face-to-face.

Based on a close reading of email correspondence and fieldwork in Ghana, this paper explores romance scams as a particular form of online, transnational interaction. As the interaction largely consists of writing and reading, the first question is how scammers write romantic texts that are both credible and fascinating to their audience. Secondly, this chapter examines how the women believe in, doubt or reject those stories in the course of the email interaction. Scammers persuade their targets by drawing on and adapting an idiom of romantic love to create this credibility. Despite the aforementioned quotes, however, the whole interaction takes place in the shadow of mistrust. The women responding to these emails are constantly engaged in practices of mistrust and only temporarily suspend them.

Mistrust is a key aspect of online communication, especially on online dating platforms, because users are painstakingly aware of the differences between front and back stage. Each user on these sites carefully crafts their online persona, and is well aware of the discrepancies between it and their private self. Scholars explore online interactions with Goffman's concept of dramatic interactions, which he originally developed to explore face-to-face interactions such as restaurant visits (Hogan 2010; Robinson 2007). For Goffman, actors constantly suspend their disbelief, or to phrase is differently, suspend their mistrust. They do this because they are interested in upholding a 'veneer of consensus' in any given situation (Goffman 1959: 3). In offline interactions in order for the collusion between performers and audience to succeed, the passage between 'front stage' and 'back stage' – in which 'illusions and im-

pressions are painstakingly fabricated' – should be hidden and closed (Goffman 1959: 69-70). On dating platforms, however, the back stage's existence is obvious to all, because all users metaphorically walk this passage when they craft their online persona. Additionally, the other's back stage is not closed but absolutely barred due to the anonymity of the interaction. Users largely have auctorial freedom concerning their online persona's gender, age, location and backstory. In other words, these sites allow an unchecked presentation of the self; to confirm this it is enough to try the sites yourself. As Mühlfried argues in this book's introduction, mistrust is a mode of relating to other actors, and the level of complexity in online interactions make it a dominant mode in this landscape. In contrast to the interactions that Goffman describes, interactions on dating platforms are characterized not by a 'veneer of consensus' but by a veneer of mistrust. Such transnational email correspondences are also a site at which different understandings of the relationship between front and back stage clash; or, in other words, what degree of inconsistencies people accept between the performances on these two stages.

The online conversations enabled by dating platforms are supposed to lead to an offline date. Yet to even consider such a date, users have to be prepared to suspend mistrust beforehand, a decision predicated only on texts and pictures, which they have received online. All users have to deal with this problem. When looking closely at the email exchange between Seidu and his various victims, it becomes obvious that playing the role of a lover in a romantic relationship with a foreigner is a tremendous challenge for him. He is a young Ghanaian with limited schooling and has to play the role of a romantic lover for women from very different societies so convincingly that his texts evoke real emotions. Like regular users on online dating sites, he has to create a narrative about himself and the potential relationship that is both credible and fascinating, a narrative that convinces them to suspend their mistrust. To enable this suspension, he draws on globally circulating narratives of romantic love and introduces Ghanaian romantic practices to non-African audiences to evoke fascination. Above all, by engaging in narration – in storytelling – he establishes a relationship between him and his reader that in literary studies has aptly been described as a 'narrative contract' (Gabriel 2004: 21). It is this particular relationship that grants the storyteller certain privileges and entices readers – similar to the suspension of disbelief – to suspend their mistrust.

However, these scams are not one-way persuasion strategies but dynamic online interactions. While scammers like Seidu try to tell convincing narratives, the readers are oscillating between maintaining mistrust and believing in the scammers' tales. Exactly because the women's feelings of mistrust endure, the concept of mistrust seems to be more applicable than the concept of gradual developing trust. While a superficial reading of these exchanges would suggest that the responding women believe in these emails, these women are

actually well aware of the differences between front and back stage peculiar to online interactions. Their lingering mistrust becomes apparent when the scammer asks for money, at which point the great majority of responding women explicitly point out the unknowable back stage and stop the interaction. The few women transferring money are aware of the possibility that they are being scammed, they continue to mistrust the scammer. Yet they prefer to continue to suspend their mistrust and to remain in the front stage of the interaction because of the emotional rewards it provides. In his paper on the anthropology of trust, Corsín Jiménez (2011: 193) argues that trust is an inherent quality of relationships which always also contains – and reverts into – mistrust. All relationships are necessarily imbued with both qualities, and the relationship between scammers and their readers brings to the fore the dynamic tension between the two in the course of the interaction.

This paper explores scams as interactions between one particular scammer, Seidu, and the women who respond to him, based on a close reading of these emails.[4] The Ghanaian police provided me with access to the account that contained these email conversations. The Police officers had confiscated it during their criminal investigations of Seidu for fraud.[5] In the course of these investigations I spoke both to him and to one of the defrauded women. However, this paper will largely focus on the way he and the women interacted online via text. Using a confiscated email account for research purposes is ethically difficult. While one side perceived these conversations as private and part of a genuine relationship, the other did not. To deal with this dilemma, this paper anonymizes all participants and only selectively quotes the correspondence. It aims at a non-normative exploration and looks to bring the agency of both sides to the fore.

First, the paper will introduce both actor groups and explain the basic workings of romance scams. Secondly, it will discuss the scammers' emails and their textual practices of telling stories that are credible and fascinating in a framework of underlying doubt. Thirdly, it will explore the way the women react to these emails and develop the dynamics of maintaining and – sometimes – suspending mistrust. Finally, the paper then discusses the distinct understandings of front and back stage – and of mistrust – on both sides of the transnational, online interaction.

4 | This study was supported by the Africa's Asian Options (AFRASO) project at Goethe University Frankfurt, sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. For critical comments, I am grateful to Florian Mühlfried, Ute Röschenthaler, Frank Schulze-Engler, and the two anonymous reviewers, especially their ideas concerning the 'narrative contract'.

5 | This happened during my 16-month-long fieldwork on police work in Ghana (Beek 2016b).

Scams and Romance

Originally created in the USA in the late 1800s, advance fee fraud as an African phenomenon spawned in the late 1980s in Nigeria. While the first scammers mostly told stories about oil and used regular mail, scammers further developed both stories and means of communication, and these fraud schemes spread to other African countries. More recently, African entrepreneurs have carried this fraud schemes to Asian countries. Many scholars understand the origins of scamming as a response to the political and economic marginalization of young people in Africa. Research on scamming has mostly focused on economic scams, and studied these as a symptom of the excesses of global capitalism or corruption in Nigeria (see Smith 2008, Apter 2005). Yet romance scams had already emerged in the early 2000s, with the advent of online dating sites. Since then, the format has become more diversified, targeting both women and men in various dating scenes (Burrell 2012: 73). Since the 2010s, romance scams are probably the most prevalent and prolific format. The common means of communication are emails, phones with fake European numbers, instant messaging and web 2.0 dating platforms.

In some poor neighbourhoods in urban Ghana, many young people engage in cyber fraud, what they call 'browsing'. They experience a huge gap between their meagre income and their necessary expenses, and a gulf between their expectations of advancement and the available opportunities. As one scammer explained to me: 'The middle class is a mirage!' The jobs they want are either not available or are only available with connections. Many of the people engaged in scamming today did not get into this practice with the intention of becoming criminals. During their youth, they wrote letters, emails or chat messages to foreigners out of curiosity. As Burell has shown (2012: 42-5), many young Ghanaians experience internet cafés as spaces in which they can connect with people from the exotic world of the abroad, even if many also hope to receive gifts. A few of them become full-time scammers. They either operate out of internet cafés or, as soon as they have gained sufficient funds, out of their own apartments with laptops. Scammers work in loosely connected groups of 'friends', and depend on each other for knowledge on the inner workings of these schemes and additional support when frauds become more complex.[6] Often they pass on clients to other scammers to proceed with the storyline in such cases. In a typical romance scam targeting a male victim, the first scammer establishes contact via email, then a female friend of his does phone calls. Cassiman (2016) writes in great ethnographic detail about the aspirations and everyday struggles of young scammers. She explores not only how their connections

6 | In a way, all scammers work jointly on new narratives, not as an organized effort but as an effect of co-authorship in their loose groups.

to 'paypals' (victims) abroad is enabled by their friendships among each other, but also how the money they earn destabilizes these social connections.

Seidu, the author of the emails explored here, has a biography similar to that of his peers. When I met him at the police station, he presented himself as a career criminal who is unafraid of the police. At court, his lawyer described him as an innocent family man who had suffered tremendously in prison. In his early emails, he writes to his mother and claims to do well in school, while he is already fully engaged in writing scam emails. He often converses with friends more experienced than him, who send him texts that he can use, outline storylines he can tell and give him stolen private photo albums from American men. Over the years, Seidu became quite successful and managed to acquire a car and a house. Still, his earnings fluctuated dramatically; at one time he wrote to one of his friends: 'brother i need ur aid now, im in very desperate situation, only god knows (...) i dont even have money to send my wife to hospital'. He also has many falling outs with his friends, decrying them as 'heartless' when they do not support him in times of need or fail to return his loans. In contrast to these intense, emotional letters, he uses business vocabulary when conversing with his friends about his scams. Women who respond to his emails he calls 'clients', and his interactions with them 'transactions' or 'deals'.

The victims of romance scams are even a more diverse than the scammers. Worldwide, online dating platforms have become an important medium to search for a partner. Both men and women, hetero-, bi- and homosexuals, people from all countries, educational backgrounds and income levels fall victim to romance scams. Romance scams remain largely invisible because victims feel ashamed and do not report it. Scholars estimate that about 230,000 people fell victim to romance frauds up to 2011 in the UK alone (Whitty and Buchanan 2012: 182). The U.S.-based IC3 reports yearly losses of fifty-five million USD, although the real amounts are probably much higher.[7]

Seidu's email account provides insight into his scamming practices from 2006 to 2010. During this time, he signed up for more than fifty online dating sites, including American, German, Chinese, Lithuanian sites, as well as Indian matrimonial sites. He wrote more than 1,000 emails and had several hundred targets. Seidu searched for people that fit a certain profile, namely women in their 50s. Whitty (2013: 675) interviewed victims and argued that many of them held idealized romantic beliefs. Based on the knowledge provided in these emails, the women did not seem special in any way but had hopes that everyone can relate to. The main commonality among these women seemed to be that they desperately longed for an affectionate relationship, either because they had never had one or had experienced failed partnerships.

7 | Internet Crime Complaint Centre. 2012. Internet Crime Report.

Writing Credible and Fascinating Love Emails

During his career as a romance scammer, Seidu employed the same general format. He uses a fake name, Albert Duncan, and claims to be an affluent construction worker from Alaska. He claims that he is divorced with a young son and enjoys a middle class lifestyle.[8] Having been disappointed too often, he writes, he looks for a woman with 'moral values'. In 2009, Seidu's first sent users the message that I have quoted in the introduction. This message sounds very lyrical, and this is not surprising considering the source; except for the first and third sentence, the text is directly copied from the R. Kelly song 'spirit'.[9]

In one of the rare papers to cover romance scams, Whitty (2013: 667; 671) claims that romance scams work by using marketing techniques and by exploiting certain cognitive biases (see also Koon and Yoong 2013). Instead, I would suggest that romance scam messages work just like regular messages at online dating sites. In a word, scammers have to craft texts that are both believable and fascinating. They, like all other users, have to make two claims believable: the claim that the writer has genuinely fallen in love and that his online persona does not deviate too much from his offline one.

Interestingly, Seidu does not achieve this by copying regular messages from other users but by adapting romantic narratives directly from popular culture, romance novels, self-help literature about romantic relationships and other sources. His addition to the text of R. Kelly's song is minor but important. In the first sentence, he alludes to the victim's profile. Such explanations are commonly used persuasion strategies for online dating sites that create the illusion that both sides are connected. Still, his reference is very vague, and Seidu can use this text for all his targets. Many of his emails are directly copied from various sources. A text about the 'qualities of a good relationship' originates from a female American blogger.[10] He appropriates another text from American religious literature for women.[11] Most of his emails are a collage of such contemporary sources. In one email, Seidu even self-reflexively comments on

8 | Burrell (2012: 72) argues that Ghanaians perceive such impersonations not as joyful experimentation but as 'flexible self-representation for the sake of persuasion'. In contrast, Cassiman (2016) employs the term 'trickster' to explore the exciting and disrupting nature of impersonating someone else.

9 | Robert Kelly, 'Spirit', Album Happy People/U Saved Me, 2004. The error in the third sentence, 'soul the sky' instead of 'soar the sky', suggests that Seidu picked the text up by listening to the song.

10 | See: http://romancelessons.blogspot.de/2005/07/three-qualities-of-good-relationship_11.html

11 | David C. Cook (ed.), 2000: God's Little Devotional Journal for Women. Colorado Springs: Honor books.

his use of intertextuality: 'My goodness, perhaps I'm making this sound like a romance novel or a self-help book. I really hope not though. Just want to share a little about me and how I feel about u' (Email from Seidu, 2009). Indeed, Seidu does not merely copy and paste but also adapts these texts to the expectation of his readership. In his four years of writing emails, he constantly improves his emails and revises his texts.

His texts also gain credibility because of the photos Seidu provides with his second email. These show a good-looking American man in his fifties, holding a recently caught fish in one photo and posing with his son in the other. These pictures were stolen from private photo albums and allow Seidu to appropriate the visuals of American family life. Such photos are markers of authenticity and give further credibility to his story.

In the various formats of email scams, African cybercriminals defraud their victims by crafting credible and fascinating stories. Appadurai (1996: 31) understands 'imagination as a social practice' and has argued that the fantasies circulating in mass media are at the core of emerging global connections (see Burrell 2008: 4-5). The way in which scammers use such fantasies prove his point. In the case of gold or inheritance scams, they draw on globally circulating narratives about Africa and wealth creation (Beek 2016a: 308).[12] In the case of romance scams, they draw on globally circulating narratives about romantic love. These stories are believable for the victims because they derive from texts written by people with similar understandings of romantic love.

In the context of the anthropology of love, romance scams are just one – and a very peculiar – instance of romantic love as a transnational phenomenon. The mere fact that Seidu started romantic relationships with women in the United States, Europe, but also India and China, is not surprising as such.[13] He and the women responding to him seem to share a basic understanding of the idiom of romantic love. The anthropology of love has long established that romantic love is a social practice that nowadays is common in many, if not all societies, though specific understandings of it do vary (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Bochow 2010). Anthropologists have also studied how transnational connections have reshaped romantic love (Padilla et al. 2007). Romance scams show to what an extent people in very different societies communicate through the shared idiom of romantic love.

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12 | Seidu also sometimes describes the dire conditions and his opportunities in Ghana and thereby draws on imaginaries of Africa in the Global North. However, these allusions are not at the core of his format.

13 | Interestingly, romance scams do not really fit the writing-back paradigm or a postcolonial grand narrative because many of the correspondences are South-South interactions. While in each interaction distinct practices and understandings of romantic love come to the fore, the ones from Europe or the U.S. are merely one of them.

Yet writing scam emails consists of more than copying global discourses: it also requires innovation. Merely reproducing romantic texts would probably not be sufficiently interesting. While intertextuality imbues his texts with credibility, Seidu's texts mainly instil fascination by introducing new elements to global narratives of romance. Additionally, only copying material would not provide sufficient text. While Seidu carefully crafts the first letters, and needs to write fresh content to fill hundreds of subsequent emails or messages on instant-messages services, such as the following:

Hello Fengyue, I really enjoyed your reply. Your responses were very eloquent and heart felt. (...) Pillars must be apart to support its structure, not too far apart, yet not to close for each position creates weakness unless these pillars are the perfect distance working in concert to support its portion of the structure.Wanting to find a balance in all relationships in all their various forms. I heard a saying years ago: "You have to become the person you want to attract." I found this very insightful at the time. But through the years this statement has deepened, like it was seed, when I first heard it, planted in my soul. A time later, saying this statement.... it felt like a yearling tree, within me, I feeling a .....wow....or ahhhhhh.... and no
(Email from Seidu, 2009).

This text is not appropriated from American or European blogs or pop culture. Instead, the vocabulary – with its dense and obscure metaphors – is very reminiscent of Pentecostalist preaching, Ghanaian self-help literature about romantic love and flirting practices in Ghana.[14] Seidu probably heard or read these lines in his everyday life and then used them in these emails. He thereby introduces 'original content', meaning content that has not been uploaded to the internet before. He creates new narratives by combining content from various discourses. Indeed, his emails also draw from the genre of love letters in Africa, which has a distinct writing style and a long history (Breckenridge 2000; Fair 2004).[15] In Ghana, valentine's cards with lyrical language have become

14 | The religious dimension is very much part of romantic practices and discourses in Africa. Rijk van Dijk (2015: 10) convincingly argues that 'Christianity in Africa has become an important carrier of romance'. Even Seidu's use of R. Kellys' song 'Spirit' is a form of appropriating religious content into a romantic context, as it is not a love song but about a spiritual quest. Lindholm (2006: 7) sees romantic love as akin to other forms of desire for the sacred: 'Romantic love is one modern form that this yearning takes, offering the experience of salvation in this world, even if only sporadically and in fantasy' (Lindholm 2006: 17).

15 | However, these and other romantic practices are of course not disconnected from the ones in other regions. Thomas and Cole (2009: 5) argues convincingly that local ideals and practices of romantic love in Africa have long been influenced by and entan-

popular (Bochow 2010: 151-2). Parikh (2004: 16) argues one reason Uganda has such a vibrant practice of writing love letters is because other globally recognized romantic practices are not available; she describes these letters as having an elaborate language that is very inventive and borrows heavily from Christian sermons. Hunter's (2009: 151) article on sex and exchange in South Africa includes a love letter between two youths; their style is similar to scamming emails, containing constant repetitions of key phrases like love and highly emotional promises and appeals. This writing style stands in sharp contrast to the way that users from the Global North communicate on dating sites. Both Marx (2012: 100) and Dombrowski (2011: 261) have found that the first messages from Germans on dating sites are very reserved and avoid emotional language.[16] Yet it seems to be exactly the scammers' writing style that some women respond to emotionally. Scammers like Seidu do not only adapt globally circulating narratives of romantic love but also bring West-African ones to new audiences.

The longer the scam goes on, the more improvised, expressive and emotional Seidu's writing becomes. This also comes with a change of communication medium. After first using only emails, Seidu often begins to communicate via instant messaging in parallel; his emails are also increasingly written in the simplified grammar and language used there.[17] In these conversations, Seidu mentions titbits of his fictional life, about his work, family meetings and sickness that befall him. Yet for the most part his messages and emails consist of declarations of love:

u know i still love u and no matter what i still love u as my wive and i know u gonna be my queen so why worry. am with u and love is in control and nothing more trust am with u deeply. because u are the only one i ever love if am not lieying to you. love is in control trust me i will change your situation and makes u happy. u just give me a chance to prove my self.be with me never ever worry am your husband trust me am with u all the time.i love u so kisses hugs is for u now am Seidu your loving one
(Email from Seidu, 2008).

gled with similar ones of European colonizers, of Islam or, more recently, of Bollywood films from India.

16 | Marx (2012: 106) also argues that these texts are written to avoid losing face if the respondent ignores it. Scammers have a decisive advantage because they use a fake persona that circumvents such fears. Instead, Seidu reveals everything about his fake online persona and declares his love as early as the second email.

17 | This writing style also masks his problems with grammar and orthography. Moving to dating sites of non-native speakers was probably also an attempt to hide these shortcomings.

Each sentence varies the declaration of love, and highly affectionate words are perpetually repeated.[18]

As I have shown, his emails are an attempt to create credibility and fascination by drawing on certain narratives. Still, to most outside observer it remains incomprehensible that people believe these texts. The main reason for the scammers' success is that the activity that they are engaged in – namely storytelling – grants them certain privileges and dissuades readers from questioning the storyteller's claim to represent reality. While readers may well constantly scrutinize and disbelieve the claims in the scammers' emails, they probably suspend their mistrust with regards to claims I make as an author about doing fieldwork in a Ghanaian police station and meeting all the people involved. Gabriel (2004: 25) describes such relationships as a 'very complex contract between storyteller and audience which entails the granting of the audience of attention, a temporary suspension of disbelief, a temporary curbing of criticism and inquiry, in exchange for delivering a narrative which makes sense (verisimilitude), yields pleasure or consolation (entertainment or catharsis), but sustains numerous hidden assumptions about legitimate and non-legitimate forms of representation'. As soon as readers of these emails accept them as a form of storytelling that represents reality, their suspension of disbelief with regards to the story also becomes a suspension of mistrust towards the storyteller. However, whether the reader sticks to the terms of this narrative contract is constantly under threat. One of the highly emotional words that Seidu repeats three times in the last quoted email is 'trust'. In many of his emails, trust comes up again and again. Trust haunts Seidu's writings because he writes against the suspicions and mistrust of his readers, as will become apparent when we turn to their email responses.

Responses: Maintaining and Suspending Mistrust

Romance scams are not one-directional messages but indeed dynamic interactions, and the responses of the scammers' counterparts are equally important to understand them. While the emails of these women are initially about themselves and their hopes, the emails also hint at doubt, suspicion and underlying feelings of mistrust. Or, employing the terminology of Luhmann (2014: 1), they

18 | Seidu often writes: ‚we need to talk about anything and everything. every detail of the day. I want to hear and learn everything about you'. However, he rarely (or only superficially) responds to questions or details in the women's emails. This suggests that these email conversations are more about imagining and narrating a romantic relationship than actually engaging in one. The highly emotional but generic texts probably allow readers to imagine very personal dreams and hopes.

engage in mistrust as a defensive arrangement (see also Mühlfried's introduction to this volume). Even before Seidu has mentioned money, many readers are highly suspicious. Most of them have heard of romance scams and a few were even victims before. This is most visible in the low response rate that Seidu has, only a fraction of his initial messages even leads to a conversation.

This mistrust also surfaces when Seidu fails to craft a plausible persona of an American construction worker for his romantic narrative. He sometimes uses stolen photos that supposedly depict his house but show pink, antique furniture and a doll collection. One woman replied that 'most men do not have lots of pink in their bedroom' and do not 'collect dolls'. While for Seidu these pictures appeared as plausibly depicting the bedroom of a romantically inclined American, the women he sent them to were irritated by pictures, which probably originated from the house of an older woman; one woman stopped their correspondence at that point. When called out on the photos, Seidu writes: 'everything i [you] saw in the picture is real. pink is my favorite, but blues count alots in my life,remember i belong to myself and nobody else. i was raised by mum and its all good to be romantic, thats me and love.' By claiming that the colour blue is equally important for him he tries to underscore his alignment with conventional masculine role models. This makes apparent the complex gender politics Seidu is engaging in. The romantic self-help literature he uses is mostly written by female writers and therefore provides romantic fantasies of understanding men that resonate with his audience. However, using pictures that show his supposed bedroom with dolls and pink flowers contradict conventional imaginaries of masculinity too openly.[19]

Mistrust also surfaced because of Seidu's emotional language and his pace:

> I asked you if you wrote while drinking... Eric that is a fair question, your emails often start out easy to understand, and then get confusing and hard to understand.... What's up with that? You need to tell me what is going on with you...
> I'm so sorry – I just can't take this seriously Eric. It is not possible to love someone you haven't met or spoken to. It is a delusion, perhaps you are very lonely, for which I am sympathetic. (...)
> You don't really address what I say to you, you seem to think you can just make this happen. (...) I am a serious person and this just makes no sense at all...
> (Email from Maria, 2007).

19 | Yet this is a rare error in an otherwise competent front-stage performance. For the most part, Seidu is an adept transnational mediator of distinct notions of romance and gender, like many romance scammers. They have to recognize, select and adapt elements of romantic practice that are markedly different from their own, both geographically and regarding notions of gender.

Maria's doubts address various elements of Seidu's email. While some women seem to accept his writing style and read it as romantically charged, Maria interprets it as symptoms of intoxication. Moreover, she probably joined the dating site with the expectation of dating someone offline, as a way to facilitate face-to-face interactions. Seidu acts as if online communication allows a romantic relationship and intimacy on its own, he quickly talks about 'love' and cybersex. Many women refuse this, stating that this is either 'too fast' (Email from Shannon, 2008) or, in Maria's case, conflicts with their understanding of online interactions.[20] In other email conversations, doubts and suspicions are never explicitly expressed. However, some women just stop responding. Mistrust is the dominant mode of engagement in these interactions, even if it is never mentioned. This becomes apparent as soon as Seidu asks for money.

After the conversation has been going on for approximately twenty days, Seidu writes that he will travel to Ghana with his son to work in a Gold mine. Whitty (2013: 679) calls this next phase of romance scams the crisis moment. After arriving and initial success, Seidu abruptly claims that he is in urgent need of financial help: he cannot access ATM machines in a 'third world country' or his son John gets sick and needs medical treatment. He closes with a declaration of love and mutual support: 'bear in mind i can do the same thing when you are in trouble,my love is open to you but this is just matter of trust' (Email from Seidu, 2007).[21]

While asking for money is obviously dangerous for the continuation of the relationship, when exploring it within the terminology of a narrative contract this is revealed to be even more crucial. Most women have suspended their disbelief because Seidu engaged with them as a storyteller whose texts they enjoyed. However, by asking them to act he changes this relationship and he attempts to change their role. As soon as they are no longer listeners but actors, their level of scrutiny changes accordingly. Indeed, this moment actually reveals that the women Seidu has conversed with still were actively maintaining mistrust throughout these interactions, even when they seemed totally convinced by his love emails as stories:

> Please do not email me again as I shall not be answering any more of your emails. I told you right from the start I am sick of people asking me for money, it is the height of ignorance to ask someone you don't know to help you, and rest assured I would never ask you for money or help, it is not appropriate to ask such a thing of a stranger. I told

20 | Another woman also states quite explicitly the difficulties of intimacy in transnational interactions: 'eric.... you would die for me???? well, where are you babe???? do you expect me to believe that????' (Email from Galina, 2009).

21 | Parallel to the email, Seidu simultaneously asks for help via instant messaging and on the phone, putting pressure on his target.

you from the beginning I have had so many men with the same tale as you asking me for money and I WILL NOT BE CONNED.
(Email from Samantha, 2008)

The women's responses are remarkably similar by pointing out that they do not 'know' Arthur.[22] They thereby point out the inherent structure of online interactions: that these are front stage performances, in which the backs stage in unknowable due to anonymity. Additionally, they often write that they have experienced or learnt about romance scams. This does not only mean that they were aware to what extent online front stage interaction may deviate from the back stage. It also suggests that during the whole online interaction they maintain a certain level of mistrust towards Seidu, irrespectively of the way they interacted on the front stage.

Few women send money to Seidu, although some sent him about 2,000 USD, and one gave him 40,000 USD in the course of a year. It is not surprising given that some women suspend their mistrust. The suspension of disbelief is an inherent part of storytelling, and online interactions also involve – and require – the ability to suspend mistrust. Yet these women are surprisingly not fully unaware that they are being scammed. In other words, their mistrust never disappears but lingers on, flaring up again and again, and they are simultaneously trusting and mistrusting the scammer.[23]

This comes out most clearly in the case of Mallory. After sending him several hundred USD, Seidu asked her for money again. She responded: 'I am sorry but I must end this relationship between us two. I am really under the impression you are not who you say you are, and for my own sake & safety I do not want this to go on anymore. (...) I am definitely not allowing you to manipulate me with your words.' Nevertheless, she continues to send him more money. Even after many people have told her that she is being scammed, she writes in a later email: 'I cant believe you are stuck in a foreign country with no money, no food, I just cant believe it. (...) NOW YOU TELL ME WHY THE HELL I SHOULD TRUST YOU.' This open question already suggests that she is – in some way – prepared to be convinced again. And she indeed continues to send money. Then, she finds Seidu's profiles on other dating sites and posts on online forums, in which Seidu's previous victims tell of their experiences:

22 | Many even explicitly refute his appeal to trust him: 'your right I do not trust you, I know nothing about you, I do not even know if you are from Alaska, how am i supposed to know.....who you are.....you have given me nothing.' (Email from Kelley, 2009)

23 | Hörlin (2016: 111) also provides a possible reading, when she writes that mistrust has both an affective and cognitive dimension, and that cognitive mistrust often coincides with affective mistrust.

You should check ALL your website you use, It was so easy the name clicked my brain into action, I musty agree i knew all the time you were up to something, but i didnt believe it, or was it i didn't want to believe you could do it.....But you did.
(Email from Mallory, 2009)

These few sentences suggest she was aware that she was being conned, but that she did not 'want to believe it'. In other words, in the course of their online interaction Mallory wilfully suspended her mistrust towards him. Despite her better knowledge, she suppressed her awareness of the back stage. She and other women sending money are not naively trusting the scammers' emails. They are instead oscillating between maintaining mistrust and believing in their tales but then decide on the latter. Remarkably, the interaction between Mallory and Seidu did not even end at this point. However, while she was trying to send him money yet again, an employee of a Ghanaian bank warned her and she finally stopped.

It is difficult to grasp the reasons for this wilful suspension of mistrust and ignorance of better knowledge. It also stands in stark contrast to Gabriel's (2004: 24) notion that a narrative is fundamentally broken as soon as 'the narrative veil has slipped to allow us to catch a glimpse of the storyteller as deceiver'. Both the biographical situation of the reader and the appeal of storytelling itself lead to the continued suspension of mistrust. In Mallory's case, the imagined romance with Seidu probably promises a way out of a life she experiences as desperate. Her marriage failed, she is on government support and suffers social isolation. She acquired the money she sent to him from loans, and her later pleas to him to repay her are distressing to read. Another woman, Verónica, had sent Seidu money once but then refused to send more. In her final email, she voices doubts but also writes: 'i think i may have set myself up for a broken heart....but thats what happens when you take a chance, this will be a lesson well learned. (...) thanks for the past couple of weeks, you really knew all the right things to say.' She herself points to narration or storytelling as the main reason for her behaviour. Despite her mistrust, she is grateful for the romantic fiction that Seidu enabled her to take part in. In the interplay of mistrust and fictional romantic love, she has decided on the former but still yearns for the latter. In a way, this is not too far from the way that we all deal with the realization that a story, in literature or film, deviates from the facts it claims to represent: we also focus on the deeper truth, hopes and anxieties it speaks about.

The Back Stage of Transnational, Online Interactions

Interestingly, Seidu himself never stops telling his story of love and crisis.[24] When his pleas for money have been rebuffed, he always writes long letter declaring his love, in the hope that the respondent will decide to send him money after all. However, even when he seems to accept that he has failed, he performs his online persona:

> u better don't play on mind OK.u kept me insane .all long i believed u and u betrayed me for a penny .and i have learn t lots from u .after all u didn't send me down here and i must fight for my return just have good with ur family and leave me alone ok bye. Seidu (Email from Seidu, 2007).

The last sentence suggest that he has given up, nevertheless he sticks to his story and even bothers to write this email in the first place. While his professed love certainly is not authentic, his feelings of being 'betrayed' perhaps are. This seems plausible because the situation of crisis is not a pure front stage performance but resonates with his everyday life. In Ghana, people routinely rely on friends and family to borrow money in times of need. When Seidu encounters financial difficulties, he asks his friends for money in ways very similar to his scam script, as shown earlier. The narrative of a crisis is probably the least fictional element of the scammer's narrative but corresponds with the stories he tells in non-fraudulent emails. In his scams, he describes crisis moments that are familiar to him, that actually resonate with his own situation.

This hints at the fact that the relationship between front and back stage in romance scams may have more layers then discussed up to this point. As online interactions, scams are about the differences between online performance and offline reality. As romantic interactions, however, scams are about the differences between an emotional and instrumental dimension of relationships. Scammers like Seidu insist that helping a partner by giving money is part of the newly established romantic relationship. Indeed, beyond all fictions, romance scams are also interactions in which very different but genuinely felt understandings of romantic love clash. Cole (2009: 111) argues that in the Global North, romantic love is understood as clearly separated from material interests, while in Africa instrumental and non-instrumental forms of relationships are more intertwined (see also Hunter 2009: 152). This stands in

24 | He only breaks character on one occasion. After Mallory stopped sending him money, he still tries to convince her to send more and writes in one of these exchanges: 'hey u really dont mean anything to me,i mean life must goes on and im in position to hurt u,may god forgive if …' (Email from Seidu, 2009). However, this threat is also a fictional story element, as he has no way of harming her.

stark contrast to attitudes on dating platforms in the global North, on which financial independence is often an explicit condition of continuing with online dating (Dombrowski 2011: 265). In Ghana, receiving gifts or 'chop money' is an expected part of some forms of romantic relationships. Bochow (2010: 175) argues convincingly that gifts in relationships can be 'speaking objects' that affirm affection. However, money send via Western Union cannot carry such symbolic meanings.

By drawing the attention to different understandings and practices of romantic love in Ghana, this contribution does not want to imply that these – or any – are uniformly held nationwide or, even more implausible, apply to the whole of Africa. On the contrary, romance scams also violate expectations concerning romantic relationships that most people in Ghana adhere to, because material gains are the exclusive aim in these interactions. While some people seem to concede more ambivalence to romantic relationships, in cases of fraud this ambivalence ends, as only one side is interested in material gains.[25]

Yet this also suggests that people involved in transnational, online interactions from different locations of the world do have different ways of relating front and back stage in these interactions. Conducting research on young Ghanaian internet users, Fair and others (2009: 36) have observed that they unself-consciously toy with their online self-presentations. Burrell (2008: 19) argues that many Ghanaian youth do not necessarily perceive misrepresentations to request assistance from someone abroad as fraudulent, and that such requests are part of their understanding of wealth distribution. Seidu's court proceedings can be understood similarly. In the end, one of the women he had defrauded managed to get him arrested. The court gave him a very lenient sentence, a fine of 1,050 cedis (approximately 500 USD). As I explored in elsewhere, people in Ghana have very different understandings of romance scams (Beek 2016a: 316-8). This brings to the fore that people connected by online communication have different understandings of the way that love and material interests – but also offline reality and online presentations – ought to relate. Both as romantic and as online interactions, these scams reveal distinct ways of relating front and back stage. In other words, they reveal different expectations to what extent these have to be aligned.

While the Ghanaians I spoke to about scamming never mentioned mistrust, all of them were deeply puzzled that people abroad believe in these stories. Like many others, one police detective explained the scammers' success not by their creative writing, as I do, but by invisible forces: 'When you receive

25 | Cole (2009: 127) also argues that relationships in Africa increasingly are unable to fulfil both affectionate and material desires. Following this argument, romance scams enable relationships in which these desires are very clearly divided, being only about romantic desires on one and only about money on the other side.

this kind of mails in your inboxes, think twice, because of these people, these boys here. I don't know whether the victims do believe or not. Thus, the scammers are using black magic. Whatever story they tell you, you believe.' In the view of many Ghanaians, Europeans are not persuaded by the texts but by the scammers' use of local religious practices to charm readers, practices that are called Juju or Sakawa.[26] Ghanaian perceptions of scamming do not focus on the emails but on 'spiritual' attacks and on the lack of certain – invisible – defences on the part of the Europeans. This explanation, or folk theory, of defences is very similar to the way I use the term mistrust here; this imaginary also suggests that people adhering to it take the necessity of such defences, or shall I say mistrust, for granted when it comes to email interactions with strangers. This does not mean that Ghanaians have a different level of mistrust when it comes to online or romantic interactions. Especially when looking at the level of security in Ghana, I do not agree with the Comaroffs (2006: 5-6) that crime and disorder are, in general, a part of everyday life in the Global South. To the contrary, people in relationships all over the world oscillate between mistrusting and believing. However, as a result of certain historical trajectories and specific social contexts, some people seem to be less scandalized by the distinctions between front and back stage and see mistrust as a more necessary part of everyday life.

Conclusion

Romance scamming is foremost storytelling, and scammers invite readers to partake in this story. They create a romantic relationship based only on writing, between people that live far away. They craft the credibility of their tale by referring to globally shared discourses of romantic love and create fascination by referring to Ghanaian ones. Crucially, by framing their interaction as storytelling, they imply a narrative contract that dissuades readers from scrutinizing their claims.

However, we as bystanders also tell a story about romance scams: The tale that the people responding to scammers naïvely trust them. Yet, when looking at these emails as interactions, it becomes apparent that the respondents to these emails are aware of the peculiar way that front and back stage relate in transnational, online interactions. Despite playing along, they maintain their mistrust throughout the interaction. In a few cases, they decide that they prefer to partake in the story even when this means sending money. Scammers do not exploit people's trust but their ability to suspend disbelief as listeners and to wilfully suspend mistrust as actors. Mühlfried (introduction to this volume)

26 | People also believe that many scammers have stopped using emails and now multiply their money only by such 'spiritual' means.

argues that mistrust is a mode of relating to others that has defensive functions and aims towards the weakening of social ties. Romance scams show the extent to which many people yearn for and dream of meaningful, strong social ties. When they are taken in by a story that provides them with just that, they even dispense with these defences despite their better knowledge.

As transnational interactions, romance scams also suggest that there are distinct understandings of acceptable forms of misrepresentation in stories and of mistrust in social interactions. Both when it comes to romance and the internet, some people seem to be more aware – and subsequently less scandalized by the fact – that the performances on the back stage deviate from – and are messier than – the stories people tell about themselves. They seem to understand the interplay between trusting and mistrusting as a part of everyday life, and the latter is more recognized as a necessary practice in a complex world, both offline and online.

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