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## Between Gluckman and Foucault: Historicizing Rumour and Gossip

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This article began with two goals: first, to suggest ways that historians might use rumour and gossip as primary sources, and second, to open up some space between functionalism and post-structuralism that would not only elaborate on rumour and gossip but might coax a tolerance for theoretical insights that are, after all, only analytical tools. As this article was written and rewritten, Michel Foucault and Max Gluckman turned out to have much more in common than I initially thought. Both theorists argued that communities constrain themselves through speech. Foucauldian notions of power expressed in everyday practices - capillary power - in which citizens are shaped by what they do and say echo in some surprising ways with functionalist ideas about how conflict is embedded in social thought and action.

Rumour and gossip, however, don't have that much in common. In fact the eliding of these two oral forms comes from journalism and communications studies, which seek to establish a genre of unreliable oral information: what rumour and gossip have in common is that they aren't substantiated like news. But anthropologists, in an earlier, more functionalist era, had more sense, I think: gossip and scandal were linked together as phenomena of speech and control, while rumour was news that one later learned was false. I want to historicize this insight, and replace 'scandal' with 'accusation.' It is a phrase that sums up the agency and the speech act of turning ordinary gossip into something on which action has to be taken.

The important question may not be which phrases are gossip, which constitute rumour, and which are accusation. Figuring out how these labels can best be applied may not be particularly enlightening. It may be more useful, particularly for historians, to try to find out what these phrases meant to those who heard and repeated them, over time and over space. Not everyone hears or appreciates or understands gossip the same way - some gossip and some rumour may be unreliable to some people while sounding perfectly reasonable to others. Labels that foreclose this latitude of credibility may not be worthwhile.

For historians, rumour, gossip, and accusation, are forms of evidence we need to use with great care and caution. However much street talk in Paris in 1750 resembles street talk in Kampala in 1950, each must be examined in terms of the specificity of time and place. Understanding gossip requires understanding social rules, values, and conflicts - not just for gossipers, but for scholars (Haviland, 28-30). But the thorny question of how rumour and gossip make historiography depends on the history and the historian. *The Vanishing Children of Paris*, is an account of the riots of 1750: it was said that the king abducted children either to drain their blood for his baths or to send them as colonists to New France. The authors reconstruct rumour and riot from diarists' accounts, through gossip (Farge and Revel, 1991). In a recent article about the trial of a "stupefier of several women" in Kampala in 1953, the evidence I used for the gossip and scandal reported in newspapers was rumour (White, 1994). In short, the terms rumour, gossip and accusation are deployments, not autonomous categories (but see Turner, 1993).

### Gossip and respectability

Gossip, as Max Gluckman pointed out years ago, creates ties of intimacy between those gossiping. The subject of the gossip, personal and political, is secondary to the process of creating bonds and boundaries. Scandal serves to keep an individual in line when gossip no longer does the trick. Both gossip and scandal assert social values, not as static traditions but as learned and lived practices: "outsiders cannot join in gossip", Gluckman claimed, and added that "a most important part of gaining membership in any group is to learn its scandals" (Gluckman, 1963).<sup>1</sup>

Such insights make gossip more aural than oral; the fact that it is heard is more important than the fact that it is spoken. For Gluckman, a story is credible because it sounds likely - or interesting, or worth passing on - to hearers, irrespective of the skill of its telling or the reliability of who tells it. One contemporary critique of Gluckman emphasized the role of 'the gossip' - the one who could manipulate information for his or her own reasons - which placed the importance of gossip in speaking, rather than listening and evaluating (Paine). Such a critique, however, extracted gossip from its social context: gossip is "not only a means for an individual to assemble basic information on his peers, but it is also a technique for summarizing public opinion" (Szwed, 435).

How is gossip or rumour different from ordinary talking, from storytelling, or from just hanging out? Put simply, gossip is a matter of context and convention. It is talk about people when they are not present, but it is not just any kind of talk: it reports behavior; it rests on evaluating reputations (Gluckman, Szwed, Merry, Spacks). "One does not gossip

about a prostitute who turns 'tricks,'" says Merry, "but one does gossip about the respectable matron who is observed with men sneaking into her house day and night" (277). Gossip reveals contradictions. When a young man became chief in Phokeng he claimed not to want white people in the district. "When you hire a white farmer to plough your land, he chases the farmer away, but right now, his soldiers are white men, his house is guarded by white men" (Bozzoli, 1991: 217).

In the western world the association of gossip with idle, malicious talk is quite recent, perhaps evolving in the last century (Rysman, Spacks). Other cultures do not see gossip as a single form of speech, however. It may not be possible, then, to historicize gossip as gossip without using academic categories in ways that peoples in the past might not have done. It might therefore be more rewarding to abandon categories of "idle talk" and ask how we think about talk itself. I propose an Africanist reading of *The History of Sexuality*, not necessarily because of what it says about sexuality, but because that is the text where Foucault develops his ideas about speaking and the voice most clearly. These are concepts Africanists hold dear. According to Foucault, however, 'speaking' in modern societies involves far more than how individuals enter the historical record, it is how people participate in the states and civil societies that manage them. The very act of talking about others - or oneself - disciplines; the very practices of sorting out the epistemologies that shock and scandalize creates and catalogues ideas about deviance and virtue which are enforced with each telling. Modern subjects are not only studied, counted and classified; they speak about these things for themselves. It is how they are managed. The "task of telling everything" allocated to subjects not only "enlarged the boundaries" of the subject matter on which they might speak but "installed an apparatus" capable of producing more and more speech that eventually policed itself.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the "crude," the "crass" and the "vulgar" are not distinctive forms of speech, but speech outside of that management (Foucault, 23-31).

Does gossip police itself? or is it too crude? Abrahams' 1970 article elaborated on Gluckman and his critics, suggesting that gossip is negotiated between gossip and audience. He argued that on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent, gossip, like story and song, is judged according "to whether it is judiciously performed in the right setting and under the properly licensed conditions." Gossip publicly condemned behavior that departed from community norms and could be used to build up the esteem of the gossip; unsuccessful gossips were those who used the device badly, and earned community disapprobation for their efforts. Thus, unacceptable gossip is not the gossip that speaks ill of beloved persons; it is the gossip that is performed without skill or protocol (Abrahams, 290-301; see also Yerkovich).

But what about the accusations that fall on deaf ears, the complaints that backfire and undermine the position of the accuser? Is such gossip invariably against well-regarded individuals? Or does it mean that some individuals are beyond reproach or that there is an ahistorical category of reputation that cannot be breached by words? Neither, I think. Unsuccessful gossip proves that gossip and accusation are negotiated, that 'unimpeachable reputation' is a specific historic construct that only the most skilled and the most appropriate gossip can impeach. "Bad gossip" invades a person's privacy more than a community will tolerate (Hannerz, 39); in Foucauldian terms, "bad gossip" is crude. Failed gossip backfires and causes more problems for the gossipier than the person the gossip is against.

If we add concepts of bad gossip and failed gossip to successful gossip, it is obvious why rumour and gossip are such wonderful historical sources. They occupy the interstices of respectability; they follow exactly the contours of local and regional concerns. Rumour and gossip allocate responsibility; they contextualize extraction. In colonial Southern Rhodesia, many African miners attributed the 1918 influenza epidemic to experiments with pneumonia vaccine, conducted in the laboratory of Falcon Mine by Joseph Lister - normally employed by the Chamber of Mines - gone awry (Phimister, 1973: 147; Packard). In many districts of South Africa, Africans avoided influenza injections saying these were the methods by which whites spread the disease (Phillips, 1990, 85:86). Thus rumours move between ideas about the personal and the political, the local and the national. Two elderly, dumb Afrikaaner women lost the power of speech not through 'natural' causes, but when one night during the South African War Abraham Essau and his spies galloped past, this terrified them into lifelong silence (Nasson, 257). Years later, a woman explained the 1953 potato boycott in Alexandra Township with a rumour: "the Boer who farmed with potatoes had the habit of knocking down his lazy labourers with a tractor. He did not bury them, instead he used them as compost in his potato farm. We were convinced that what we heard was true because even the potatoes themselves were shaped like human beings. They were not completely round" (Bozzoli, 1991: 183).

Successful gossip and accusation tell us how penetrable a reputation may be, and when it is penetrable, they disclose the boundaries of attack and subversion. Successful gossip and accusation must be keenly aware of the shifts in reception and credibility of certain issues. In the boom of the late 1920s, for example, Nairobi streetwalkers reversed the conventional tropes of respectability and condemned the more discrete prostitution of Nairobi's Muslim settlements: "those women in Majengo, they stayed like wives, they had to go with whoever came to them" (White, 1990: 59). A badly timed accusation, however, lands the accuser in trouble. Thus, for

historians at least, the power of gossip is more than a collective delight in the vices of our friends and colleagues. Gossip is a reliable historical source because it traces the boundaries created by talking about someone. In that talking a world of value and behavior is constituted: that's what Foucault's idea of discourse discloses; it does no more (Foucault, 27).

Between Gluckman and Foucault lies, structurally and historically, communication theory. These empirical studies of rumour (Festinger, Kapferer, Fine) attempted to prove, among other things, which qualities of transmission made oral information credible - was it overheard, made authoritative by liquor, or told with greater skill and attention to detail than a true story? The surveys and quantification of how belief is articulated, read with Foucault, may make the ambiguities of hearing and thinking too concrete and clearcut, but they also show the skill and the discretion with which oral information is evaluated. They reveal how local, rather than personal, the evaluation of gossip is.

Gossip and accusation are idioms of intimacy. How deeply do we care about the vices of people we don't know? An interpretation of gossip based solely on Gluckman would imply that we might not care about the vices of O. J. Simpson. One that combines Gluckman and Foucault would argue that there is no difference between talking about O. J. Simpson or talking about our friends - it is the very process of gossiping that creates the intimacy. In gossiping, a claim is made to knowledge and the right to speak it. How deeply we care about the vices of strangers depends in part on the meanings attached to information - how scarce and hard to come by it is - with which the gossip gossips (Hannerz, 37-38). Gossip about people we don't know not only binds gossipers together in an imagined community of shared values, but binds gossipers to states and sanctions. Gossip about strangers may have meaning because of the very intimacy translated to daily life by the original usage of the term. But in the case of strangers, the epistemologies of our caring "percolates into formal agencies of social control" and out of them again (Merry, 277n., 290:94; Haviland, 105). For historians at least, this is a crucially important and theoretically rewarding place to start, because if we can historicize gossip we are able to look at the boundaries and bonds of a community. Who says what about whom, to whom, articulates the alliances and affiliations of the conflicts of daily life. Christian Tanzanian women who transformed Nairobi prostitution in the late 1930s returned home as scathing about Muslim women as those women had been about them. One said of a Tanzanian woman who became a Muslim "she wanted to eat. Her Islam was food only" (White, 1990: 115). A form of speech that actively debates, establishes and re-establishes the criteria for success and failure, for prestige and scorn, is a tool for writing the history of communities in intimate detail.

## Voices and Subjects

There are perhaps certain discomfiting parallels between how modern regimes have required speaking subjects and how African historians have required them. The intellectual foundations of oral history of living persons – the life history, or personal narrative – rest on some basic assumptions: that people are the most accurate chroniclers of their own lives, and that experience is evidence of the most reliable sort. While there have been piecemeal critiques (Vansina, 1980, di Leonardo, 1987), this view dominated African history by the 1980s. And why not? The twentieth century could be best explained by those who lived through it, especially when those lives were not always deemed important enough for the historical record: African voices could fill the gaps in official documentation, and provide a version of events suppressed by colonial chroniclers (see White, 1990: 21–28). Voices were considered such a key tool to the reconstruction of African history that they were never problematized.

But recent work in history has queried some of the assumptions on which the oral evidence for historical developments in twentieth-century Africa rests. The notion of an essential self, a persona that sees his or her life the same way over time, now seems rather quaint (see Vaughan, 12–19). The idea that experience alone can provide historical evidence, on the other hand, seems far too simplistic in and of itself. What counts as experience and what counts as fantasy? How would people report things that are simply not counted as experience? And how do historians interpret things which we believe our informants didn't really experience (Scott, White, 1994a)? Whether we think that experience is the result of historians unifying diverse elements into a narrative that subsumes differences, or whether we think it is reconstructed from fragments that excluded some points of view and were simply ignorant of others, it would be difficult to argue that 'experience,' especially when derived from the words with which one narrates one's own life, provides a more authentic form of evidence than any other (Scott, Prakash, 1990, 1992, Stoler, 1992).

All of this should make the practice of twentieth-century oral history problematic. The question of who is reporting what experiences in which way is crucial to our practice. Research into colonial subjectivities by historians is rare; what historians have left to the literary critics has been too general and has often homogenized colonialism and Africans into unchanging monoliths. Historians need to ask, what was a Tonga or a Yaka self like in 1930? How did they see the world and what was in it? What was the Kikuyu sense of self in 1933, and how different was it in Kiambu, Nyeri, and the Rift Valley? When people talk about what they did in the past, are they talking about their present-day persona or ones from an earlier era? How can we know what someone was like – what they felt and

thought – in their twenties without rewriting their lives for them? In some parts of Africa we have enough information to hint at some changing notion of self, but for most places we have relied on a kind of transhistorical wish fulfillment in order to use oral sources. What someone says in 1990 about himself or herself in 1935 is taken to be true because the same person is doing the talking. Similarly, what we know about African selves in the 1980s and '90s is applied to testimonies before commissions of inquiry in 1913 and 1947.

Such ahistorical treatment of African selves has had historiographic consequences. The absence of historicized subjectivities in colonial Africa has given scholars African voices without selves, voices in which no embodiments, interests and powers strive to be reinvented and reinterpreted as they speak.<sup>3</sup> This means, in short, that the voice captured in an interview may be a risky source with which to know and understand the self of forty years before. Barbara Myerhoff has argued that much interviewing of the elderly involves their own self-conscious construction of a coherent self, experienced "as a stable, continuous being through time, across continents and epochs". A life is reworked by the informant for very specific and personal goals: "The discovery of personal unity between the flow and flux of ordinary life is the personal counterpart of myth-making" (Myerhoff, 222). The evidence derived from people talking about their own past requires an understanding of who they were, and how they saw themselves in their past worlds.<sup>4</sup>

But what about people talking about others, about gossip? I suggest that gossip is at least as reliable as people talking about themselves. If historians have failed to historicize the self, let alone interpret people's words about their own lives, talk about others may be the only source left to them. Gossip, in practice, contains interests, embodiments and local strands of power. It reveals precisely those passions, complaints and revisions that are sometimes suppressed in the lives written about from oral interviews. In sharp contrast to the genre of unproblematized life history (Strobel and Mirzah, Davison), gossip reveals motivations and interests of the gossipier, at a specific moment.

Listen to Kas Maine, a South African sharecropper, present himself as hard working and self-righteous as he recalled turning down the invitation of his landlord for a trip to town to watch boxing: "I refused to go and told him I could not stomach that shit – sitting in a tent all day watching others do their work while we left our own unattended" (van Onselen, 1990: 111–12). The recollection about another reveals a self. Indeed, in two separate interviews, with different interviewers, over a five year period, the normally laconic Maine described "in almost word-perfect fashion" his early years as an independent farmer in debt to a local shopkeeper. In each version, Maine's attempts to settle the debt earned the admiration, praise

and favoritism of the trader, Hambly. What, van Onselen asks, do these two recollections, with their exact level of detail, reveal about the complicated terrain of memory and oral history (van Onselen, 1993, 511-12)? I suggest that they reveal the analytical possibilities of gossip, that in talking about the trader Hambly, Maine presents himself best. Not only does Hambly become a vehicle with which Maine constructs memories of himself and his impact on others, but in recalling Hambly Maine recalls Hambly talking about him. The line between speaking about oneself and speaking about others is hardly firm: that is precisely my point. A self is revealed in talking about others at least as much as it is revealed in introspection.

This raises another question altogether: is all talk about an absent party gossip? Most functionalists would probably say no, that gossip is gossip when both parties know the absent one. Most Foucauldians probably wouldn't bother with a definition (definitions are not their strong suit), but would argue that Maine is the real subject of this recollection. However, Ulf Hannerz's 1967 admonition that "the same information may be gossip or non-gossip depending on who gives it to whom" (1967: 36) may have been a prescient combination of functionalism, post-structuralism and the needs of oral history. A well-crafted memory may be told in a variety of contexts. The story of Hambly's praise of Maine may have had more pointed meanings when told to those who remembered Hambly than when told to those who did not. The appearance of such a story in a series of interviews suggests that a way of talking about others - whether such talking was once or still is gossip in other venues - has become part of a repertoire of anecdotes, stories and memories that the speaker uses to make points about his or her life (see Tonkin, Hofmeyr).

Historicizing rumour and gossip means not only making them historical sources, but utilizing the ways that both are intensely personal. How do we write history with accounts of firemen who captured Africans and took their blood, of waters that turned bullets to thin air, of witches who caused typhus? Reading gossip, rumour, or accusation for Ginsburg-esque 'clues' about common pasts will doubtlessly reveal some history, but such a reading makes the gossip and accusers empty conduits for historical information (Ginsburg, 1983, 1991: 1-30). The people thus studied bring no personal history to cultural history. I have argued (White, 1993, 1993a) that the details of gossip need to be read as hints or lenses with which to gain insight into the local contemporary context from which they emerged. Rumour, in other words, provides details about the period of the rumour, and is not a vehicle for older ideas. Lyndal Roper (1994: 225-30), however, has argued that gossip and accusation must be contextualized in terms of individual lives: the mentalité that accusation reveals is a person's, not that of a society.

How then can scholars get at African subjectivities? For several years I have been working on a history of East and Central African rumours about agents of the colonial state who captured Africans and took them to white people who drained their blood. I have tried, in several articles, to use these stories as historical sources, arguing that these rumours had different and overlapping meanings depending on who was telling them and who was listening to them. Labouring men's vampire stories spoke of the hierarchies within the labour process, while Nairobi women's stories articulated the new relations of property and propriety emerging in the town. For the most part, I have used stories of colonial bloodsucking as social, rather than individual, constructions. But what if I were to read each and every vampire story as a personal statement, as evidence about a self hardly revealed in other ways? What if I were to look at the specific embellishments and embroideries in each story? These are the things African historians are trained to weed out (Vansina, 1985: 81). But looking at the ways people fashion well-known stories into their own experiences or performances may be a way to historicize subjectivity.

The following is an attempt to write about colonial subjectivity by examining embellishments. Zaina Kachui told me a *wazimamoto* (literally, the men who extinguish the fire but used generically for bloodsucker in many East African towns) story about prostitutes trapping men in pits in their rooms. It was common in Nairobi the 1920s and '30s, but her version had a level of detail and commentary other stories did not have. I suggest that by contextualizing this version in terms of the life of Zaina Kachui I can write about her life without adding emotions she herself never expressed to me in many hours of interviews and conversation.

A long time ago the *wazimamoto* was staying in Mashimoni, even those people who were staying in Mashimoni, they bought plots with the blood of somebody. I heard that in those days they used to dig the floors very deep in the house and they covered the floor with a carpet. Where it was deepest, in the center of the floor they'd put a chair and the victim would fall and be killed. Most of the women living there were prostitutes and this is how they made extra money. . . . When a man came for sex, the woman would say karibu, and the man would go to the chair, and then he would fall into the hole in the floor, and at night the *wazimamoto* would come and take that man away. . . . It was easy for these women to find blood for the *wazimamoto* because there were so many men coming to Mashimoni for sex.<sup>5</sup>

I have written on this text extensively, partly because it is so dramatic, so gendered, and so much fun. The question I have not asked is why did Kachui tell this particular story? No other woman told it. All the other versions I heard were matter of fact, without this level of detail and cunning, told without so much energy, enthusiasm, and word play.<sup>6</sup> There's no possible interpretation of this material as a cautionary tale about Pumwani neighborhoods. Mashimoni - Swahili for 'many in the pits' - had lost its allure as a place for prostitutes several years before Kachui

came to Nairobi and Kachui is quite clear that this was a story she heard. But the very fact that this is not "experience" makes it even more significant that she told this particular tale more than forty years after she first heard it.

Zaina Kachui was probably born in Taveta around 1910; her father had immigrated from Kitui several years before. Her parents died when she was relatively young, possibly during the influenza epidemic of 1918, leaving her and an older brother orphans. Her brother encouraged her "to go with men" to support them both, but he died a year or two later, just before Kachui gave birth to a stillborn child, after which she went to Kitui. She was not yet an adolescent: "I didn't even have breasts yet." In Kitui she stayed with a relative of her father who tried to marry her to a man so many years her senior that the district commissioner stopped it. "This is a daughter," she recalled him saying, "not a wife." The DC told her to return to her father's home and, seemingly grateful for the direction, she did. But "that place was not good for me, I had to cook all the food and I hardly got any food to eat" and so she went to Thika for several years and took up prostitution there, eventually coming to Pumwani in 1934 or '35. She credited an older woman with insisting that she take money from men, rather than finding a boyfriend whose own impoverished state would drain her resources, advice Kachui never fully took to heart. During World War II, a man friend offered to keep her very considerable earnings in a safe place for her, with predictable results. Nevertheless, although she never acquired property, by the time I knew her she was living in two rooms in the house she had been living in for 30 years, keeping a younger man who was rumoured to be her lover and selling cooked food to supplement what must have been truly astounding savings. She's dead now, but she would be offended at any characterization of her life as one of failure and misery: she was very proud of her accomplishments, that in her late 60s she did not have to ask anyone for help. The self-confident Kachui I knew in 1976 and '77 did not reflect on the intense vulnerability, pain and confusion of the pre-teen prostitute in Taveta or the thirteen-year-old almost-bride in Kitui. In fact, she told me about her arranged almost-marriage in the course of explaining colonialism to me ("In those days the government went by age, if you were young you got a young DC to make a decision about you"), and not as a description of the exploitation of adolescents in already over-burdened extended families.

But if she did not describe her youth as one of pain and exploitation, how can I? Can I accurately represent Kachui with my own interpretation of what happened to her, or do I pay attention to her words, her use of language, her sense of metaphor, play, and power? I suggest that her powerful fantasy of passive men, seeking only sex, falling into pits, can be read to reveal her vulnerability. A woman passed from man to man during

her adolescence might well gloat at men passing through property. A woman whose needs were ignored by every kinsman from whom she sought protection might well delight in a story of women's agency and men's powerlessness, a story that implied great male stupidity as well: "after a few years men stopped coming to Mashimoni because so many men had disappeared there." A woman who had few choices about home, about family, about men, about everything in fact but the remuneration men gave her might well embellish a well-known story with details about housing, and with enormous power and control.

### Gossip and silence

But what about not speaking? According to Foucault, silence is an additional strategy. What is important are "the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers". Silence "functions alongside things said." Together speech and silence form discourse; speech or silence alone do not (Foucault, 20-27).

Starting in the mid-1970s, women's historians began to equate women's silence with their being powerless (Gal). Within a few years, a new generation of scholars of colonialism, heavily influenced but not necessarily instructed by *Subaltern Studies*, began to look at Foucauldian silences as a point of opposition rather than a discursive strategy. The silence of omission - of colonial documents all about men, about elites, about colonized women described with all the malapropisms of white men - was read to reveal the gender and power of colonial agendas. Reading the silences of documents was a way to see who mattered, and how they mattered, under colonial rule (see for example Spivak, Hunt, Manicom). This insight quickly got out of hand, however: scholars of colonialism in general, and oral historians in particular, began to 'listen to silences.' Anyone whose voice was not included had been silenced, and any number of interviews were interpreted for what was unsaid, rather than what was said. This gave interviewers enormous power, more than they would admit wielding. Silence in an interview, a commission of enquiry, or a courtroom, was no longer strategic, it became another site of interpretation. Listening to silences collapsed the differences between speech and silence; it turned silence into a sort of interpreted speech. Interpreting silences homogenized the different cultural meanings of specific silences.

I want to return here to an old-fashioned, but Foucauldian, interpretation of silences. They are neither spoken nor heard: that is their power. They evade explicit meanings. The full import of these silences are not always completely understood by those who speak and hear them, let alone by a clever researcher. The best example I know of is from colonial Trinidad, the childhood memory with which C. L. R. James began his book about cricket. His aunts spoke of Mathew Bondman, an "unsatisfactory" son in

an "unsatisfactory" family, he is described:

as an awful character. He was generally dirty. He did not work, his eyes were fierce, his language violent and his voice was loud. . . . His sister Marie was quiet but bad, and despite all the circumlocutions, or perhaps because of them, which my aunts employed, I knew it had something to do with 'men' . . . . They rented from us, and had lived there a long time, and their irregularity of life exercised its fascination for my puritanical aunts. But that is not why I remember Mathew. For ne'er-do-well . . . Mathew had one saving grace - Mathew could bat. More than that, Mathew, so crude and vulgar in every aspect of his life, with a bat in his hand was all grace and style. When he practiced on an afternoon with the local club people stayed to watch and walked away when he finished. . . .

Mathew's career did not last long. . . . My aunts were uncompromising in their judgements of him and yet my grandmother's oft-repeated verdict: 'Good for nothing except to play cricket', did not seem right to me. How could an ability to play cricket atone in any sense for Mathew's abominable way of life. . . . (James, 3-5)?

This is perhaps as good an example of gossip, memory and silence as a colonial historians could wish for. That complex bundle of offensive traits of Mathew Bondman and his kin were common knowledge, more engrossing perhaps because they were not detailed. But Mathew the batsman was also not explained in detail. The meaning of his talent, rather than the talent itself, was a silence, unspoken information that revealed the contradictions of race and class - and grace and style - through a colonial identity expressed in universals: Mathew "was my first acquaintance with that *genus Britannicus*, a fine batsman, and the impact that he makes on all around him, cricketers and non-cricketers alike" (James, 4). The silence here is not an additional, repressed version of the spoken, but a kind of socially-constituted understanding of what the gossip is really about.

The meaning of gossip is as social as it is personal. It is pieced together, by many people exchanging information over a short period of time, or by one person over a lifetime - lived experience again. When several people exchange gossip because it is exciting, what's really going on is a debate, as people argue the details and reliability of this rumour, about the issues involved (White, 1993). Silence carries hints, allusions, references and opinions that are not contained in the other information, but it remains a silence, powerful because it is not spoken, and cannot be pulled - or decoded - into speech. Silences do not necessarily lend themselves to the same straightforward interpretation that spoken words do, they require slower or looser analyses. Indeed, James wrote *Beyond a Boundary* in 1963 - after *Black Jacobins*, after years in the US and England, after the exhilaration and disappointments of the Trotskyist movement: "It is only within very recent years that Mathew Bondman . . . [and another cricketer] ceased to be merely isolated memories and fell into place as starting points of a connected pattern" (James, 7).

My argument here is that Foucauldian notions of silence should lead us

to believe not that they are sites of repression, but that they are eloquent assumptions about local knowledge. They are not spoken of not because they are unspeakable, but because they are isolated fragments of powerful stories; they do not carry weight unless the gossip, to use Edgar Morin's troubling phrase, metastasize into rumours and accusations. This brings about a "transition from the singular to the generic" (Morin, 62-63) in which the isolated fragments, whether barely remembered or discussed daily, are shaped into a specific kind of accusation according to specific conventions. The silences in gossip allow it to be taken up anew, with new villains and new situations (see White, 1993a).

### Who Is Gossip About?

If gossip is transmitted over time, how is it different from historical memory?<sup>7</sup> Is the lore about local heroes gossip, or is it myth-making (Nasson)? This raises another question, not just about who gossip is directed at, but whose gossip - gossip about which person - is useful as an historical source. Gossip about the escapades of ordinary folk survives but it is difficult to do more than catalogue these fragments - the gossip remains and is sometimes the only source available (see White, 1990a). In Nairobi, for example, I frequently heard about the women who worked for the *wazimamoto*: "there was a fat woman called Halima and she sold her sister" (White, 1990a: 432). Such remarks were made almost in passing, often by way of examples of the kind of wrong doing I had asked about. I didn't realize it at the time, but these fragments weren't presented as gossip but as invitations to gossip: they tested the interviewer's local knowledge, to see if she knew the landscape - or at least the names and norms - well enough to join in (Favret-Saada, 11). Gossip offered to, or written to bypass the ill-informed, remains fragmentary to those who don't know enough to participate (Nasson, 257; Stoler, 1992). It may be important information by itself, but in such cases, only when gossip is combined with other evidence can it reveal a complex portrait of the subject of the gossip.

But it may be that in the case of the people who left, or were capable of leaving, a paper trail, that rumour and gossip become the best and most reliable historical source. To return to *The Vanishing Children of Paris* once more, there is a great deal of writing about Louis XV, some of which tries to dispel the idea that he had a frightful disease. Yet nothing articulates the quality of his reign quite the way rumours about blood-drained abducted children do. Similarly, Jeff Peires (1987: 66-92) has argued for the use of oral history "as a counterweight to written documentation" by writing the story of a white lawyer who disposed the people of Kat River with his pen, "but wasn't such a fool as to leave anything lying around on paper." If the oral evidence for the man's deception and bullying were overstated, it nevertheless represents a vision

of a legal system at odds with the needs of white and black smallholders.

In my own work (1993a, 768-71), a Scandinavian settler farming near Abercorn in colonial Zambia was accused of being *banyama*, the local term for vampire, by a desperate African in 1944. The man was in dire straits almost two hundred miles away - he had just been arrested for abducting a child, presumably a dispute over child custody or pawning - and was probably repeating local gossip. I did go through all the planters' associations minutes I could lay my hands on to find some information about this man; nothing useful emerged. The history of the agricultural society of Zambia revealed how many leopards were shot near his farm. But other sources revealed why this man might be locally known as a vampire: he was frequently involved in labour disputes on his farm, which he lost, and he had insulted the Bemba paramount in a retail transaction when he was a shopkeeper in Kasama. These sources were, in a word, gossip: they were the gossipy unpublished memoirs of a colonial official, the son of the man's colleague recalling an incident in 1940, and an arrested African.

### Gossip and Historians

At the very real risk of falling back on categories I have described as obsolete, historicizing rumour and gossip allows historians to get to a more intimate terrain of personal experience than other historical sources. The intimate anger and judgemental scorn of gossip map the changing fortunes, values and standards of communities that other sources periodize only broadly. Rumours locate ellipses in the narratives produced by daily life. The various theories of speaking are the tools by which these qualities of gossip might be disembedded - not as separate and distinct forms of speech, to be segregated from the other material presented in oral interviews, but as a way of talking in which people express their interests more intimately, and more personally, than they might if they were talking only about themselves.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Compare this to historians' use of proverbs as a way to establish cultural values, often without the attribution of individual authorship or ironic word play (see Yankah).

<sup>2</sup> For a no-nonsense summary of Foucault written specifically for Africanists, see Vaughan: 8-12; for a no-nonsense colonial historian's reading of Foucault, see Stoler, n.d.

<sup>3</sup> Although courtroom testimony is outside the scope of this particular essay, it is one of the sites in which gossip and subjectivity interrogate each other, and a site from which a subject reinvents a self with, or against, gossip (see Ferguson, and White, 1994). The subject need not be present to be remade in a courtroom, although when a dead subject is refashioned, the living subjects are often constrained by the positions from which they remake the dead (see Cohen and Odhiambo).

<sup>4</sup> Scholars of early modern Europe have debated this as much as Africanists have avoided it. See, for example, the debates generated by *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Davis, 1983, 1988:572-603; Finlay; Greenblatt). Roper, (1-34, 225-30) has an excellent summary of these debates.

<sup>5</sup> Zaina Kuchui, Pumwani, 14 June 1976.

<sup>6</sup> See White, 1990a; pits were said to be in prostitutes' rooms in Pumwani, but in Kampala men had such pits in their houses (see White, 1994). Presumably Kachui's version was heard by people whose Swahili was better than mine, but the play between the word for carpet (*mkeka*) and the word for boundary (*mpeka*) is strong in an account that is about women's ability to control space.

<sup>7</sup> Even within a region, the understanding of gossip varies considerably. The Bemba-speaking people on the plateau of colonial Northern Rhodesia used *ityashi* to refer to conversation and talk; Bemba-speakers of the Luapula Valley used the same term for historical memory (see Cunnison, and White, 1995).

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