

# The Republic of Rumors

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## WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

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Because rumors loosen one's grip on reality.

It was said that a woman in Les Cayes gave birth to a fish. It was said that an ex-president flew on a broom in the night. It was said that black magic caused horrific tragedies, like a 2008 school collapse that killed almost 100 people.

The rumors came fast and fantastical in Haiti. The country seemed to run on unverified — sometimes unverifiable — assertions that, by dint of repetition and amplification, snowballed into something resembling authority. The rumors traveled over radio, chat groups, SMS and, most mysterious to me, *teledjol*, or word of mouth. Their authors were usually unknown.

Many took mystical form, like the birth of the fish. Other times, the rumors were earthlier and sordid, conspiracies more familiar to those in the United States. For instance: A daughter of the outgoing president was said to be carrying the child of the man her father chose as his successor. A former prime minister had allegedly masterminded a massacre. (When the bodies could not be found, accusers said that dogs had eaten the corpses.)

I knew these rumors were lies — not because I was wise (I was not), but because I knew the people involved and could get close enough to see an absence of evidence. I saw, too, that the lies had caused great harm. The prime minister wrongly accused of a massacre wasted two years in jail trying to clear his name and then many more as a recluse, terrified to leave his house.

But rumors tend to test the faith of the open-minded, all the more so when they are espoused by power. They disorient and disconcert. By juxtaposing an unverified, sometimes unverifiable, narrative alongside the conventional one, rumors loosen one's grip on reality. After all, not all rumors are false. The *teledjol* in October 2011, for instance, was that the United Nations peacekeepers introduced cholera into the country by recklessly dumping waste into the tributary of a major river. It has taken more than six years of forensics, investigations, lawsuits and advocacy, but the U.N. has finally admitted responsibility.

None of the rumors I heard in Haiti, though, bore an official imprimatur; none were espoused by the president. Here in the United States, the situation is vastly different. We the People have inaugurated our first Republic of Rumors. Except that the rumors are called “alternative facts,” and we know well where they come from — the Oval Office.

Donald J. Trump rode a wave of disinformation into the White House. *People are saying*, came the message. *People are saying that Barack Obama is not American. That Mexicans are rapists. Climate change, whatever. I can't tell you who, but that's what people are saying.* The past week suggests that Trump's statements — their manner, substance and media — won't much change, except for one very important thing: It's now the most powerful person in the world who is espousing the rumors, misinformation and outright lies. This is a president that could make we the people utterly crazy.

“It was a comment he made on a longstanding belief,” said the president's press pugilist, when asked about Trump's unsubstantiated claim that voter fraud gave his opponent a whopping margin in the popular vote. “He believes what he believes based on the information he's been provided.” The president has tweeted that he will order an investigation.

Other presidents have lied or obfuscated the truth before, of course. Clinton: “It depends upon what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is.” Reagan: “A few months ago I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that's true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not.” The difference with Trump — and it is crucial — is that he impugned, baselessly, the democratic system.

Never mind that it's the very system that put him into power. Winning by the rules is never enough for a certain type of politician. He needs more. He needs to supersede the rules, to displace them in importance, to annihilate them. That is how the strongman rules.



## **Pooja Bhatia**

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