

1-1-1996

Knowledge underground : gossip epistemology.

Karen C. Adkins

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1

Recommended Citation

Adkins, Karen C., "Knowledge underground : gossip epistemology." (1996). *Doctoral Dissertations 1896 - February 2014*. 2288.
https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1/2288

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations 1896 - February 2014 by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

KNOWLEDGE UNDERGROUND: GOSSIPY EPISTEMOLOGY

A Dissertation Presented

by

KAREN C. ADKINS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 1996

Philosophy

© Copyright by Karen C. Adkins 1996
All Rights Reserved

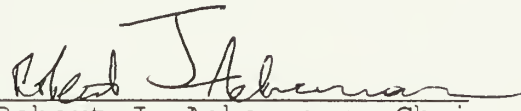
KNOWLEDGE UNDERGROUND: GOSSIPY EPISTEMOLOGY

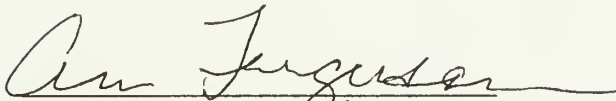
A Dissertation Presented


by

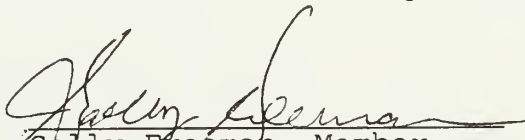
KAREN C. ADKINS

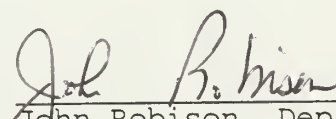
Approved as to style and content by:


Robert J. Ackermann, Chair


Ann Ferguson, Member


Robert P. Wolff, Member


Sally Freeman, Member


John Robison, Department Head
Philosophy

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this dissertation has been difficult for me, originally because my chosen topic of study is so heterodox to the conventions of my field. Happily, the members of my dissertation committee have been uniformly willing both to allow for the possibility of peculiar research in philosophy, while not relaxing their standards for research and argumentation. For their interest and support, as well as their frank and helpful criticisms and suggestions, I thank Ann Ferguson, Robert Paul Wolff and Sally Freeman.

Just as my topic has proven challenging for me, though, actually sitting down and researching and writing the dissertation was no less sizable an obstacle. Without the interest, encouragement, and occasional good-natured nagging of my family and friends, this project would no doubt long ago have been abandoned for more immediately pleasurable pursuits. In particular, I am indebted to Dan, Emily, George, Hank, Joseph, Marge, Sarah, Susan, and Valerie. I especially thank George Leaman for passing on his archive of Philosophy department memos, both for spurring my interest in gossip and providing me with a treasure trove of raw material.

Ultimately, though, my greatest thanks are for my director, Bob Ackermann. Bob inspires me by example in many ways -- reading and writing prodigiously, analyzing arguments and current affairs meticulously and acutely, applying high-

theoretical interests to everyday problems, practically involving himself in community work while staying academically productive, all the while continuously showing interest in others' work and experiences. More particularly, Bob was particularly flexible and enthusiastic during his years of working with me; challenging me to produce writing at times when I would rather have done anything else, supporting both the validity of this project and my quest for an academic job, and adjusting himself to my variant timelines as my work proceeded slowly (and very occasionally quickly). I would have neither begun nor concluded this project were it not for Bob's constant support, ideas, references, and reaction. My paramount thanks to him, of course, are for his unending supply of spectacular gossip, as well as his constant endorsement of the validity and merit of this project. Bob has taught me much about philosophy; but enduringly, he has taught me more about gossip.

ABSTRACT

KNOWLEDGE UNDERGROUND: GOSSIPY EPISTEMOLOGY

SEPTEMBER 1996

KAREN C. ADKINS, B.A., UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Robert J. Ackermann

This dissertation is an attempt to loosen what I see as a chokehold by which two paramount assumptions constrict our epistemic endeavors. These Enlightenment assumptions - that we accept or refute ideas as true based on transparently clear and orderly methods and criteria, and that **individuals** accept or refute truth claims - are still central in epistemology, despite their many critics (for the first, Kant, Hegel, James, Quine, Bayes; for the second, postmodernism, Deleuze and Guattari, Gilbert). Thinking about gossip as an epistemologically productive concept provides us with the means to critique those assumptions, and further attempts to broaden our notion of an epistemological foundation.

Gossip at first appears to be an unlikely candidate for such a resurrection, mainly because its treatment by academics has been dismissive; this dismissal is in part due to Enlightenment conceptions about truth and falsehood.

Chapter One surveys the social science literature on gossip and rumor, revealing that social scientists begin with such

restrictive definitions of what gossip is that their conclusions amount to little more than tautology. **Chapter Two** shows that humanists have a slightly different approach to gossip, but with roughly similar results.

The handful of philosophers who deal directly with gossip or rumor almost as a unit accept uncritically a division between "purposive" conversation and "idle" chatter. To do so, I think, perpetuates a limiting epistemic foundation on a linguistic level. In contrast, I argue in **Chapter Three** that the very existence of something like gossip proves the inadequacy of the foundationalist myth (at least in its current form), and that to attempt to understand and use gossip with foundationalist tools is simply a wrong fit. My understanding of gossip is based on this central fact: we undertake the activity of gossip or rumor-spreading because we are trying to make sense out of something -- we need to collect knowledge socially. Gossip originates from dissonance; it acts as a (necessary) counterweight to more official information, and can't be considered apart from official knowledge. We use gossip and rumor, along with more orthodox sources of information, to formulate our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. The extent to which gossip and rumor are spread is the extent to which the analysis is shared, and not individualized. Gossip is both a genealogical tool and an speculative tool.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	vi
Chapter	
INTRODUCTION: GOSSIPING YOUR WAY TO KNOWLEDGE.....	1
1.1 Some Preliminary Commentary.....	1
1.2 Outline of the Work.....	9
1.3 One Final Note.....	14
1. WHY GOSSIP IS ALMOST ALWAYS WRONG IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES.....	16
1.1 Social Meteorologists.....	25
1.2 Spin Doctors.....	73
1.3 Gossipy Voices.....	119
2. METHODOLOGY LITE; WHY GOSSIP IS ALMOST ALWAYS TRIVIAL IN THE HUMANITIES.....	154
2.1 The Trope of Gossip and Rumor.....	160
2.2 Referees of Chatter.....	196
2.3 Doppelgänger Gossips.....	211
2.4 Archaeologists of Gossip.....	248
3. WHY GOSSIP IS ALMOST ALWAYS RIGHT; TOWARDS A GOSSIPY EPISTEMOLOGY.....	274
3.1 Its Definition.....	279
3.2 Why (and How) Epistemology Might Be Informal..	300
3.3 How Informal Epistemology is Inherently Gossipy.....	324
3.4 How Gossip Selects.....	331
3.5 How Gossip Synthesizes.....	336
3.6 Applications of Analysis and Conclusion.....	343
APPENDIX: A MODEL GOSSIP.....	350
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	351

INTRODUCTION

GOSSIPING YOUR WAY TO KNOWLEDGE

"A self is a set of reputations"

--F.G. Bailey, Gifts and Poison

1.1 Some Preliminary Commentary

I gossip a lot. Indeed, I have only half-jokingly remarked to friends that I am the ideal person to carry out this project, because I have been practically training for gossip research all my life: when I was ten, I began the first (no doubt only, and certainly short-lived) Gossip Club at my elementary school; we met every afternoon at recess on the parallel bars to evaluate fellow schoolmates, teachers, and siblings.

I begin this "serious" project so apparently flippantly, first as a warning for those seeking out objective analyses of gossip. While I am interested (and hopefully have succeeded) in sketching a more complete portrait of gossip than currently exists in the academic literature, I do so not as an impersonal crusader for science, but as an unabashed defender, as well as habitual practitioner, of gossip. While some readers will no doubt turn away from my evidently hopelessly biased work on this statement alone, let me assure readers that other gossip writers who aren't as explicit about their personal attitudes towards gossip, nonetheless make their prior prejudices equally as clear in their subsequent, excessively

hostile, treatments of the subject. I am merely trying to lay my cards out on the table before we begin the analysis game, rather than feigning objectivity at the start, only to have scabrous invective creep into my "neutral" investigation as it proceeds (I like my scabrous invective out in plain sight).

Indeed, let me quickly enumerate those initial assumptions with which I began this project now, before we get too far in. I began this work as a straightforward champion of gossip. "Of course it is always right, of course it is never petty or malicious, anyone who thinks otherwise is a craven Puritan," is a pretty fair assessment of my attitudes towards gossip. Reading the vast assemblage of gossip- and rumorology has challenged those assumptions, but only partially. I now think that gossip is an infinitely more complicated social manifestation than ever before, and that no one functional reading of gossip (it makes truth, it distorts it, it lies; it is good, it is bad, it is just a tool for values) can hope to capture its inherently multifaceted nature. While I fear that in this work I still retain too much of the flavor of my original evangelical attitude towards gossip, I still prefer it to a feigning of neutrality or a frowning, "judicious" criticism: I think a blast of unabashed enthusiasm towards gossip's virtues and functions is probably the best way to prod others to appreciate gossip as complicated.

And I do think that gossip is complicated, in striking contrast to the bulk of the extant academic literature on the subject. While researching and writing this project has been startling in a variety of ways, foremost among them was the discovery that an activity that had provided so much insight and discovery for me was either ignored or dismissed by so many theorists on human behavior. While I began this dissertation almost on a dare (as the ultimate moment of an extended gossip-conversation with my dissertation advisor), my rapid discovery of the widespread, and largely trivializing, literature on gossip propelled me to explore more deeply questions of language and knowledge. Writers on gossip, it seems to me, are able to cordon it off into a "safe" zone (affecting only "trivial" personal relations or being wildly destructive, but in identifiable and predictable ways), because they have similarly cordoned off notions of how language works, and how it is we come by knowledge -- since language is either transparently rational and purposive or idle and emotional, and since we can determine what is "really" knowledge versus what is merely opinion, gossip can easily belong to its own separate (and certainly unequal) arena. Rethinking gossip as in part a constructive epistemic force entails rethinking how it is we communicate, and come to knowledge, with each other.

Of course, rethinking gossip is no small task; for well over 200 years gossip has almost without exception been

vilified, dismissed, and trivialized in both academic and popular media. Sermons are delivered detailing gossip's evils, samplers are embroidered counseling sagely against its practice -- indeed, I even ran across an old trivet in a junk shop decorated with a female exhorting the user in bowdlerized German not to "talk so dumb." Largely, then, my dissertation will consist of a critical reading of the academic literature on gossip which explains why these theories (almost without exception) fail to capture the complicated and convoluted nature of gossip.

A partial reason that I see this happening is evidenced by the large amount of meta-writing that occurs in writing about gossip. To be precise, the gossipists I have been reading, with few exceptions, spend more time writing about the difficulties in writing about/theorizing about/studying gossip, than they do in actually reporting and analyzing the gossip they collect (Sarah Miller, Ori Bet Or, Jörg Bergmann, and John Beard Haviland come to mind). This is true even in cases (Bet Or and Miller) where it's clear that the authors have an enormous amount of primary information that they have not only collected but analyzed; one writer (Bet Or) even explicitly discusses how he could spend 100 pages alone discussing one particular gossip-episode. What this phenomenon suggests to me, among other things, is that gossipists are so intent upon credentialling themselves as doing something legitimate (with something so apparently

illegitimate) that they constrain themselves as much as possible, so as to retain credibility for themselves. It seems impossible, then, if we consider the bulk of the literature on gossip, to write about the topic seriously without simultaneously reducing the topic to complete non-seriousness.

Of course, skeptics might contest my more generous approach towards gossip as being exactly non-serious; to wit, that my straightforward enthusiasm amounts to an uncritical assertion of truths to gossip that I cannot justify, given my lack of disciplinary fidelity. Detractors could argue that, like the social scientists I so energetically attack, by my own definition I am simply setting myself up for success -- if gossip is always already everywhere and in everything, well then of course it's a part of knowledge. My dissertation then becomes an amusing exercise in circularity.

I have two responses to this criticism. First, I think it's important to recognize that contextualizing approaches to social science (and more generally, to knowledge-gathering) are a legitimate and widespread intellectual movement. Bruno Latour's We Have Never Been Modern (1993) and Jacques Rancière's The Names of History (1994) are simply the most recent (and elegant) examples of this approach. To crudely summarize, Latour and Rancière, while working from vastly different frames of reference (Latour

writes about science, politics, and history, using Hobbes and Boyle as his lenses; Rancière appraises literary criticism, politics, and history, using Michelet and Braudel's European histories and Auerbach's literary criticism commentary) are both attempting to demonstrate not just that history is never simply a story-telling, or that scientific revolutions aren't simply happenings; but that only by openly and actively combining or contextualizing our fields of knowledge or inquiry can we make any sense of them, for **in their very structure** fields, ages, and frameworks contain elements of the fields, ages, and frameworks they are apparently conceived to refute or differentiate. Their claims best illustrate this notion: historical science is still and always written as narrative; the postmodern era is neither postmodern or an era, but simply a failed attempt at modernity (neatly cleaving into differently functioning and limited intellectual ages, whose products themselves are variably and similarly functioning and limited); scientific advances are political changes; we have always been premodern (rather than following a linear development of ages, including "the postmodern"); the history of the anonymous is written as a history of a character ("the people"). To generalize about these claims in the most reductive terms, Rancière and Latour argue that yes, we always are trying to focus on just one object of examination at a time (whether it be a person, an event, a

revolutionary change, an object), and that focusing isn't itself a problem. The point is that focusing on one thing **is** focusing on the world, writing the story of the airpump is writing the story of the Enlightenment, just as writing the story of gossip is writing the story of the world. The problem comes when we attempt to convince ourselves that we need only look at narrow concepts, that we can simply ignore certain facts or works because they don't "fit" the paradigm, that we can construct paradigms to describe the world that are consistent, complete, self-contained, and absolutely refuting or denying earlier paradigms.

These are just a few of the conceptual sea changes that Rancière and Latour, in their different ways, adumbrate. Those who would argue that such apparent raving relativism leaves us with no method by which to come to systemic beliefs about things or events or people (and, perhaps more to the point, no pre-approved or -legitimized method for conducting Rigorous Intellectual Inquiry) miss the point. Our beliefs, our ideas about people and events and changes and structures, are **already** pluralistically constructed. It is we who discredit our own attempts to gain knowledge by rigidly confining ourselves to tightly circumscribed domains. We are always inventing anew our own frameworks for how we think, so our limits are at once nothing and everything.

All this rhapsodizing is simply to say that gossip and rumor don't just occur as isolated or isolatable phenomena. While the prose of many gossipists (Rosenbaum and Subrin, Bergmann) might suggest that gossip is still a highly cloistered, clandestine activity -- preselected subversive cells scurrying off to safe spaces to trade dirt in their own highly technical and impenetrable language -- gossip as it actually happens is simply one activity among countless in a day. Indeed, gossip is so indistinct as an activity that many people do not even tag it as an activity (or a separate activity). Therefore, it can hardly make sense to study gossip as a narrow phenomenon that can only have a strictly defined content or relevance. For such restraints do not reflect how we live with gossip, and as gossips, every day.

To use Rancière's language, then, I want to write a narrative of gossip as knowledge. In one sense my task is similar to my predecessors in gossipology, who wrote narratives of gossip as an anti-rational community-definer and -destroyer. But in another sense, our tasks are substantively different -- my narrative (I hope) will show my character of gossip being changed, interacting with other well-developed, three-dimensional characters. I would read the others' works on gossip as morality plays, where characters are absent -- the stage is populated by types (The Gossip, The Truth) who clash, misunderstand each other,

stay separate and opposed, and affect the audience only by boring it or provoking moral qualms.

1.2 Outline of the Work

Some precision might now be in order. The dissertation consists of three chapters, the first two being critical reviews of the extant literature on gossip and rumor, with a particular consideration of theorists' views on gossip epistemologically. **Chapter One** reviews the social science literature, **Chapter Two** the writings in the humanities. I divide the review chapters thus because I discovered, during the course of my much less disciplinarily organized search through gossip matter, that apparent similarities in field training and convention led to roughly similar kinds of assumptions authors made about their work. To speak plainly, social scientists tended to get bogged down by methodology, producing ethnographies that demonstrate empirical soundness coexistent with primitive, judgmental notions of gossip. The seventies revolution of thick-descriptiveness in social science (revealing initial biases and assumptions, so as to be able to construct a more complicated portrait of the society or subculture one wishes to present) seems for the most part to have escaped those social scientists wishing to study gossip and rumor. Social science studies of gossip tend to focus only on a very few types of conversation (explicit, condemnatory, backbiting

talk of others' genital or imbibative activity), and their studiers tend to advocate more and less explicitly for the regulation of, if not the outright censure of, gossip. To the extent that these writers consider gossip as epistemically valuable, then, it is only as an object lesson in falsity.

For their part, humanists tend to focus less on methodology and more on narrative: what are the stories gossip tells, and more particularly, what are the stories we tell about ourselves as we tell these gossip stories? While this approach promises more complication to gossip (the practice becomes less singlemindedly about articulating moral and social rules to each other, using those not present as pawns), the downside to this approach is that gossip retains relevance as story only; humanists insist, with depressing regularity, that gossip is essentially an individual, or intimate community, activity, and has bearing on the wider world only in the sense that every human has versions of these communities. This means, though, that the matter of gossip becomes irrelevant; its function is purely generic (a version of talk therapy). Gossip may contain epistemic truth, but so privately and particularly that it surely cannot be a further interest.

I certainly dispute these methodological assumptions (and argue these assumptions as I present them), divergent though they are, and indeed I unite both chapters together

in at least one fashion -- virtually every writer on gossip and rumor (save the small circle of innovative writers from each discipline, presented at the end of each chapter) mechanistically reproduces dictionary definitions of gossip and rumor as valid tools for understanding their topics, and in so doing drastically restrict the scope and import of their analyses. The work in **Chapter Three**, then, begins with a presentation and defense of an alternative definition of gossip, as a way in which to open up our field of consideration. This definition becomes relevant when I consider issues in epistemology that encourage such an attitude towards gossip; namely, that justified beliefs still can have at least some independence from the communities in which they occur. The primary goal of this chapter is to argue for a more informal, community-dependent understanding of epistemology, and subsequently to demonstrate how gossip contributes to such an informal epistemology. If gossip is more than simply negative, necessarily false or distorted tittle-tattle about our neighbors; if, in other words, gossip is (as I argue) simply the informal conversation of friendship, then traditional understandings of epistemology, which rely on highly formalized, retrospective accountings of what certitude and proof are may inaccurately represent how we actually go about collecting knowledge.

I see this realignment of epistemology through gossip occurring in two ways -- first, the informal conversations we have with friends are a playground for ideas; we can collect and combine intuitions, observations, analyses, more randomly, more creatively, and more loosely than we do in other, more rigid settings. As such, gossip helps us assemble analyses in a way that a constantly retrospective analytic epistemology cannot recognize or document. Second, these traditional understandings of epistemology miss important preliminary stages of knowledge-gathering -- where we decide what we will **not** pursue in a field of hypotheses, areas of interest, etc. Gossip importantly helps us to rule in and out some options, in a unique fashion.

After this analysis, I then practically challenge my predecessors' habits of writing about gossip and rumor as if they are either necessarily wrong or necessarily irrelevant by invoking gossip examples that illustrate knowledge creation that are both demonstrably true and not bound by tight community lines. I conclude by suggesting applications of and further directions for this sort of research.

An important methodology note: the bulk of this dissertation, as I indicated before, consists in a substantial, and often painstakingly close reading (perhaps irritatingly so to readers) of theoretical and empirical texts on gossip. While I acknowledge the length of what

might seem to be only secondarily relevant material, I would like to justify its inclusion for just a moment. In the first place, no really inclusive review of this literature exists of which I am aware -- those scholars who as a matter of course produce literature reviews while preparing their gossip or rumor monographs have tended to focus only on the literature from within their disciplines. Hence, the more strictly literary commentary is typically ignored by the social scientists, and vice versa. Despite their (I think) disciplinarily influenced differences, there are many important crossovers in these writers' approaches and conclusions regarding gossip, and hence I think it is important to have this material collected. However, and much more pointedly for me, in the course of my reading this material I came to the realization that the vast majority of writers on gossip and rumor seemed to have none but the most unsophisticated, judgmental conceptions to their subjects, and that indeed most of this literature really was not deserving of future serious study. I realize that this is a serious (not to say audacious) scholarly claim to make, and in wishing to make it as responsibly as possible, I have attempted to provide as exhaustive argumentation as I know how to support this contention. Since in many cases evidence of the sorts of bias, inappropriate inferences, or circularity had to be teased out of several passages in particular texts (or the aggregate of one long argument in

the text) rather than in one overt passage, both presentation of material and criticism are substantial endeavors. I apologize for my garrulousness.

1.3 One Final Note

If my already-evident passion for gossip has limited my ability to analyze and argue its nature and function in any capacity, the following is the only limitation I genuinely regret (for any overenthusiastic argument I would defend as a necessary counterweight to the overwhelming existence of vituperative dismissals of chat): that my genuine irritation at simplistic and reductive analyses of gossip has often left me incapable of appreciating, and more importantly recalling to readers, the sheer pleasure of gossip. Speaking personally, while I definitely gossip in part because it enables me to uncover facts, ideas, speculations to which I might not in other arenas have access, and because it permits a freer, more elaborate analysis than many supposedly more "serious" channels provide, I know that chief among its attractions for me is the enjoyment it provides. Gossiping is fun, because you can talk about anything, in unrestrained fashion, at any length. It's fun because you can have fun doing it -- you can be playful, you can be explorative, you can be goofy. One of the primary limitations of academic analyses of gossip is that they so typically ignore this aspect of

gossip, or if they acknowledge it, by the very structure of academic writing, they make fun and gossip seem distantly related, and certainly distant from the reader (recall E.B. White's analogy of humor analysis to frog dissection). This is an appropriately "non-serious" note with which I close this introduction, in part because it recalls my opening anecdote and subsequent remarks. The purpose of juxtaposing "serious", weighty academic reflection and "silly", frothy gossip (womanly!) chatter here in part is to remind us of just how unfairly these two terms are constantly and absolutely juxtaposed; how having fun can be serious (indeed, may be the only way to be serious in some situations). I regret that in my enthusiasm for my project I too have done less than I might otherwise have to repair that deficiency in gossip analysis; my weakness as a gossip, indeed, is that I cannot gossip about academics in these pages seriously enough.

CHAPTER 1

WHY GOSSIP IS ALMOST ALWAYS WRONG IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

For almost a century, gossip has been one of the measures by which social scientists gauge how well they know the societies they study¹. Since one important task for social psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists alike is to be able to understand the function of a society (or one of its subsets) as its inhabitants do, having access to and understanding the gossip of locals is incontestable proof that the social scientists has established herself as an insider -- that she knows the scoop. As Max Gluckman recognizes in his groundbreaking 1963 article, gossip is an important component of social and community life -- it is crucial to maintaining cohesion in a community (308). To understand a community, you must understand its gossip.

Since Gluckman's article, social scientists have self-consciously taken up with a vengeance the challenge of understanding gossip in its social context². Gluckman's

¹See Gluckman (1963) for citations.

²While social scientists have written about gossip or rumor or included them in their work for most of this century, Gluckman is the first to recognize gossip explicitly as a critical factor in understanding how members of a society, or any of its subgroups, see themselves and each other. To use a crude analogy, prior to Gluckman, gossip and rumor were relied-upon, if unacknowledged, social scientific tactics. Gluckman's article "outs" the study of gossip and rumor as necessary methodological tactics; Gluckman's article legitimates the (subsequently more open) usage of and reliance upon more "informal" data collection through chat.

article legitimizes the study of gossip. Already a well-respected anthropologist, Gluckman produced an elegantly written, creative essay that acknowledged what should have been transparently obvious to everyone. Gluckman's object lesson for his fellow ethnographers is simple: if you are trying to assess/record/document a group of people, the less intrusive and formal you are, the more complete your knowledge. So clearly, less formal talk (e.g. talk that is not simply passive, artificial responding to survey questions) encourages broader and more exhaustive knowledge for the ethnographer; as Gluckman says, "[gossip] is part of the very blood and tissue of [community] life" (1963, 308). Gluckman's essay, in part, encourages a breaking free of reliance simply on survey techniques for doing social anthropology, in lieu of a more difficult (but ultimately more productive) informal collection of informal conversation. Collecting informal gossip, Gluckman concludes, is critical for attaining more nuanced portraits of societies, because it is only through gossip that the more ambiguous lines of social distinction can even be perceived. Without gossip, Gluckman suggests, we miss critical social data, and our resulting social interpretations are oversimplified (1963, 312-313).

While this proposal would seem liberatory and exciting, the fact is that academic social science work has responded sluggishly to the suggestion. The basic flaw of pre-

Geertzian social science -- assuming the objectivity and neutrality of the scientific observer, and his (yes) unimpaired ability to "read" correctly and fully any society he chooses to enter (phallic imagery fully intended, thanks) -- flourishes unabated in the social science of gossip and rumor. The flaw of social science researchers' assuming neutrality and objectivity, as Geertz so elegantly demonstrates, is that it encourages a lack of self-reflexivity amongst its practitioners (22-23). In other words, ethnographers rushing to study the now-acceptable social factors of gossip and rumor do not pause to examine their own assumptions and preconceptions, and to reflect upon the ways in which those assumptions might be coloring the data they collect (causing them simply to miss things, or draw only certain conclusions, or, more predictably, to draw conclusions that [magically!] match the initial hypotheses with which they began their projects)³.

Certainly there is a range of the kinds of error gossipists and rumorists make when examining their

³While it is true that after The Interpretation of Culture anthropological methodology changed both dramatically and for the better, there are still clear holdovers within the field (and more broadly within social science) who ignore Geertz's challenge and continue to study and write from their own assumed omnipotence and omniscience. Harold Pepinsky (1991) provides a useful debunking of one such broad lack of reflexivity, in the field of criminology. Geertz himself provides a useful reminder that anthropologists' goals should not be simply to examine all assumptions and preconceptions (and therefore, implicitly, arrive at a truer omnipotence), but that instead we should simply compare the interpretations that ethnography **necessarily** produces.

(admittedly unwieldy) topics. But with depressing regularity, the social scientists whose work I analyze here, with two exceptions, all produce one facet or another of that pre-Geertzian methodology; that is, each in his or her own way seems to have a(n admittedly smaller than pre-Geertz) general list of (social, conversational, interpersonal) qualities s/he looks for when researching gossip; and this or that particularly society or substratum is simply so much raw data to be processed by the magic Anthropology Machine, and reproduced as one more interchangeable analysis. The researcher typically assumes a complete understanding of the nature of gossip. The process, though, less clearly resembles genuinely productive academic work than Calvin's (of Calvin and Hobbes) Transmogrifier -- an empty cardboard box into which variant amounts of imagination and expectation are piled, so as to convert the simple box into an all-powerful transformative tool (Calvin's Transmogrifier turns him into various fish, fowl and beast regularly), terminated only by the appearance of one of Calvin's parents, cutting short the fantasy and resuming the infinitely less interesting (less malleable, less spectacular) reality.

So how exactly do these Bekins boxes of ethnographic analysis (claiming grandiose analyses of the nature and function of gossip while merely reproducing one ordinary statement after another: "gossip is mean," "gossip is

petty," "gossip is manipulative") attain their transmogrifying status; and how, correlatively if less pleasantly, do I see myself in the role of crabby parent to these overimaginative, if underproductive social scientists? Of the social scientists whose work is my primary focus here, I see three rough groups of the degree and kind of overdetermining generalization they perpetuate. Crudely put, the extent to which each writer accepts the dictionary definition of gossip or rumor as setting the appropriate range limits to the information for which s/he will look, is the extent to which the gossipist in question produces unreflexive and uninformative analysis. I will divide this crude observation into a typology with four possibilities. The first comparison along one axis that defines that approach social scientists use are these: Do they see gossip and rumor as primarily passive or active phenomena (in other words, do gossip and rumor simply reflect a predefined reality or conception, or do they themselves help us define how we see things)? The second comparison traces the writers that treat any kind of truth element, or even relation to truth, in gossip and rumor (e.g. does it simply go unconsidered because they're clearly unrelated; does the thinker consider gossip and rumor to function only to distort or outright falsify truth conceptions?; or does the

thinker allow that gossip and rumor could sometimes be accurate?). Let me illustrate⁴:

	Truth	Falsity
Passive	see footnote 4	1.1 Social Meteorologists
Active	1.3 Gossipy Voices	1.2 Spin Doctors

Let me note that these categories are ahistorical; in each category writers from eras throughout the history of gossip and rumor social science (roughly, the 1920s through the present) are represented.

My procedure is as follows; I will begin with the most egregious (most antiquated, most generalizing) gossipists, and work up to the most promising. First we have the Social Meteorologists, who are able to understand gossip only as an entirely passive notion. Gossip reflects social reality and ranking for these writers; more particularly, gossip is only

⁴One of the four possibilities is empty; that gossip can be both a purely passive phenomena and yet contain meaningful truth content. My assumption is that writers cannot imagine gossip in such a seemingly paradoxical context. In other words, researchers are able to contradict the reputation of gossip, but only minimally -- something so reputationally suspect can either be manipulatively truthful (truthful as an active object of construction), or beyond manipulation (passive), but only so because of intrinsic falsehood. It cannot be both beyond manipulation and truthful.

of interest indirectly (i.e. its reflection of society); its content tells us nothing. Gossip is a device by which we take the temperature of a society. As such, gossip and rumor have no real relation to truth or falsehood -- their interest or merit stems entirely from their status as social products. Amusingly enough, this most antiquated group includes the most recent research.

Holding a more nuanced view of gossip and rumor are the Spin Doctors, who regard gossip and rumor, ultimately, as hermeneutic devices. These writers grant gossip status as both interesting and active, and they acknowledge that it's not simply flatly wrong or malevolently destructive. However, they stop short of saying it has significant truth value -- for them, gossip functions to interpret social rules, values, norms. This can mean disputing, adapting, individualizing, rejecting, evaluating, or comparing often important social rules; but ultimately, gossip becomes more about **managing** information (e.g. manipulating it, distorting it), and so here too a (subtler) distinction between truth and falsehood is maintained, with gossip and rumor continuing to inhabit the wrong side of that distinction. With most of the writers in each of these two categories, I observe the striking continuity of one particular metaphor or allusion -- that of gossip and rumor as a kind of poison -- invoked over and over again. While it is true that F.G. Bailey explicitly refers to gossip as "Gifts and

Poison" in his book of the same title, it is nonetheless remarkable that so many writers -- many of whom without citing Bailey -- return to this imagery as a somehow accurate, if emphatic, description of the trajectory and method of gossip and rumor.

Finally, and most intriguingly, are the social scientists (Sarah Elizabeth Miller [1992], Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar [1978], Peter DeBenedittis [1993], and the Max Gluckman of the 1963 article⁵) who manage both to accord gossip power as an active entity, and to bestow upon it a productive (if shadowy) relationship with the truth. While I have some criticisms of each author, I still regard them as clearly having the most creative approaches to gossip and rumor in the social sciences.

One final note: in this chapter, as in the following one, I consider the literature on gossip and rumor integratively (theorists on each are to be found in every section in this chapter). This is not because I think that rumor and gossip are interchangeable terms (though they are often used as such, and indeed, several of the writers here use them interchangeably). Rather, I do this mixing first because the relevant literature often does not draw (or even

⁵As I will make clear in part 3 of this chapter, the reason I refer to "the" Max Gluckman here is because there are two Max Gluckmans - sadly, the Max Gluckman who writes about gossip after his initial 1963 article inspires an academic spat within the pages of Man is little more than a Spin Doctor himself.

notice) a sharp distinction between gossip and rumor. The fact that thinkers on rumor and gossip have in fact used their terms interchangeably (and indeed, cite the correlative works when writing their own studies; e.g., Bergmann's book on gossip cites Allport and Postman's book on rumor), I think indicates an important conceptual blurring that takes place in these fields⁶. In short, since both gossip and rumor are traditionally defined as what they are not (gossip = non-serious talk; rumor = propositions without evident justification) rather than what they are, such derivative definitions lead to the conceptual confusion. Both are simply different species of non-truth (assorted versions of "loose talk"); indeed, scholars often make the close relationship between the two explicit⁷. For clarity's sake here, I will try to make it explicit whenever I am referring to observations about rumor or gossip (if they seem to be used in an exclusive fashion).

⁶There is a distinction to be drawn between gossip and rumor, though I do not think it follows the standard lines (differentiated by channel, degree of truthfulness, topic) commentators observe. Chapter Three will discuss this distinction in greater detail.

⁷One easy example is in Brison's (1988) dissertation, where she refers to "[rumor that is] allowed to circulate in the ambiguous realms of gossip" (146). Clearly, gossip is the essential conversational channel carrying the content of rumor.

1.1 Social Meteorologists

Despite their often painstakingly self-conscious methodology, and their divergent foci within the general subjects of rumor and gossip, what unites the social scientists I think of as social meteorologists is their fundamentally reductive attitude towards the topic when they invest their time in it. Ultimately, for these writers, gossip and rumor can never be more than a simple social phenomenon whose presence they mark. Its meaning and significance is transparently clear from the start -- it is malicious, false, distorting, and creates havoc among otherwise peaceable people (for it is among these writers that invocations of "poison" and viral imagery are most common⁸). Because their initial presuppositions about gossip and rumor are so clear, and so diminished in character, their analyses are similarly reductive and diminished. My task here will be to show how this is so.

Jörg Bergmann's Discreet Indiscretions: The Social Organization of Gossip (1993) is the most recent treatment of gossip directly contrary to Gluckman's (1963) in terms of an attempt to understand gossip and appreciate it on many levels. Indeed, Bergmann himself is unabashed about making this attack on Gluckman part of his own project; he ignores Gluckman's article until his final chapter, then presents

⁸See Adkins (1996) for more detailed analysis of the implications and conceptual looseness this metaphorical usage represents.

what he sees as the decisive rebuttals of Gluckman's approach to gossip. Generally, my criticisms of Bergmann boil down to this: the narrowness of his conception of gossip, and his methodology, produce an uninformatively diminished analysis of gossip and its effect. Since Bergmann's treatment embraces the work of earlier "scientific" studies, I will make it the major focus of my treatment of the social meteorologists.

In Discreet Indiscretions, Bergmann's overarching aim is to justify gossip (by demonstration) as an object of social analysis -- it is a social interaction like any other, and it has its own quirks and characteristics that merit analysis (indeed, that have to be analyzed for the notion of communication to make sense)⁹. Bergmann seeks to achieve a certain realignment of communication theory that takes into account its disparate elements (31). In this sense Bergmann would seem to be rather straightforwardly following the direction of Gluckman (albeit in a different field -- Bergmann is a social psychologist). However, while Gluckman's essay recognizes that notions of social organization must change to accommodate the content and function of gossip, Bergmann thinks that gossip has to be analyzed according to preexisting norms within the field of communication; gossip must fit existing methodology. He

⁹One might wonder how Bergmann can consider gossip a form of communication like any other, given the value judgment implicit in the title of his work.

sees as his exciting breakthrough elevating gossip to the rationally analyzable terrain of social science - showing how the irrational can be considered rationally (and all of its irrationality revealed). I see his breakthrough as not a breakthrough at all, but rather a stagnation -- Bergmann confines gossip (and communication) to the ever-rational terrain of science, which fails to assess either (or, of course, science itself) as a complicated, not clearly rational or irrational phenomenon.

Bergmann's attempt stands in clear contrast to Gluckman's essay (which I will discuss in more detail in section 3); for where Bergmann's book is overloaded with observations on methodology and a narrow confinement of work to appropriately preordained bounds of social science, Gluckman's short essay is a freewheeling, creative analysis of previous social science that is colored by Gluckman's own observations, and Gluckman's own experience. Gluckman's frank subjectivity, which lends authenticity to his remarks, suggests not only that Gluckman is alert to more (and more variant) details in his anthropological work, but ultimately that Gluckman has a basic interest in writing about gossip that Bergmann cannot honestly share. To phrase all of this as cattily as possible, if the tone of Bergmann's book is an appropriate indicator, than apparently he himself has never recognized any indulgence on his part in a spot of gossip;

or if he has, this book is either curious penance for his transgression or an attempt at covering his tracks.

Bergmann's inability to adjust communication theory to reflect its subsumption of complicated social occurrences such as gossip is reflected in his moralizing attitude towards gossip, which he makes plain throughout the book. To begin, Bergmann has a conceptual quarrel with Gluckman; he doesn't like Gluckman's article because "instead of acknowledging gossip's social disrepute as an empirical feature and explaining it, [Gluckman] treats it as a scientific statement about gossip that needs to be disproved" (144). Bergmann finds this disregard of such a "fact" about gossip irresponsible and distorting; he has harsher words for Gluckman later, chastising Gluckman for "overlook[ing] the fact that gossip, since it repeats the private affairs of others, is, and in principle has to be, a morally disreputable practice" (145, emphasis mine). It is clear, when we juxtapose these two statements, that for Bergmann the social disreputability of gossip isn't simply an 'empirical' feature of gossip that can't be disputed, only explained; but that gossip's **moral** disreputability is an essential characteristic of gossip that can only color and inform treatments of it¹⁰. The neutral language of the

¹⁰The strict reliance upon dictionary definitions a statement like this belies -- for gossip is commonly defined in dictionaries as "sensational," "tattling," "idle" -- supports my earlier comment that the more closely writers cleave to dictionary definitions, the more restrictive

earlier statements is misleading -- one can think of many "empirical features" of a subject under study (for example, the hypothesis that only gay men contract AIDS), the explanation of which would be rather less critically important to even pretending a knowledge of the subject than Bergmann's opinion of gossip's disreputability seems to indicate about "empirical features"; in particular, given that "empirical features" are often revealed to be somewhat less than empirically true of their supposed objects, as was the case in the early 1980s when the phenomenon of "GRID" as a gay male disease was replaced with the (still partially contentious) theory of AIDS as a viral disease to which anyone is susceptible, this language is too strong.

Bergmann's slippery use of language here gives away an ulterior agenda. Notice how the "social" disreputability of the first passage evolves into the much stronger, more evocative "moral" disreputability of the second passage.

More pointedly, Bergmann's attempt to foist upon Gluckman an unthinking admiration of gossip is simplistic -- Gluckman makes it quite clear, at several points in his article, that he is well aware of gossip's socially insecure status (308, 314, 315). Morality aside, Gluckman's argument rests on the contention that, while gossip may have one status overtly, in actuality, its function is quite different. Why Bergmann chooses to ignore this collection of complicated remarks in

analyses of gossip they produce.

Gluckman's (brief) article goes unexplained. But, as the rest of Bergmann's book amply demonstrates, multi-layered readings of events and texts seem anathema to Bergmann's analytic style¹¹.

Of course, Bergmann makes a good show of endorsing a multiperspectival approach. His definitional starting point, as he repeatedly reminds us, is to take gossip "at its own terms." But what exactly *is* considering gossip on its own terms? For Bergmann, such a consideration seems chiefly to consist of one thing -- taking seriously everyday conceptions of gossip. This sounds good to start with -- for how productive is a social science that entirely functions to ignore or dispute the practices of the society it claims to annotate? Bergmann deals lengthily and seriously with such everyday conceptions of gossip as its status of social disrepute, and its status as the occupation of women, the elderly and the idle. He also spends a fair amount of time considering past social theories of gossip: as a means of social control, a mechanism for preserving social groups, and as a technique of information management.

¹¹Bergmann's ultimately trivializing and dismissive attitude towards gossip becomes clear when he describes the nature of gossip (starting in his "Gossip Triad" chapter). It's clear that he always thinks that there is a kind of invasive nature to gossip, and that it's a kind of cold-blooded, laissez-faire operation where the participants are constantly dealing with each other for private benefits and public disadvantage (43, 58, 66, 67, 68, 85, 126, 136-138). Indeed, the only good effect gossip can have, Bergmann paradoxically claims, results from its illegitimate moral and social status (153).

His basic criticism of those theories is his criticism of those who created the theories; they don't consider seriously (i.e. as also a thing to be studied) the everyday conceptions of gossip (16-17).

Clearly, taking what gossipers themselves think about gossip seriously **is** a critical issue, and one that is often neglected in social science studies. Bergmann correctly points out that not doing this is part of what perpetuates the absolute split between theory on gossip and gossip itself -- you don't need the former to do the latter, and the latter isn't really a critical part of the former (3-4). His task, then, is to improve science on gossip by bringing the two together; by examining intuitions about gossip carefully to understand why they are formed (and hence why we think what we do about gossip). Bergmann's professed task is something that may seem so admirable as to be self-justifying -- writing authentically useful science.

Unfortunately, while Bergmann admits that there are differences in intuitions about gossip, he doesn't allow that there might similarly be a pluralism in conceptions of gossip (or more importantly, that the pluralism in intuitions of gossip might extend to different kinds of notions of gossip; i.e., not simply different particular intuitions about gossip but more general disagreements about what it means to gossip, or conceptions of gossip that do not all cohere to one basic theme -- gossip is bad). In

other words, Bergmann avoids what would seem to be a crux of a book as methodology-obsessed as this -- actually defining gossip, so that instances of it can be recognized by "scientific" means. More particularly, he avoids articulating his **own** everyday attitudes and conceptions of gossip. Such an absence might simply be seen as an attempt to be a neutral scientific observer(!); but I think that even if this is the apparent motive, the real effect is far broader, and skews his work far more extensively¹².

To take these issues one by one: Bergmann argues that since we all have preconceived ideas about what gossip is, we don't have to begin investigations of gossip with definitions, because "empirically proven determinations" (39) of what gossip is will appear in the course of the data collection. And Bergmann's point here is not only that

¹²In particular, when we consider how Bergmann's text rather transparently displays his unusually rigidly moralistic and condescending attitudes towards gossip -- it is, in turn, "a toy for adults" (2), "a completely broken relation with moral rules and values" (146), a kind of hypocritical mania in which its practitioners preach moral order but by gossiping act chaotically (134-135), marked by coarse or obscene language (101), "**morally contaminated**" (99, emphasis in text), akin to "radioactive" substances in that it can "pollute anyone who reaches out for it unprotected" (91), storytelling "without specific measures of care and neutralization" (73), and ultimately, an unimportant part of our lives (6) -- the likelihood that Bergmann's assumptions do in fact seriously distort his data collection and analysis should seem inarguable. Ultimately, then, Bergmann's admonitions to "take gossip on its own terms" must be highly suspect, for by these slips of language in the text Bergmann reveals himself to be writing from an outsider, non-gossiping perspective (who therefore would have a difficult time figuring out what gossip's "own terms" might be).

empirical determinations will appear, but that they will actually **replace** and improve upon preconceived notions (science will triumph over prejudice!).

What Bergmann is saying here is that how we define gossip is irrelevant; that the only thing that matters is the result we get when we apply our science to our observations, at which point a rigorous, sound definition of gossip will become absolutely clear¹³. This is a pleasant and seductive point, but unfortunately Bergmann's actual work doesn't give it any legitimacy.

Bergmann's technique by which he proposes to determine gossip's definition, manifestation and function empirically begins with his criticism of the standard social scientific tool of the variable grid -- the result of analyzing a complicated social formation according to several factors or variables, a graph of a social group. Because variable grids are finite, Bergmann argues -- one can only analyze a certain number of variables in any social analysis (when we examine the UMASS student population to predict student success we'll take into account family income, gender, racial background, religious history, town of origin, graduation rate, and time-to-degree, while ignoring family educational background, extra-curricular activities, majors

¹³This achievement, of course, would stand in sharp contradistinction to much of the history of science, such as Galileo's discovery of the orbits of the solar system; see Feyereabend (1975) 121-125.

[number of majors a student has throughout his or her time at UMASS], class size, academic advisor) -- the shape of any variable grid will in part determine the result. Because only data that fits into the variable grid will be noticed [or noticeable], Bergmann argues (16-17), some observations about the subject will naturally escape the observer's notice.

This is why it is important to talk about preconceptions so as to understand how the preconceptions determine the final product¹⁴. Bergmann makes this point with regards to ethnographies, to demonstrate how ethnographies are lacking in the ways in which they consider gossip. But Bergmann's work itself seems lacking in exactly this respect. To make this plain, simply consider: how do you know where and in what fashion to apply your science to gossip, if you already don't have a pretty clear idea what is (and more importantly, isn't) gossip? When we look at the transcriptions of the gossip-conversations Bergmann analyzes, his preconceptions become clear (gossip is always personal, its topics are traditional personal vices like drinking, infidelity, bankruptcy [46-47, 84-85, 87-88, 95-96, 102-103, 113-114, 124-125, 127, 131])). He starts out by noting only a few everyday conceptions that are clearly important to him (that gossipers are socially disreputable, that gossipers are women and the idle), and lo and behold,

¹⁴This point, of course, is drawn from Geertz.

his data (transcriptions) empirically reproduce those facts. By the conclusion of the book, he's still trying to talk about why gossip is socially disreputable (i.e., he's yet to examine **whether or not** gossip actually is socially disreputable), and he's never really focused on gossip in corporations, gossip by men, rich gossips, gossip in governments or about governments, gossip by scientists, gossip by priests, non-personal gossip, non-negative gossip, etc. (though he mentions a few of those possibilities in theory, his case analysis is always about people living in housing projects, primarily women, carping about the personal habits of others). So the replacing of intuitive preconceptions by hard data that he's talking about is empty -- the only data Bergmann sees is the data that confirms his preconceptions, the data that his own variable grid magically produces.

Because of this, Bergmann's argument that actually defining gossip at the beginning is irrelevant rings false. Bergmann sets up the belief that hard science will in fact be hard (immovable, neutral, nonfalsifiable), so that prejudices are ultimately irrelevant because the data will have their way. In other words, he sets us up for a conceptual movement (we start at the literal and conceptual beginning, with crude belief -- we jump to the end, with scientifically verified determinations), when none really occurs. We do not need to define gossip because we only

hear conversation that fits neatly stereotypical dictionary definitions of the word. As Bergmann would have it, we still wouldn't believe anything different about gossip than we'd already thought, we'd just believe it with more force.

In one sense, of course, Bergmann presages his conceptual non-movement when he talks more directly of definitions¹⁵ of gossip. When Bergmann talks about preconceptions of gossip, he's only talking about a very reduced field of what gossip is, and what preconceptions about it are. As his dictionary definition of gossip makes clear (he follows up that early dismissal of the need to define gossip by tossing off a dictionary definition as adequate enough for our purposes), Bergmann only thinks of gossip as "bits of news about others" (39)¹⁶. He adds a few clarifications of that definition throughout his book, but it's clear that for Bergmann, gossip is talking about someone who isn't present, and talking about that person's

¹⁵Throughout this chapter and the next, many of my criticisms of many of the secondary sources I will cite here will revolve around their unreflective adoption of what I consider to be the uselessly judgmental, innacurately narrow dictionary definition of gossip: as negative, evaluative conversation about some absent person's non-public behavior. I would like to include as a general reminder over this entire discussion of definitions that in Chapter Three I propose and defend an alternative definition of gossip, which broadens its scope without reducing the notion to complete nonsense.

¹⁶"Others", of course, refers to people only -- the possibility of gossip about institutions or buildings is automatically ruled out (so when we speculate about the reasons as to why Michael Hooker gives UMASS a grade of C+ we can be gossiping about Hooker only, and have nothing to say about UMASS?).

private life. Of course, if the terrain of gossip is reduced like that, it's more believable that Bergmann would come to the conclusions that he does -- that gossip is something to be controlled, that only women and the idle gossip, that gossip can only be socially useful (e.g. reveal social rankings) because of its continued dim moral position (153). In other words, Bergmann's focus determines his conclusion. This is a point he never comes close to noticing (even though he makes precisely this point about Gluckman when he condemns Gluckman as a functionalist [145-146]).

The reductiveness of Bergmann's definition also makes itself manifest when Bergmann gives his account of how gossip happens. He reproduces a narrative conception of gossip -- someone tells a story, someone else appreciatively listens and comments (97); in short, a completely one-sided, individualist, non-meaningfully-interactive relationship. Even when Bergmann pretends that narration isn't the model of gossip (he says that there is a metanarrative and interpretation going on at the same time as the storytelling [98]), the roles are clearly divided -- the producer provides the metanarrative and sets the tone for the interpretation, the recipient merely listens and fills in gaps. This narrative approach cannot help but to restrict the domain of gossip-activity to the content of the stories. While perhaps one story may lead to another related one, and

hence an entire gossip-conversation may be larger than the sum of its individual stories (i.e., an entire conversation could be a summation of a particular person's character, or a conflict between many people in a town or academic department or whatever), Bergmann only considers the conversation in terms of the individual stories, and what the stories were "about". Utilizing such narrowly realist literary techniques precludes the possibility of multiplicity of meaning to gossip, or indeterminacy of interpretation, or of agency to multiple actors. Bergmann simply can't hear multiple tales in a conversation, or multiple tellers in one apparent tale.

Bergmann's choice of communication theory methodology sets him up for such reduced conceptions of gossip. It's clear, from the amount of space and analysis he gives to the subject of methodology and science, that Bergmann is very concerned that his book and study have legitimacy - it's important for Bergmann that his readers think that **his** method is the best possible method for studying gossip (as contrasted to, say, Gluckman's more carefree method). The reason why is a topic for later discussion. Right now I'll discuss the ways in which Bergmann holds his own method (gossip is a genre of communication) in highest esteem, and the ways in which I think his method doesn't deserve such esteem.

Bergmann sees the theory of genres of communication as a happy medium between the competing interests in gossip study. For Bergmann, the trouble with studying gossip (as with studying communication as a whole) is that of social science -- trying to fit human patterns of behavior into more rigid, scientific patterns (variable grids). His use of Gregory Bateson's metaphor of a dance (26-28) well expresses his faith in the communicative genre method as a productive compromise. Bergmann begins his book articulating rather neatly the conflict between the universal and particular in theory (the conflict between theory and subject, each of which bears no relation to the other); and the conflict between science and the social (the grid that loses its subject, 3-4). Communicative genres are a compromise between rigid science and indiscriminate particular observation because they contain both within their frames.

Bergmann uses the metaphor of a dance to articulate the nature of this compromise (26-28). Genres of communication are structured, have a basic ordering (just as a dance has steps to be learned, is selected based on the music's style and tempo), but at the same time have freedom of interpretation (music doesn't always determine that just one dance must be danced -- every dance has its own variations). His metaphor of a dance frames my dissatisfaction perfectly. Bergmann really **likes** to think of communicative genres as

dances -- he likes to think that we can sort of figure out what's appropriate and inappropriate to say all the time if we just listen to the hum and watch (follow) our interlocutors (do what they do, just backwards and on heels). Of course, he's aware of "spontaneous" dances, but even these are turned into a genre, even these are limited. Bergmann's impossible desire to have it both ways (unpredictable and yet categorizable! individualized while perfectly transparent!) amounts to perennially adding a few more dances to the list. Ultimately, then, gossip becomes another genre¹⁷.

There are general reasons why gossip doesn't seem to work as a genre of communication. In the first place, in Gluckman's article, when he discusses professional gossip, he astutely demonstrates that there are many times when the boundary between technical, professional remarks and personal gossip is impossible to draw (either during the conversation or afterwards upon reflection, 309). While Bergmann's metaphor of a dance is perhaps more rigid than he means it (because it seems that only in the case where someone wasn't doing a dance properly, moving the right way to the right music, would we say that it was difficult to say whether they were tangoing or waltzing or just shuffling

¹⁷In short, Bergmann's attitude towards dance perfectly replicates his attitude towards gossip; he presumes that it is transparently previously clear whenever someone is or isn't dancing, ignoring the obvious confusion present in our observations of what "dance" is, as in any social phenomenon.

around), it is still the case that Bergmann is assuming a uniformity and univocality to gossip -- that all of its manifestations must be markedly the same in terms of form, tone, content, (or at least divisible into broad categories)¹⁸. And indeed, when Bergmann gets into the detail of how gossip happens further along in the book (80 - 100), we see that he in fact is making exactly those assumptions. By his narrative construction, there is an invitation to gossip, then the gossip happens via a story, a story-teller, an appreciative listener, and finally evaluation and condemnation of the subject by the gossipers. As the selection of Bergmann's conversations, his evaluation of intuitions, and his theory of gossip demonstrates, Bergmann can only see gossip happening in one particular way. And it is only if one can ascribe this kind of homogeneity to gossip that using genres of communication to confine and discuss gossip makes sense. And this notion of gossip, it seems to me, surpasses simple homogeneity, and approaches simple, useless tautology.

To his credit, Bergmann does make some attempt to give some play to his notion of gossip. He sums up his self-defense by saying that we **can't** overcategorize gossip (and

¹⁸While Bergmann himself stoutly denies such a possibility (genres are not "'merely' heuristically relevant conceptual construction of the scientists' but empirically effective orientational and productive models of everyday communication" [28]), his actual use of the notion of genres, as fixing the details of how gossip happens rather than simply "orienting" our observations, belies this notion.

that the concept of communicative genres is not such an overcategorization), because ultimately we theorists aren't in control of the categories (the actors control the categories and their contents [29]). But if that's true, why then does he start with the (over)categorization; why not just present the goods and let the categories and their actors 'empirically determine' themselves? As becomes apparent later, when he describes the moments of a gossip-conversation (80-81), Bergmann's notion of "actor agency" is sharply limited -- he will recognize variance only in the small details of the predetermined subject (in the gossip-conversation, he recognizes that different participants can start or finish a gossip-conversation, but its fundamental path remains static). Bergmann's commitment to the tenets of the scientific method seem very much provisional, tactical, for decorative purposes only¹⁹.

Several conclusions Bergmann reaches in this study are oddly shaped by his methodology. One interpretative task is to explain the everyday conception of gossip, according to which only women gossip. Bergmann employs some truly wacky etymology to explain that women have been labelled as gossips for a long time. In brief, the theory is that the original German word for gossip, "klatz", was originally an

¹⁹In short, Bergmann's apparent "play" shows only the retention of his model -- "adjustments" are made for odd cases, otherwise gossip is a straightforward and noncomplex social issue.

interjection that was the sound of the crack of a whip or a slap; and that this word carried with it the connotations of a wet stain (62-63). Bergmann's creative conclusion from this is that "klatz" invokes up a scene of washerwomen doing their chores, and gossiping during the process. "The washing place is symbolic birth place of (female) gossip," Bergmann concludes(63). Bergmann is pleased with his linguistic reconstruction of the word, because he suggests that this gives some substantive evidence for why it is women have been labelled the gossiping sex, rather than the label simply being "empty" or "analytically obtuse" (63). His contention is clearly that once we know why and how women got this defamatory label, we can freely reject it (61). But Bergmann actually moves in a different direction.

More trivially, in the presentation of the etymology itself, Bergmann misses an obvious point²⁰. He presents klatsching historically (71-74), developing as a female response to the overwhelmingly male coffeehouses of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While Bergmann is quick to ascribe dramatically serious purposes to the coffee houses ("function[ing] primarily as places of business ...centers of communication in early bourgeois economic and

²⁰Of course, Bergmann misses **several** obvious points here, not the least being that his etymological explanation doesn't account for why women are castigated as gossips in non-German languages (notably English), where the roots of gossip are both not clearly gendered as distinct from the roots of the German **klatsch**. His explanation cannot be accurate.

cultural history...serv[ing] the editors of the London moral weeklies as editorial locations and... business addresses ...exercis[ing] no small influence on literature" [72]), their female counterparts get dismissive, and quick treatment as centers of gossip talk only. Indeed, Bergmann chiefly characterizes them as "the butt of men's jokes" (ibid). Now, while it is certainly true that serious business did (and does) get conducted in coffeehouses and bars, it is nothing short of disingenuous not even to suggest that non-"serious" activities like gossiping also occurred, to say nothing of the possibility that business sometimes is gossiping. Bergmann's description suggests that coffeehouses weren't so much sites of socializing as early business guilds, or oral newspapers. Indeed, as Mickey Hellyer's dissertation makes clear (see Chapter Two), even august personages like Benjamin Franklin, engaged in serious tavern business like adult education, were wont to do little else with their "purposive" bar time than gossip. Bergmann's initial, moralizing prejudices against gossip, then, produce this incomplete reading of gossip, and reproduce the assumption (if displacing it to an earlier historical moment) that indeed, only women really do gossip.

More broadly, the etymology gets applied when Bergmann makes it clear that the reason why women (and old people, and working-class people) get saddled with the pejorative of "gossips" is that gossiping is (was) done by the working

classes, by the (female) domestic servants, about the upper classes (their masters). The whole scenario is remindful of his treatment of celebrity gossip (we do it out of a mixture of envy, adoration, resentment [51]) -- his examples and description make that clear. This is a condescending, reductive treatment of gossip -- it's done for shallow reasons, it's done from resentment, lower-class people do it about upper-class people, and certainly never the other way around²¹. Again, it suggests a reductive univocality about gossip, and a pretty negative univocality at that. We gossip to express our base lower natures, and clearly only certain of us (the poor, women, the unemployed, the elderly) need to express those lower natures -- rich, active people (rich active men) lead too interesting lives to be able or interested to waste time nattering.

Of course, it could be that Bergmann is simply raising this specter as a vision of the past -- in other words, this is the myth about gossip (these are the presuppositions that arise out of those old, outdated intuitions we all have about gossip), to which he will now contrast the clearer reality (everybody gossips, regardless of class position, employment, gender, activity level, etc.). As I said before, this is an ineffective tactic in the first place, because its historical siting of gossip as a female, lower-

²¹Indeed, at one point Bergmann quite explicitly says that gossip between "superiors and subordinates, namely, between persons of unequal rank, is generally rare" (68).

class activity still carries with it stigma (since class boundaries exist, and many women still do in fact launder clothes). But more unfortunately, if he ultimately wishes to dispel this cliché as a cliché (as something with no claims to accuracy) he certainly doesn't do it in this book, because he doesn't give us one reason (theoretical or empirical) to believe why anyone **other** than women, the unemployed, old folks, and working-class folk gossip. He doesn't show us or talk to us about upper-class gossip (whether or not they do it and what characterizes their gossip). Aside from the fact that he's also clearly suggesting that gossip can be typified in a really broad way (you gossip and thus you reveal your social, class or gender position), remember again the clichéd gossip transcriptions Bergmann presents us with, women in project apartments sifting through neighbors' carnal and venal sins. In other words, Bergmann doesn't show us rich or occupationally successful people, or many male people, engaged either in these (or other) kinds of behaviors, discussing these (or other) kinds of behaviors. So his evidence presupposes the conclusion he never has to make explicit -- that women, the idle, the elderly **really** do gossip more than other folks.

Indeed, Bergmann closes the chapter with the limp statement that women are simply characterized as gossiping more because structurally they fall into the positions seen as gossip-producers more than men (67) -- here he's talking

about the kinds of jobs women often hold (i.e., domestics, launderers, secretaries, child care). But even this conclusion simply reinforces the outdated intuition, regardless if via a different justification. So, as this first conclusion of Bergmann's makes clear, his interest in conceptual movement (let the facts present themselves!) is minimal -- both his methodology and his prose serve only to reinforce churlish privately muttered but perhaps more widely held stereotypes.

After having contended that only certain kinds of folks gossip, now Bergmann moves on to conclude that only certain kinds of situations lend themselves to gossip. Bergmann introduces the continuum between active and inactive gossip (71-80) -- active gossip is klatsching, where gossip is the activity, and inactive gossip is diversionary gossip, where you're gossiping to pass the time on the way to something else [class, work, appointments]). Of course, given his attitude and tone towards gossip earlier in this book, it's surprising that he didn't align terms to type oppositely. The fact that inactive gossip is also characterized as "diversionary" should alone make this point clear -- Bergmann really doesn't think diversionary gossip has a point other than the diversion itself, filling up "empty" time (75). And the entire continuum is overshadowed by Bergmann's assumption of the social disreputability of gossip (and how that is a thing not to be questioned).

Gossip at work, which Bergmann considers as different from diversionary gossip but really isn't (the only difference is that it's intentionally diversionary gossip -- you could be doing other things but you're choosing not to), is discussed as the most surreptitious kind of gossip -- Bergmann suggests an entire complicated set of behaviors by which work gossipers gossip so as to appear to be just about to, just finished with, or in the middle of work²². So both halves of the continuum are tainted by the notion that gossiping is something not to be done, to be castigated. Bergmann's only attempt at being slightly less than rigid is when he says that sometimes particular conversations can be active **or** inactive (76), but this qualifier hardly does much to alter the context of his analysis.

Again, I think it is a plausible thesis that Bergmann's overarching presupposition of the social and moral disreputability of gossip produces this restrictive analysis. Bergmann lists elaborate sets of behaviors as the only protection workers have against lavish punishments for their sloth (e.g., gossiping while standing, holding files, etc. [77-78]). But I think the issue to consider here is **why** are workers punished? Is it because (as Bergmann

²²Of course, a reasonable alternative hypothesis is presented by Gluckman (1963), that the working gossipers quite well might be working **by** gossiping (obvious examples: Walter Winchell, Hedda Hopper), but such a simple thesis is inconceivable to Bergmann, who not only ignores such a possibility, but replaces it with a more elaborate, social-sciencey argument.

suggests) they are doing something socially disreputable? He analogizes gossip to drunkenness as a means of demonstrating precisely this point (77-78); he argues that drunkenness is only acceptable at work under certain conditions (winning lottery, birth of a child), because otherwise it's seen as social disreputability.

As before with the dance metaphor, I think he picked exactly the analogy that refutes his point. Bosses don't care if you're drunk at work because it's socially disreputable (notice that Bergmann never gives us a reason for why it is that bosses only care about drunkenness sometimes **because** of social disreputability) -- they care because it makes you less productive (you're less profitable for them). If you can hide your drunkenness, if you can get your work done, they don't care about drinking. I'm sure anyone reading this piece can think of many functional drunks, who are able to get through most workdays with steady drinking or excessive lunchtime drinking. Those unable to recall functional drunks should recall the John Tower confirmation episode, or the aborted Thomas Eagleton Vice-Presidential nomination²³. The point here is not that simply Tower and Eagleton eventually lost their political plums because of fear of public disapprobation, but that [as testimony and public record around each episode makes clear]

²³Cf. White, chapter 8, for a full account of this episode.

their respective indulgences were transparently obvious to their coworkers, constituents, for **years** before the respective contretemps. Indeed, the retracted political prizes were initially offered precisely because of each politico's spectacular success at functioning despite what according to Bergmann would be a debilitating weakness.

Even the gestures towards disguising or minimizing the drinking (e.g. only drinking at lunch at restaurants away from the worksite, or drinking in a private location at work) don't make the drunkenness any less apparent -- astute observers can read the signals of regular secretive behavior. Most functional drunks are in no threat of losing their position, **precisely because** they can still do the work they are expected to do. The same corollary follows with gossip -- employers don't care about gossip if it means you can still get your work done and it doesn't interfere with your performance in other ways (i.e., if it doesn't foment your anger at your job). Lots of 'socially disreputable' things are easily tolerated in workplaces (lying, cheating, manipulation, certain kinds of drug use) -- because they don't hinder productivity (and in some cases [trading in stocks is the obvious recent example] clearly help it, and are [perhaps only tacitly] encouraged). Productivity, and so clearly **not** social disreputability, is at least as constraining, if not more so. Owners, bosses, and managers are not in the business of making business decisions rest on

moral judgements -- unless, of course, those moral judgements happen to coincide with increased business or better public relations. In other words, to return to the Tower/Eagleton examples, had Congress confirmed Tower or the Democratic party supported the Eagleton nomination, certain business fallout -- unseating of incumbents, calls for reductions in Department of Defense budgets -- would have been probable. Clearly, if morality were the **real** issue, with such widespread knowledge of each's habits prior to the conflicts, neither Tower nor Eagleton should have been put forth in the first place; and indeed, their political careers should have been aborted at much earlier points in time. Of course, Bergmann ignores this fact in lieu of making grand moral statements like: "gossip is viewed as sociable inactivity and is therefore incompatible with work" (77).

I suspect that part of the reason Bergmann makes a case for gossip being socially disreputable is because he is still fascinated with the phenomenon of gossip on a voyeuristic level²⁴. Bergmann wants to think of gossip as a clandestine, subversive activity that depends on secretive, private networks of trusted compatriots trading

²⁴More evidence supporting the thesis that Bergmann is either a voyeuristic gossip-phobe or an ashamed, secretive gossip seeking to repress his vicious past.

secrets no one would dare express in public²⁵. I think a moment of reflection on the nature of gossip easily demonstrates that it is far from having such a clandestine character currently. Bergmann makes his covert attitudes overt when he distinguishes between gossip and rumor -- the main distinction for Bergmann is that rumor doesn't depend on preexisting networks of trusted interlocutors (anyone can spread or receive a rumor), whereas gossip does (70). But this notion, again, is outdated. Gossiping doesn't require significantly greater levels of trust and intimacy than rumor. Granted, in an Enlightenment world, where physical appearances and statements were considered to be eminently confirmable or falsifiable, and where there was a truth to be known, making verboten connections and thinking in an unseemly way **did** require trust and intimacy (why else was gossiping evidence for the practice of witchcraft? [Bergmann 16]). In that world, gossip is a frontal attack on rationality and logic. But in a century where the theories with most common purchase revolve around perspective (relativism, pragmatism, existentialism, postmodernism), there are no stakes (sic!) in gossiping. You don't

²⁵Hence his fascination with the coffeeklatsch itself; which he describes as unique because, unlike other social settings, "gossip occurs here within the context of -- we could also say under the cover of -- socially accepted sociability" (74). In other words, klatsching is interesting to Bergmann (not simply because it's a world he clearly couldn't enter but) because its practitioners courageously defy the sure-to-be-applied label of moral disapprobation; klatsching is gossip uncloseted.

challenge anything epistemologically. (Everyone but the professional philosophers knows that you can't believe everything you hear or read.) That's why now you **can** gossip with relative strangers, and in relative comfort. Indeed, the clear collapse of the public-private distinction in journalism²⁶, which was certainly apparent as Bergmann wrote his monograph, is fair testimony to the only increasing legitimacy of gossip.

Bergmann views his own work as a drastic improvement on earlier scientific works on gossip²⁷, because he is the only scientific researcher willing to consider gossip "on its own terms" (a claim he frequently repeats). However, my general conclusion about Bergmann's book is that when an approach to gossip as careful, self-conscious and extensive as Bergmann's nonetheless still ignores many basic aspects of gossip and rumor, and when the methodological departure from its prior studies such a work promises not only fails to emerge, but indeed, reproduces stale old chestnuts for conclusions, then perhaps it is time for gossipists to look for new approaches to analyzing gossip. Perhaps the problem is not, as Bergmann repeatedly reminds us, that only some

²⁶A few examples of this are Signorile (1993); the Harper's forum (1986); cable channel E!'s "Gossip Show," broadcast daily; and the thriving of gossip magazines and newspapers in this country and in Europe (Meiser [1995]).

²⁷Some of those he speaks disparagingly about that are relevant here include not only Gluckman but Haviland (1977); Shibutani (1966); Goffman (1963); Lumley (1925); Philadelphia Institute for the Study of Human Relations (1958).

scientists are considering gossip on its own terms, but rather that social science as we think of it actually **prohibits** a consideration of gossip on its own terms.

It is important to document the ways in which less tightly academic analyses of gossip perpetuate the same straitened analysis. While Deborah Tannen's You Just Don't Understand (1990) is (unlike Bergmann) not centrally focussed on gossip, the approach she uses to consider gossip as one of the many indicators of gender differences in language is revealing. Tannen makes many of the same definitional assumptions Bergmann does when theorizing about gossip. For Tannen, gossip is simply (and again) reporting on an absent third party's personal life; and it is something only (or primarily) women do (96-97). Tannen, then, is also writing from a univocality of perspective on gossip (only recognizing a very few things to be gossip or particular people as gossips); her univocality differs from Bergmann in its gender-specificity.

For those unfamiliar with Tannen's book, she argues that American women and men are raised differently -- that as boys and girls we learn different means and values of communication, and that this split continues through adulthood -- men and women simply don't speak the same language. My quarrel here is not with the book's overall argument (though I think that argument more generally restates the criticisms I make in this section). More

particularly, Tannen's assumption of gossip as something gals do that boys just can't understand strikes me as naively overgeneralizing.

Tannen believes that gossip is something girls learn very young. While boys are off roughhousing and playing games, girls sit in each others' rooms and just talk; that is an acceptable play activity for girls that boys must repudiate (80). Like Bergmann, Tannen is making an assumption about the simplicity and univocality of human behavior here -- she is assuming that when girls talk in rooms, that they are only talking (and that they are only talking about the content of their talk), and she similarly assumes that when boys play games, they are only playing games and not communicating (indeed gossiping) on some other level). When boys (and later men) do talk, Tannen avers, it is about topics like sports and politics, and 'report-talk', or talk to impress, inform, or persuade (85). Tannen (like Bergmann) ignores the argument that talk about sports and politics, that talk about non-personal issues, can be gossip (can be personal, among other things); and correlatively, that apparently "personal" gossip can also be about impersonal topics, or have layers of meaning that extend beyond the individuals in question. For Tannen, conversation is either good (expressive, intimate, revealing = feminine) or bad (non-expressive, impersonal, combative = masculine). Her locution makes it clear (83, 84, 91) that

women are naturally more expressive than men, that they are expressive because they talk clearly and directly about themselves and their personal lives, and that this is the ideal both sexes should strive for in their conversation.

Tannen grounds her sociolinguistic program in a series of dichotomies about conversation that are based on her reduced notion of what gossip is and who does it. For Tannen, gossip is either good (talking-about, intimate) or bad (talking-against [96]). Any particular item of gossip can be either one or the other, but never both at once. Intimate gossip is valued over non-intimate gossip on many levels. Not only is intimate gossip better than morally disreputable talking-against, it is also clearly valued over political gossip (which isn't really gossip in any interesting way for Tannen [101]). Men only gossip about politics with each other, and cannot gossip about personal lives. Tannen maintains this split between public and private, intimate and impersonal, even in the face of counterexample. When she acknowledges that public and private get blended, that news and government reports are becoming gossipier, she argues that this is only about style ("off the cuff," "informal"), not substance (105). Remarks are "made to seem" gossipy; the implication here is clearly that news can never really be gossip, because it's not about the right subjects (it's not personal, it's about "big"

issues -- objective, universal topics that affect all of us directly).

While much of Tannen's chapter on gossip is simply advice for men and women on different strategies to come to conversational détente with each other (in essence, she's suggesting that men need to learn how to gossip more, and that women need to learn to do 'report-talk' more [121]), her concept is subsumptive. I like Tannen's advocacy of gossip here, but it's done for the wrong reasons. Women need strategically to learn about assertiveness, but men need to adopt feminine values of intimacy and connectiveness, and gossip (the right kind of gossip) is the tool with which to do this. Since gossip is simply a component of her argument, and not the argument itself, it is impossible to tell how (or why) she maintains the assumptions towards gossip that she does. Suffice it to say that she, again like Bergmann, restricts her notion of gossip (it is either good or bad, it must be about certain topics only, it can only be between individuals and have relevance in interpersonal relations, only women do it), ultimately to restrict the applicability or interest of her analysis; while gossip can be "appropriated" by men, inherently it remains a tool for women, for essentially private purposes.

Even when writers on gossip and rumor expand the realm of their analysis from the strictly personal to structurally

political, their analyses do not correlatively expand in insight or sophistication. Terry Ann Knopf, in her Rumors, Race and Riots (1975), very much writes about rumors as political entities, exceedingly charged political manifestations that can help signal the onset of race riots, or civil disorder (153). But more broadly, whereas Tannen is enough of a social constructivist to argue that at least some facets of gossip are malleable (e.g., men can learn how to gossip too), Knopf depicts rumor as an even more immutable social occurrence.

Knopf's project is very narrowly defined; she's trying to determine why it is that racial riots are so frequently precipitated or accompanied by rumors; in particular, she's concentrating on race riots occurring in the United States in this century only (19). Knopf rejects the previous theories of rumor occurrence, as either too individualistic (13), or so generally socially determining that they fail to explain the uniqueness of rumor formation -- in particular, rumors about civil disorders (86-90). The model Knopf eventually constructs combines structural factors, local causes, and some psychological theory, to explain why and how race rumors can occur (107-109).

The complexity of Knopf's model stands at odds with the narrowness of her treatment of rumor. To her credit, Knopf acknowledges the limitations of rumor study. While she accepts that standard definition of rumor (a proposition

without sufficient evidential proof [1]), she acknowledges that it's difficult to study rumors in part because only those rumors that are false tend to be documented or remembered as rumors; rumors that turn out to be true are documented simply as fact (62). But unfortunately, throughout Knopf's study the stain of rumors as necessarily false and counterproductive social ills remains²⁸. Knopf, by very legitimately trying to de-emphasize the all-determining power of rumors she sees in the contemporary social science literature (she energetically argues against the naively empirical belief that by refuting the rumor you solve the social problem²⁹), by my reading goes too far in this task -- rumors simply become one of a host of blips on our social screen, to be read accordingly.

To explain in more detail, Knopf's model presents two kinds of features that pave the way for racial disorders:

²⁸Because this argument has been so exhaustively demonstrated in my discussion of Bergmann, I will not elaborate on it here. Suffice it to say that Knopf's language throughout her book (rumors are associated with lynching because both rely on assumptions of belief rather than strict standards of proof [19]; rumors are defined as the proof stage for [generally false and hostile] beliefs [158-159; rumors increase polarization while strengthening solidarity "in a negative sort of way" [164]), combined with her lack of particular analysis of the concept of rumor, justifies a reading of her as presupposing a negative and counterproductive image of rumor.

²⁹Knopf names the Philadelphia Institute study and Shibutani as two of her examples. I disagree with her placing of Shibutani in this camp, but otherwise accept her characterization of this tendency within those who study the social phenomenon of rumor (and indeed, gossip).

larger, structural characteristics (e.g. demographic changes, ideology changes, urbanization, industrialization [146]), and immediate circumstances (local incidents that can touch off conflagrations [150])). In this model, rumor acts as kind of a shuttle -- it can simply act itself as an immediate circumstance (a particular rumor about a particular local incident), or it can represent or make particular general ideological convictions (Knopf observes patterns to rumors people spin around racial incidents, having to do with continually held stereotypes [119-130, 134-142])). Additionally, Knopf is critiquing the literature on rumor, which defines it either as a strictly individual or social problem -- the roots of rumors, particularly race rumors, Knopf argues, are manifold. Ultimately, Knopf remarks, "[rumors] are an **extension** as well as **expression** of [community] conflicts" (243). But the problem this argumentation raises is that if one phenomenon called "rumor" arises in all sorts of kinds of situations, has different kinds of origins, and functions in opposing ways, then the explanation of and description of that phenomenon must account for those myriad characteristics. To simply point to a wide variety of explanations, theories, phenomena, and say "look, there's rumor," while appealing only to the most general of definitions, brings us no closer to an understanding of what rumor is, and why and how it functions in the complicated, seemingly contradictory ways

it does. In other words, Knopf sheds no light on the issue of why rumors **in particular** are one of the many signals of racial unrest -- indeed, an almost inevitable one.

Witness Knopf's language: "[rumors are] one of a number of determinants which enhance the prospects for a collective outburst" (153), rumors are often simply crystallization of already-held hostile beliefs, or the "last straws" before violence (151, 153, 154), "rumor closes the gap between a hostile belief and its embodiment as a 'fact'" (159). While it's true that at least technically, these lines refer to rumor as an active phenomenon (no passive verb voice here), the fact remains that using analogues like "crystallization" and "last straws" suggests that rumors are significant for Knopf less because of what they actually **do** (in other words, how they change or make manifest violence that was simply imminent previously), than for what they represent. More particularly, this usage of "crystallization" connotes a kind of inevitability or overdetermination to rumors -- they cannot be controlled or prevented. Rumors are one (perhaps the last) sign of imminent political crisis (a riot); where a rumor occurs, a riot is a serious possible consequence. Rumors are less a phenomenon to be understood, than one simply to be marked, noted, and countered.

It is because rumors are such a passive phenomenon that the policy recommendations with which Knopf ends her study

seem to have so little to do with rumor itself; the recommendations are all about avoiding the consequence of rumor: riots. Knopf's lack of real analysis of the concept of rumor means that ultimately, she doesn't have a lot to say about it in lieu of what she determines as the "real" determinants of riots. Knopf sees race riots in the first place as endable only through real, material, structural changes in society (e.g. a more egalitarian distribution of wealth, housing, educational opportunities); barring that, her self-described provisional solutions all have to do with broadening accountability of public offices to the community, and increasing communication between officials and the public on a day-to-day, non-crisis basis.

While her recommendations in general seem responsible and reasonable, one irony presents itself. Knopf concludes her book by addressing the brief phenomenon of "Centers for Rumor Control" (CRCs, public crisis hotlines for people to report in rumors and check on their verification/disconfirmation). While CRCs enjoyed a brief vogue after World War II and longlasting good press (307-308), Knopf subjects them to some strong criticism, arguing that the problems rumor signify are too big for CRCs to be a real solution (311-312)³⁰. "They [CRCs] not only treat rumors

³⁰It's worth noting here that CRCs, when used by smaller groups for their members only (for example, the Crips and the Bloods gangs in Los Angeles), have met with success. My thanks to Bob Ackermann for pointing this out.

as an isolated, problem, they treat it as **the** problem, with rumor control as **the** solution," Knopf claims (308). Of course, in her rush to prove that rumors are not only not the problem but play only the smallest of roles in the problem, Knopf amply demonstrates that rumors really aren't her topic at all. In other words, exactly why she makes fun of CRCs is because of the accompanying naive empiricism with which they began. Just get the right facts out to folks, so the thinking proceeds, and they can't help but recognize The Truth, and cease and desist any and all unlawful behavior. But of course, Knopf responds, rumors just don't work like that, and more broadly, people don't work like that. If you don't trust the police (or management, or your department head, or your parents, or your friends) to begin with, why will you suddenly believe them when they tell you some one fact contrary to what you've been believing for a while? You won't, and so of course the disorder won't stop, she says. But most of Knopf's policy recommendations are simply more sophisticated versions of exactly the same kind of empiricist naïveté (newspapers should rely less on wire services [300-303]; police should be trained to become more rumor-conscious, and screen police applicants for "emotional fitness" [259-262]; public officials should more actively verify and communicate with the public about rumors they hear [276-278]).

To be sure, Knopf herself is aware of this point, hence the band-aid remark. But it seems to me that part of the reason Knopf is able at the end of her extensive study to offer only (albeit bigger) band-aids to the gaping wound of race relations in this country is exactly because she has failed to grasp the complexity of the concept of rumor. Riots and rumors can in some sense be seen as similar concepts. Both are genuinely ambiguous, unpredictable social constructs. The very ambiguity of Knopf's model of riot aetiology (the vast number of "possible" structural forces she names, the ambiguity of "situational" circumstances) attests to this, as does her difficulty with explaining the variance to rumor. Knopf claims, quite correctly, that rumors have failed to be controlled by such inherently rational and predictable means as CRCs -- new rumors constantly crop up that are "untrackable" by the CRC radar (e.g. in the '60s Communist conspiracy rumors died down, to be replaced by race rumors). Riots are (by definition) a similarly unpredictable social phenomenon, so it is hard to see how recommendations that require game-theoretic rationality on the part of their participants would succeed (well, the police have this great new public relations program where they attend town meetings once a month, so they can't also be brutal). At best, it seems that riots would simply morph into differently manifested phenomena -- as the literature on the LA riots of 1992

suggests. Reducing social concepts to the sum of their rational, precipitating factors (rumors = ambiguity of news + inadequate information, riots = structural inequities + local incidents) denies the inherent contrariness of social life; similarly, eliminating rumors from an analysis of riots (save for as a passive, but negative, marker) so as to ensure a rational, predictable answer ensures that the answer such analysis provides will not succeed. Unfortunately, contemporary events underline this point.

Even where the topic is not nearly as grim as riots, yet still not stereotypically gossipy (a view of gossip that does not revolve around individual actions), the tack of dismissing the accuracy of rumor so as to enhance the potency of centralized policy solutions remains attractive to far too many academics. Marie Zaner, in her 1991 dissertation, sets herself the pragmatic task of designing a model for communicative strategy to help companies implement organization-wide changes (layoffs, reorganizations, name changes, etc.) without drastic negative side benefits (which she sees as, among other things, unionization of the employees). While she begins the dissertation with one assumption of how communication strategies have to change (on a broad-based level, changing how the message is initially presented, to whom, and its content), her secondary research early on demonstrates that rumors are a key reason administrative changes often go over poorly (52-

53). She positions herself as a supporter of informal channels -- companies need to make use of the grapevine to communicate their information with less risk and greater speed, ability for evaluation on both sides (72-73, 75-76).

But enthusiasm aside, Zaner still has a fundamental mistrust of the effect of rumors on stable businesses, a mistrust her research suggests is misplaced. First, she cites several studies that demonstrate that rumor accuracy is much higher than we might otherwise think (ranging from 50-90% accuracy! [75]); this fact becomes particularly revealing when we examine her 15 case studies of companies instituting organization-wide change carefully. In **seven** of the 15 cases, a major problem for the companies was that they released inconsistent information to their employees regarding the change, so the employees would lose trust in the company, become more hostile, etc. (In four of the other case studies, the company simply released very little information, resulting in similar situations.) Anyway, what's thrilling about this is that the "authoritative" information is only about as accurate as the lower end of the rumor accuracy level. Rumors are almost always right! (Or certainly, no less wrong than the "right stuff.")

This becomes ironic to me when Zaner endorses another writer's advice that "once rumors have begun, the best advice is to provide facts to those most affected by its spread. By doing this management has removed the ambiguity

because the facts are transmitted via a reliable original source" (133-134). But of course, there's not much of a solid ground in this study for believing that management information is necessarily going to be all that much more reliable than rumor information. In several of the cases (four), **accurate** rumors about the proposed changes provoked management into announcing the change sooner than they'd intended to, oftentimes months before the change was scheduled to go into effect -- this is partly what resulted in company chaos so many times (and while the rumors occasionally may have been exaggerated in those cases, the essential character of them wasn't far off the mark). For example, in one case, when the news was finally announced, "the general feeling among the employees was 'It's about time'" (211). Only in one case study does Zaner actually mention that some of the rumors circulating were bizarre (219), but at the same time, this case was yet another case study where management had provided inconsistent information ("No layoffs!" - layoffs - "No more layoffs!" - more layoffs - "No more layoffs!" - still more [200]), in a situation where information was desperately needed (a total of more than one-quarter of company employees were laid off over two years). Zaner is assuming the sustained reliability of authoritative information, a reliability belied by the evidence at hand.

By the conclusion, Zaner apparently recognizes at least some validity to rumor. Her model changes drastically from the beginning of the research to its conclusion -- and the one major change in the model is the new emphasis given rumors. Zaner's proposed model depends on Grice's (1975) maxim of four parts to communication strategy: message, source, channel, timing. In the original model, the source is the most central part of the model (she most closely links it to the nature of the change and the organizational dynamics, 255); but in the revised model, timing becomes the most central part of the model (282); and timing is important because rapid transmission of management information defuses the power of rumor. More particularly, in the original model, "rumors" are the second and third sub-categories to the (lower prioritized) timing category; in the revised model, rumors are the first subcategory of the first-prioritized timing category. Zaner is explicit that rumor pervasiveness is the reason behind her changes to the model (273).

Yet even in such a straightforward analysis of the importance of rumors in official change, Zaner must still present criticisms of the existence of them at all. Even after Zaner has argued for the efficacy of rumors for administrators (the grapevine is there to be used, employees can be manipulated successfully through rumors), she must still remind us of the moral taint rumors carry.

Often the grapevine made the changes worse than they ultimately became. Employees seemed to feel that any information was better than no information. The more interest employees had in the change and the less information they received from management, the more rumors developed. (235)

"Any" information, of course, implies information of (probably) dubious accuracy and reliability. Remember, we're operating from within a framework that still takes source of information and credibility very seriously (and means both terms in the most straightforward, typical ways). This casual slam ignores the fact that information from highly credible sources (management) was often, in these very case studies, of no value at all, and only served to mislead employees even more (in fact, contradicting many of the accurate rumors employees were trading)³¹. In short, then, despite her moments of appreciation of the power of rumor, Zaner clearly thinks that rumors are an inevitable

³¹Zaner is by no means the first scholar to make this point explicitly; Tamotsu Shibutani's well-regarded Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor (1966), begins by pointing out that "false intelligence is sometimes worse than ignorance" (2). While Shibutani's manifest purpose is to bring rumors up for examination, to show where they are empirically right as well as wrong, and while he refers to incorrect information being disseminated from various authorities as fact (and as inciting rumor), it is interesting to note that the language of violence he invokes to criticize inaccuracy in information (see part 2 of this chapter) applies only to the inaccuracy of rumor-information, and not to the "authoritative" data.

commodity inherently dangerous to business; smart managers should strive to quarantine them successfully³².

What we have seen up until now is a series of more applied analyses of gossip and rumor, each assuming the inevitability and the undesirability of gossip and rumor. The more general rumor authority most rumor authors cite, Gordon Allport and Leo Postman's The Psychology of Rumor (1947), while not having such an activist agenda as to propose models or recommendations to control the spread of rumor, presents the same old argument that there is a dire need to control rumors and gossip, to preserve community sanity. Even though Allport and Postman initially define rumor pretty innocuously: "A large part of ordinary social conversation consists of rumor-mongering. In our daily chitchat with friends we both take in and give out whole lungfuls of gossip -- sometimes idle, sometimes not" (vii)³³, their real opinions soon become clear. Rumors alternately "sap morale...menace national safety...spread[] needless alarm... rais[e] extravagant hopes," and "sprea[d] the virus of hostility and hate" (vii-viii). Indeed, when Allport and Postman define rumor in more exact terms, they

³²For a comically excessive demonstration of this line of thought, see Philadelphia Institute for Social Relations (1958). This study of the effect of a false rumor on a disaster-stricken community actually purports to trace out the play-by-play path of the rumor (13), so as to instruct readers to control more effectively similar "outbreaks."

³³Notice that this is another example of the casual intermixing of gossip and rumor.

are only able to do so in terms of a lack: a rumor is a "specific (or topical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present" (ix). In other words, we recognize a rumor chiefly by what it's not, justified true belief. More precisely, their analysis of the path of rumor transmission is an analysis of how the requisite distortion occurs (they trace a path through recall, forgetting, imagination, and rationalization of participants, viii), clearly not even considering the possibility that rumors could be accurate, or have validity.

Of course, part of the reason Allport and Postman conceive of rumors as necessarily false and necessarily present is because of their highly psychologized account of how and why we spread rumors. We spread and believe rumors because they relieve, justify or explain emotional urges, as well as providing closure and meaning in an inherently chaotic environment (37). Because of this complicated web of individual emotions dictating our rumor transmission, Allport and Postman regretfully conclude that even when there is a "kernel" of truth to a particular rumor, it is probably inextricably embedded within the detail and distortion that are added to satisfy the particular individual's psychic interests (147-149, 43). At the end, Allport and Postman come clean and admit that rumor isn't

really about designating or presenting new information, but "evaluating" or "appreciating" old information. Indeed, they continue,

[i]nsofar as rumors pretend to be informative-designative, they are always, in part at least, erroneous. Since this pretense is always present, they are invariably a deceptive mode of discourse. [167]

Such false and manipulative information can be controlled to some extent, Allport and Postman admit -- when people are more educated to the **real** nature of rumors, they are less likely to be susceptible to them (36). But the fact remains for Allport and Postman that no matter what our activist intentions, the specter of rumor remains to haunt us -- ultimately, it makes public both private, individual wants and desires and larger, collective fears and dreams.

Ultimately, what Allport and Postman make explicit -- encouraging us to study rumors in their "appraising, legendary, mythic, poetic" capacities (169) -- is exactly what their followers (Bergmann, Knopf, Tannen, Zaner) have done. These students of rumor and gossip are ultimately interested only in the legendary and mythic aspects of conversational formations. Gossip and rumor are interesting more for the cachet with which they are held than for the divergent forms they take, and the myriad effects they bring about. No matter what the ostensive content or circle of gossip and rumor -- intimate friends, neighbors, corporate employees, nervous citizens -- gossip and rumor can function

only to highlight inevitable flaws we have (we speak separate languages, we are not serious enough, we ignore reality, we are unselective in our information collection). Such are the elements of social meteorology. For this group of barometricians, rumors and gossip are (ig)noble lies for the populace, nothing less, and certainly nothing more.

1.2 Spin Doctors

Unlike the social meteorologists, who only see gossip and rumor as always already present, those academics I think of as gossip and rumor "spin doctors" share some commitment to social constructivism; to varying degrees, each attests to the fact that our words can construct real truths for us, that even "less" empirically reliable words like those of gossip and rumor can be part of that truth-making, and that hence gossip and rumor are more complicated features of the social scene than we might have previously thought. Of course, while this sounds initially appealing, the depressing reality is that spin doctors really do still have sacred cows, just more covertly. The members of this group clearly write with two truths in mind -- Truth, which is actually empirically correct, and the truth of gossip and rumor, which may sometimes coincidentally turn out to be Truth, but in general is simply an interpretation of, exaggeration of, projection of, or otherwise distortion of The Real Thing. Social constructivism turns out to be a

convenient peg on which spin doctors can hang a triadic notion of truth -- truth, outright falsehood, and the messy stuff in between. But unfortunately, the two initial concepts remain purified; the in between messiness of gossip has no meaningful status or content for these constructivists. Untidy gossip and rumor are simply empty space.

John Beard Haviland, in his Gossip, Reputation, and Knowledge in Zinacantan (1977), anchors this discussion; his arguments about gossip titrating already-existent social rules paradigmatically demonstrate the spin doctor's competing allegiances to social constructivism and an absolute notion of truth. Of course, at first glance Haviland apparently seeks a far less value-dependent social function than the other social scientists we have examined. When he blandly repeats the standard dictionary definition (personal talk about an absent third party [28]), it is not to set himself up for a Bergmannesque lecture on its evils but so as to appreciate its varied uses. Haviland explores his assumption that gossip is a venue for apprehending and appreciating (and occasionally critiquing) social rules. By Haviland's view, there are different homogeneous groups applying standards to personal behavior and habits; gossip is simply an interpretive trope (a passive vehicle of reflection) for individuals to use to consider other individuals. While this allows for some social

constructivist power for gossip, Haviland's individualist bias towards gossip diminishes his ability to read the gossip moments he collects, to consider and analyze the background and intents of his various informants, and probably, to hear certain kinds of conversation as gossip. Hence Haviland is only able to see gossip as a factor in information manipulation, not creation. And initially, Haviland's individualist bias explains why his attitudes towards gossip (what it is and why people do it) -- while attenuated -- strike a moralistic tone similar to Bergmann's.

This failing begins to appear when Haviland repeats that definitional saw about gossip as sordid personal chitchat. While Haviland doesn't explicitly say what kinds of actions aren't worthy of gossip (he only loosely categorizes gossip as "news, report, slander, libel, ridicule, insult, defamation, and malicious and innocent gossip" [28]), it is clear that the one thing that gossip never addresses is political decisions, community issues. The instances (gossip-moments) Haviland cites (23, 9) are all about issues like excessive drinking, adultery, marriage, divorce, etc. Leaving aside for one moment the notion that a conversation can have many layers of interpretation and content, Haviland early on states baldly that instead of gossip exposing issues that affect the Zinacanteco communities (like new taxes, harvesting or

voting issues), he observes gossip as "masking" the conflicts: "the gossip, that is, has less to do with power and political ends than with the personalities and propensities of the disputants" (9). In short, even when gossip may occur in a civic or political setting (here Haviland is referring explicitly to gossip-conversations that happen in court cases, in town halls), it is really only about personality. So when the ostensive content of gossip is personal (i.e., Haviland observes a conversation about someone's drinking too much, say), there is no latent gossip; but if the gossip potentially concerns political issues, there must be a latent personal content so that the gossip (and the implications of gossip) can be kept safely on the trivial plane of interpersonal relations³⁴. It is difficult to reconcile the one-sidedness of Haviland's willingness or disinterest in seeing multiple narratives,

³⁴In case readers are beginning to think that I as a gossipist am obsessed only with politics, and in fact bifurcate my gossip to the reverse of Bergmann, Haviland et al. (to wit, that only political gossip is important/interesting and that personal gossip is dull), let me make it quite clear that I follow no such dichotomy in my own characterization of gossip. To be sure, I do not believe that gossip can be divided (often) as strictly personal or political, rather that gossip conversations (like most conversations) are clearly about many subjects at once. The only reason I am writing so heavily on political gossip in this chapter is to correct what I see as the mistakes earlier gossipists make in abundance. When I use words like "sordid" in this chapter with apparently judgmental tone, hopefully the reader will understand that the tone is an attempt to indicate how I read these social scientists' tone when they write about gossip, rather than as a reflection of my personal opinions about personal gossip.

with his initially proclaimed interest in the power of gossip.

At one point, concluding a chapter, Haviland mentions gossip that concerns town issues (65); but this is a quick mention, with no quotations from transcripts or lengthy analysis. Rather, Haviland's point in mentioning that gossip around town issues occurs is to shore up his notion that gossip reinforces factions in towns. When this assertion is considered in light of his earlier argument about political gossip being transparently about personal issues (and indeed, in light of the rest of the book and its overwhelming supply of sordid anecdotes about Zinacantecos), his meek acknowledgement of civic gossip carries little weight. For Haviland only a very few conversations merit hearing, and only according to a very limited stock of interpretations.

Now, the careful reader could dispute this as a reductive reading. After all, Gluckman's claim in the original 1963 article is simply that the boundaries between gossip and non-gossip are hard to draw, and that there are many kinds of subjects to gossip (sometimes all at once). Couldn't I, in my reading of Haviland (and Bergmann before him), be unjust in inferring simply from the ostensive content of the cited gossip-conversations a univocal approach to gossip -- in other words, isn't it possible that Haviland and Bergmann are both hip enough to recognize that

when we gossip about someone getting drunk and being silly we may also be gossiping about who should be chair of city council or how much property tax should increase, etc.? Couldn't they be that sophisticated?

In a word, no. It is not simply the fact that they both only listen to, record, and remark upon gossip-conversations about ostensibly personal behavior; both also very have static notions of what gossip is about, and are unwilling to grant freedom to gossip to move beyond content restrictions. When Haviland lists the topics of gossip (74), they are all (with the possible exception of one, jail) about explicitly personal aspects of life, and the topics (listed by frequency of appearance in gossip) are also clearly static -- there is one topic per gossip-moment. Haviland can justify this assumption because part of his notion of gossip is evaluative storytelling (cf. 10, 48-49, 51, 53) -- gossip is telling a story, only with more group participation and group ranking and rating at the end. Incidentally, Haviland's gossip groups are "moral communities" (8), locution which suggests stasis in not only the content of the story of gossip but the interpretation and evaluation that follows.

Like Bergmann before him, Haviland seems to take his role as a social scientist very seriously -- his analysis of gossip reflects his training on many levels. In addition to his close adherence to the 'commonsense' gossip definition,

Haviland also argues that we can only consider as gossip what Zinacantecos would consider gossip; and that that set of conversations must also fit what we would think of as gossip, and to which we would react as we do to gossip (28). While at first this sounds impressively thick-descriptive (Geertz's term for social science that thoroughly reflects the social and epistemic norms of the society it purports to depict), Haviland's claim reflects how deeply, and how limitingly, his social science instincts run. According to this notion of what we can call gossip, gossip has to be translatable and transparent; in short, everyone and anyone must be able to recognize a conversation as gossip. This transparency may be a necessity for success in some social science world, but it is a path to failure for gossip (and ultimately, I would argue [as I think would Geertz], for social science that aspires to greater completeness and complexity). Haviland's apparent objectivity here is an attempt to please everyone, and has the result the cliché predicts. Universality in gossip -- an abstract notion of what gossip is and what it does -- simply cannot make sense (gossips wouldn't accept it); this is Gluckman's exact point³⁵. Gossip is fluid, has fluid functions, has fluid effects. Coming up with a category of gossip (this can count, this can't count, gossip must do this and can't do

³⁵My cynical first reaction to Haviland's remark (who are 'we'? Do 'we' have a univocal opinion about gossip? Do the Zinacantecos?) is a short version of this criticism.

this) beforehand means that you approach your conversations in a predetermined way -- that you can only hear certain things, that you will miss certain conversations, certain nuances, certain asides. Those "certain" conversations that Haviland thinks "we" will regard as gossip are clearly only the most idle, the most trivial, the most stereotypically gossipy; e.g., those conversations that most narrowly cleave to that chestnut of a dictionary definition of gossip.

At one point, Haviland observes (following Gluckman) that he simply cannot understand much of the conversations he hears because he isn't aware of the local gossip. But what Haviland misses, in his attempts to be locally acceptable about gossip, is exactly this notion that you restrict your field of what you can hear and the connections you can draw dramatically. How better to explain the fact that the only conversations Haviland (and Bergmann) think worthy of transcription and repetition are those involving the transgressions of the seven-deadly-sin variety? Haviland isolates the stereotypical gossip-moments only to quarantine them, so that gossip can have reference and resonance in reflexive ways only. But as I demonstrated before with the analysis of Bergmann, just because there is an everyday conception or has been one, doesn't mean we must maintain it uncritically and in perpetuity.

When Haviland moves beyond the dictionary definition of gossip, and attempts to draw conclusions based on his

research, the result is a rather meager extension of the most modest of Gluckman's theses. Haviland uses the cargo system in Zinacanteco culture as evidence for how gossip expresses tacit, consensually held community standards of morality. The cargo system is simply the structure of community religious ceremonies to celebrate the corn harvest, which is the basis for the Zinacanteco economy. There is an elaborate hierarchy of roles one can assume (if one is a man) in the cargo ritual, and one 'works' one's way up through the cargo ladder. Cargo participation is restricted (there are only about 30 roles to play), and relative position is supposed to reflect, according to Haviland, not merely one's social status, but one's moral purity -- how hard one works, how pious one is. The cargo system, in short, transparently indicates Zinacanteco beliefs, values and practices. "[T]he idiom of cargo success is, in most conversation, synonymous with virtue, diligence, and worthiness," Haviland writes (104). He continues:

Gossip about cargoholders, fortunate and unfortunate, leads directly to the interrelated notions of wealth, prestige, luck, seniority, and success. [ibid]

For Haviland, when Zinacantecos gossip about their primary social link, it is only to use it as a yardstick for virtues.

This conviction about the transparency of the cargo system and its gossip gets interestingly complicated when

Haviland explains its warps and woofs; when Haviland accounts for cargoers who don't fit into the Horatio Alger picture, and the gossip around them. Haviland is aware that lots of Zinacanteco gossip centers around cargo decisions, and that much of that gossip in turn centers on decisions that many Zinacantecos don't accept. But Haviland characterizes that gossip as exceptional.

When gossips encounter a cargo career structured in an unusual way they try to reconcile the facts with the peculiarities, disabilities, or bad luck of the individual. They explain, that is, why what happened was not exceptional, not surprising.
[100]

In other words, gossipers only enforce a preexisting social code, be it explicit or implicit, and their gossip serves to fill in gaps so as to endorse the legitimacy of status quo decision-making (or the existence of the social code, and the appropriateness of the rules that are perhaps sometimes less than rigidly enforced). This analysis ignores the fact that gossip is often what determines status quo decision-making, and that fact that gossip also (and contradictorily to each of these earlier social functions) acts as criticism of status quo decisions; gossip highlights bureaucratic or personal incompetence as often as it complicatedly legitimates it³⁶. The competing and irreconcilable nature of these social functions of gossip suggests that function in gossip may operate on a deeper level -- that the reason

³⁶Zaner's evidence of gossip efficacy bolsters this point.

why we can do so many different social things with gossip is because it's not transparently an endorsement of social order.

Haviland ignores these less-than-Pollyanna implications of gossip as critical of the social order³⁷, and he does so because he grounds his concept of gossip in too structured an understanding of social rules and how they operate. His individualism is a result of his maintaining a categorical notion of truth -- gossip can't have a broad impact.

Haviland's analysis of the failure of the cargo system is peculiar: "gossip reminds us that people fail, that careers go wrong, that following the rules is not the rule" (108). His locution is suggestive -- it is not the rules themselves that are wrong or don't work, it is the individual.

"Following" the rules is the erratic occurrence; the rules themselves are no cause for gossip or concern. Gossip tracks and evaluates the individual, on an idiosyncratic basis -- it stays away from the touchier, more dangerous stuff like what rules we (apparently or actually) live by

³⁷And importantly, he ignores conversations themselves that are less than Pollyanna about the social order. He quotes transcriptions (102, 103) of conversations about cargo where the conversations suggest an ironic attitude towards the cargo system -- a shared belief that while supposedly the cargo system may represent virtue, diligence, etc., in reality it is (like other political systems) also an opportunity for the purchase of power and influence, with cynicism and selfishness being the operating factors. While Haviland heeds the words of the conversations he transcribes, he misses the laughter.

and if they make sense. Gossip cannot be a means for evaluating the big stuff, only the small stuff.

For Haviland, social rules are not completely fixed or rigid; he thinks there are many different kinds of rules, and that the point of defining rules is to understand and recognize their violation (158). Ultimately, Haviland thinks there needs to be a flexibility to rules and our interpretive guides of rules (of which gossip functions as such a primary guide [167-68]). To demonstrate this, Haviland describes how impossible it would be for a social scientist (or anyone) to explain what rules are in effect, when and why for a situation as simple as a yellow light at a busy traffic intersection (178-80). But, as he makes absolutely clear in his chapter on the cargo system, it is an individualist, crudely relativist flexibility that Haviland seeks. Ultimately, the looseness he wishes the social sciences would adopt is this narrative looseness with which he characterizes gossip -- the freedom to constantly make particular, on an individual level, why someone does something and how (or how not) actions reflect their supposedly determining social rules. Haviland's conclusion is that our social grammar needs more complexity -- and while the completion of such a complicated descriptions would be impossible (imagine a complete description of why eight cars and three pedestrians did whatever they did at some traffic light), gossip nonetheless stands as a marker

of the kind of complexity we should be seeking in our social explanations of human behavior (180). The difficulty here is that Haviland's conclusion about social rules and gossip's role is implicit from his beginning assumptions. Of course gossip's productive domain can only extend so far as to explain individual moves and individuals' stories (and their lives are for Haviland always stories, and stories only), never contributing to any kind of broader critique or understanding of who people are and why they do what they do.

This starting and closing assumption of the restrictiveness and triviality of gossip is most patently clear when Haviland finally refers to Gluckman explicitly. As he closes his book, Haviland sharply observes that Gluckman's position that you don't know a society until you know its gossip is a "fatuous and self-congratulatory position that would deny most social science" (171-172). This harsh critique of course ignores his own self-consciousness at **finally** learning Zinacanteco gossip; and how **his** status in Zinacanteco society changed dramatically after he learned it (12-14). Haviland is desperate to justify social science that doesn't include gossip, so desperate that he ignores his own experiences, and indeed, the import of his own conclusions about gossip. He later notes that "the naive ethnographer, unlike the old-hand gossip, has trouble distinguishing the exceptional from the

ordinary" (175). By this reading, instead of the gossipy social scientist being fatuous and arrogant (and hence overemphasizing her own work), wouldn't the non-gossipy ethnographer be practicing the bad social science? This juxtaposition of remarks recalls Bergmann's fundamental trouble with definitions -- since Haviland as well fails to make clear what his opening assumptions and biases about gossip are, he avoids the tricky issue of clarifying why it is he approaches gossip the way he does. Basically, Haviland attacks Gluckman for lending credence and significance to gossip, the subject Haviland apparently thinks interesting enough to merit an entire book.

Haviland's dismissive attitude towards gossip is surprising, given his interest in being seen as a knowledgeable gossip. He quite painstakingly lays out his means of capturing and analyzing gossip. Haviland collects various knowledgeable people from the different hamlets and tapes lengthy collective interviews he calls "Who's Who" sessions; in these he asks about various people or incidents, and his informants spell out histories³⁸. The technique itself I have no serious quarrel with (because, as Haviland's transcriptions make clear, once stories start

³⁸Bergmann, amusingly, is appalled by this technique (he finds it artificial -- thinks that clearly, what Haviland is collecting isn't really gossip because it's too content-driven and ignores the interactive nature of gossip [37]), and of course replaces it with his own much more exacting technique that produces exactly the same result.

they **are** interactively told), and because it's clear that Haviland simply acted (albeit more formally) as many of us do when we lead our lives -- he asked for gossip. However, where I do quarrel with Haviland's Who's Who methodology is the representativeness of his informants. Haviland, without elaboration, makes a quick claim that his Who's Who participants are a 'representative' sample (13). There are several reasons to be suspicious of this claim. First, it is not clear that Haviland's informants are other than all male. Haviland's understanding of Zinacanteco gossip is that it occurs primarily through the men; and that the women act as "vehicles" only of gossip -- they transport it, they don't create it³⁹ (26). While Haviland acknowledges that children too can be carriers of gossip (40), it is similarly in this passive, vehicular notion of gossip that children are characterized as gossips -- and there is certainly no suggestion from reading the transcripts that children are included in the Who's Who groupings. The overwhelming majority of Haviland's transcripts of gossip-conversations seem to be between men; he frequently refers to circles of men engaged in gossip (1,8-9,21,27,31,35,43-44), and at one point he refers to the panels as being composed only of men (13-14), talking (primarily) about men in the village.

³⁹In other words, women can't do the heavy thinking necessary to interpret social rules, but they can usefully spread men's wisdom. Notice that this is the location where Haviland's social constructivism gets most precisely compromised.

Now, before I appear to be a cranky Pagliaesque feminist (I complain when women are castigated as gossips, I complain when women are excluded from gossip), let me make myself absolutely clear. I don't think only men or only women gossip, or only rich people or poor people, or only Zinacantecos or Anglos or Latinos or Asians, or only existential philosophers or ethicists, or only any one or other particular group. My point (obvious though it should be, and clearly following Gluckman) is that everyone does it. **Any** attempt to constrict and restrict gossip to or from particular social sub-groups must be wrong. While in a sense Haviland's restriction is modestly less irritating than Bergmann's or Tannen's (Haviland at least makes it clear that men do gossip -- a lot -- and often about sordid personal topics, analysis that somehow must have escaped Bergmann's and Tannen's notice) because it is less of an obvious cliché, it nonetheless distorts the domain of gossip.

This is not the only distorting methodology I find in Haviland's book. Presumably, his notion of representation should contain some class representation -- he should have talked to Zinacantecos from all economic levels. Particularly when cargo gossip is considered, given the inaccessibility of cargo positions, it would be important to have richer and poorer Zinacantecos (identified as such), particularly given the amount of cargo gossip that occurs in

this book. But here again, Haviland is silent on the background of his informants. The individual transcriptions aren't helpful either. There are only two mentions of cargo participation from informants -- one an elementary participant and one a higher-up participant. From over 50 conversations, this doesn't tell us much. It is important to know whether or not those Haviland quotes as being pleased or annoyed with the cargo system are those who have succeeded at cargo, or tried and failed, or simply been excluded. In fact, it is impossible to get a very complicated analysis from Haviland's conversations without getting a sense of who's doing the talking; as Haviland himself earlier says, intent, motive and agenda are important parts of gossip. So why then does he leave intent, motive and agenda out of his Who's Who transcriptions -- does he assume (ludicrously) that when his informants enter the room they automatically adopt neutral roles?

Given the looseness of his methodology here, his analysis -- choosing to use his transcriptions as a basis for making cultural generalizations about the values that are important to all Zinacantecos -- rings particularly insincere. He makes this agenda clear at various points (76, 77, 86-87); it is an agenda that smacks of a primitivist bias. Haviland rather sniffily refers to "American student gossip" as "highly psychologized" (58), as

gossip focusing solely on determining motives for behavior on an individual level. But while individualist biases may be frustratingly relativist (as Haviland should know), it is equally frustrating to have gossip act as a great leveller, simply transmitting cultural codes and beliefs through human mouths. This primitivist bias becomes clear when Haviland very cautiously acknowledges that "[he] cannot avoid the feeling that some Zinacantecos take cargos or involve themselves with ritual simply because they enjoy it" (119). This conclusion is one that easily applies to other cultures' social, religious or political systems -- imagine a resident of this country having difficulty with the notion that some Americans involve themselves with holiday rituals (Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwaanza), with their accompanying special feasts, songs, gifts -- for pleasure, not simply for the religious and cultural reasons ostensibly behind the rituals. The cargo ritual is similarly marked by feasting, playacting, parades, and tokens, yet Haviland seems unwilling to consider seriously less-than-pure motives for partaking in a system that is, like so many cultural artifacts, complicatedly effective and ineffective, functional and superfluous. I suspect that this bias towards overgeneralizing the motives and actions of the Zinacantecos partly determines why Haviland's analysis of gossip is so constraining of the effect of gossip. Haviland the spin doctor can only see gossip as an individual,

interpretive device to apply and analyze particular social rules, because his view of Zinacanteco society is itself ultimately too simple.

Ultimately, then, gossip for the spin doctor is at best a tool for opinion, not fact. This assumption is central in Karen Jane Brison's work, Gossip, Innuendo, and Sorcery: Village Politics Among the Kwanga... (1988), as well. Brison's dissertation (since published as a book [1992]) confronts the "problem" that the Kwanga have many long public meetings, typically devoted mainly to addressing (unsuccessfully) issues that originate in village gossip (16). The Kwanga hold two kinds of meetings: regular village meetings each Monday to distribute community labor (only one half-hour is spent on the division of tasks, several hours spent on gossip issues [2-3]), and funeral discussions, held after a death in the community, to determine the cause (12). The preconceptions clearly guiding Brison's study are that since these meetings don't result in overt change of villager behaviors, laws, reputations, and that since the issues at the meetings are often trivial (11-12), there must be a significant social explanation for their occurrence.

The theory she proposes, after eighteen months of observation of and interaction with the Kwanga, is that the particularly egalitarian form of Kwanga society necessitates ineffectual meetings (42-43). In a society without a

particular hierarchy, Brison contends, the meetings are necessary to establish both social norms, and social rankings⁴⁰(37). More to the point, egalitarian societies contain within them the seeds for more factionalizing, while simultaneously being more dependent upon consensus (since there aren't recognized leaders or parties [42-43]). Seemingly ineffectual talk can actually be critical social maintenance work, resolving or helping to resolve problems (41). Finally, being a good talker (being able to talk frequently, and eloquently), is the highest mark of social status for these villagers (of the three kinds of 'big men' in the Kwanga, orators are the most respected [46]).

While all of these comments delineate a society strikingly supportive of gossip as a constructive rather than destructive social force, Brison nonetheless observes Kwanga holding the same old myths about gossip as necessarily distorted and counterproductive. She observes in several of these meetings (the purpose of which seems to be only to make public and evaluate accusations circulated through private gossip [65]) that people seem to distrust others' public statements (66); and indeed, that they regard gossip as disuniting of the community (ibid). In addition, the Kwanga, in their village court system (Papua New Guinea has been independent from the rule of Australia since 1975), hold rumor and gossip spreading to be a crime for which one

⁴⁰Which, of course, would hardly seem "ineffectual".

can be charged, tried and punished (88, 158, 276). Finally, Brison notes that at several of these meetings participants discuss not only rumors but rumor -- complaining about the veiled way in which accusations of culpability in a death are made, for example (140).

The problem with all this conceptualizing is that the end result is a kind of levelling and simplifying of the Kwanga perspective. In other words, the conclusion I see Brison making over and over again is that the Kwanga are **only** straightforwardly afraid and mistrustful of gossip -- that they see gossip and rumor as disruptive of what is otherwise a peaceful community order. But what emerges from the anecdotes Brison herself presents is a more complicated reading of the Kwanga.

To elaborate: Brison describes community rumors as wild, and potentially leading to disastrous consequences (151). Focusing just on rumors of how someone in the community dies, Brison describes variant, elaborate rumors leading to "retaliation through sorcery, court, or embroilment in long, expensive competitive exchanges" (the Kwanga participate in a competitive harvest system around their yam, called the tamburan cult [133]). But this reading can't be accurate; for in the several case studies Brison herself presents throughout this study, formal and informal penalties threatened or levied (e.g. fines through court, threats of retaliatory violence, rejoinder

accusations of malfeasance) are never actually carried out (73, 89, 120). It seems implausible that a community would be imprisoned by a fear that never makes itself manifest.

More particularly, Brison only speaks well of the public system of courts, laws and assessed fines, even when it is clear that the Kwanga themselves have reservations about those institutions. She praises the development of the "new law" (157, 158) where gossip and rumor are indictable offenses, and where personal slights are adjudicated in court. More to the point, she draws an implicit contrast between the indirect speech of rumor and gossip and the direct speech of the courtroom; remarking that direct, public speech results in (apparently) much less conflict (161-163). Again, Brison acknowledges that the Kwanga seem to have little faith in the efficacy of the public meetings (64-65), and that the court system itself has a reputation for distorting facts and preserving ambiguity (275).

In this praise of institutional political structure, Brison perpetuates a neat disjunction between informal information and adjudication sources -- gossip and rumor, and their more formal brethren -- public meetings, courts and the laws and penalties they impose. Brison clearly accepts the fact that both exist simultaneously (and with some tension) in contemporary Kwanga society, but repeatedly portrays the latter, overt, formal judicial system as

necessary because it balances out the inequities of the former. Witness Brison's theory (borrowed from Donald Brenneis [1984]) as to why people are afraid of the negative power of gossip:

...as long as a dispute is confined to the realms of partisan gossip, there is the danger that it will spread to include other members of the community. An official public version restoring the good reputations of both parties removes this danger. [148]

"Official public version[s]" or explanations come about only through the lengthy meetings, or the court system.

The basic tension throughout this argument is as follows. Brison grants gossip the power to construct reality -- gossip and rumor are the chief means by which explanation and reputations are spread, gain communal force (113). Indeed, she even allows for a genealogical character to gossip -- she admits that the public meetings, court systems rarely if ever seem to get at the root of problems within the community, or adjudicate satisfactory explanations of deaths (73, 4-9, 52-53). Indeed, she avers, "it [is] impossible to know the true cause [of death] until a couple of years later...It is only after a couple of years when tempers have cooled that people will drop hints when gossiping with friends and relatives and the truth will eventually emerge" (13). However, Brison wants to have it both ways -- gossip is a powerful force within the community, acts as a force towards eventually resolving disputes and constructing truth explanations, but **only**

because of its necessarily distorting character. Gossip constructs truth by manipulating it, impurifying it. As such, gossip must necessarily cohabit along with multiple public channels for its evaluation and confirmation, **even if** those channels are necessarily ineffective. Both of these claims simply cannot be true⁴¹. In other words, Brison is implicitly maintaining an absolutist conception of truth (the only way a social constructivist account of truth with gossip is palatable to her is if the "truth" that gossip constructs is always already distorted).

Papua New Guinea is changing rapidly, Brison observes. The harvest cult system (with its complicated system of inter-village communications, partnerships, and competitions, in no small part based in gossip [258]) is fading out -- no new members have been initiated into the harvest cult since 1978 (initiated cult members are the 'big men' of Kwanga society). The Kwanga response to this change (which in turn has spawned other changes -- less bartering, more cash cropping, more hierarchy because of fewer Totem [harvest] groups [ibid]) has been to hold more public meetings; conflicts which used to be resolved mainly through cargo competition and cargo meetings -- through gossip, in short -- are now supposed to be resolved through public meetings, and the court system (260). Brison contends that

⁴¹Indeed, one reviewer of Brison's completed book noted the same exact difficulty in her analysis: see Oceania (1994).

this change happens because "people attempted to stop tradition by stopping the system of gossip which supported it" (ibid). But again, this contention suggests a belief that gossip is predominantly destructive, or distorting, that the facts in Brison's dissertation simply don't support. And so while Brison is certainly to be admired for acknowledging the influential status of gossip in Kwanga -- she does not shy away from declaring its social power or its at least occasional ability to uncover facts -- by conceiving of gossip as the necessarily weak end of the dialectic of truth and punishment in Kwanga Papua New Guinea she ultimately perpetuates a stale notion of gossip as a priori distorting or malicious⁴². This is what renders Brison a classic spin doctor -- her interest in (active) constructivism forces her to downplay her bifurcational

⁴²I think it's also relevant to draw attention here to the primitivist stain of this kind of analysis: in short, that gossip uniquely has a kind of distorting, malicious, and warping capacity that "open" or "public" speech in courts does not (which Brison herself acknowledges fails to reveal accurate reconstruction of events). Indeed, Brison is not alone in making these kinds of dangerous assumptions about gossip. Witness Robert and Ruth Munroe's response to Donald Campbell in the pages of Zygon (1976), where they casually observe that in more sophisticated societies, "an ethical code is a more indirect form of social control than the face-to-face methods such as gossip, scolding, and witchcraft accusations often employed in simpler societies" (3). In short, one mark of "simpler" societies is their social control only through face-to-face, non-abstract or universalizable (and obviously, not as good) moral codes -- it is only the sophisticated societies that can operate according to "indirect" "abstract" rule systems (and hence have less reliance on imprecise methods such as gossip).

notion of truth; however, gossip always ultimately maintains the inferior half of that division.

Ori Bet Or (1989), in his dissertation examining the status and function of gossip in an Israel kibbutz, takes a tack similar to Haviland's, using painstaking methodology to justify unsurprising, formulaic results. Bet Or, in trying to move the epistemological question to a different kind of realm than "straightforward" truth or falsehood, unfortunately simply displaces to a secondary level gossip's ultimate status as falsehood. One quote in particular demonstrates this attitude:

...gossip is more Impression Management than Information Management. The gossipers are making use of information, in order to influence and change. Selection of the information and relating it to certain interpretations rather than straightforward presentation, is typical of gossip. By being more a matter of evaluation, criticism, judgement and impression, than of actual information or rational analysis, gossip cannot be related to in terms of truth or falsehood, reasonable or unreasonable. [424]

To put it simply, Bet Or tries to have it both ways. He's appealing to the defenders of gossip, by saying that it's not so much that gossip is either true or false (because we know where gossip would fall if **that** were the criterion), but that it's beyond those simple categories -- it's off in the murk of judgement. But his language betrays him -- gossip is not "straightforward" information transmission, it's not "actual" information, and of course, it's not "rational." I find myself strangely uncomfortable by the

notion that gossip is simply too ethereal to belong to dull, earthbound realms of reason and unreason, truth and falsehood; because it's clear that gossip is simply a shadow-irrationality, a phantasmic falsehood. Because gossip lurks around corners, never presenting itself directly, never confronting confirmation or disconfirmation square in the face, it's in a non-realm, where it has no actual connection with truth or falsehood, only manipulation and "management." But the implication there I think is only too clear -- managed information is adulterated information, gossip can't be straightforward because presumably some other kind of information is. Bet Or's still clearly holding to that dichotomy that truth and falsehood exist, and gossip is simply **even** further from one category than the other, rather than in its own realm.

Like Haviland, Bet Or thinks that gossip (as the conclusion makes clear [239]) functions to make particular, evaluable, and malleable rules, norms, proceedings, statuses, constitutions that we already operate by. He thinks that we already modulate the norms and categories to suit our own personal experiences, and that gossip is simply the means by which we check our evaluations with others, and confirm that our own interpretations aren't too far off the mark. And again, like Haviland, it's also clear that Bet Or suffers from the same fundamentally dismissive attitude towards gossip. For example, he can't help from describing

gossip as essentially negative -- a way for someone to boost his or her own self-image at the expense of another -- even as he acknowledges the contradictions rife within assumptions of gossip's fundamental negativity or positivity (423). It's also clear that Bet Or is well aware of gossip's supplemental power in truth-making; he describes the "common knowledge" that no one in his particular kibbutz actually follows the dictates in a pamphlet describing rules and proceedings; a new kibbutz member is ridiculed for citing the booklet (7). In general, Bet Or on several occasions recognizes both the positive capacities of gossip (107-108, 9, 163) and the simultaneous reliance of the community on gossip along with their fear, suspicion and negative attitudes towards it (9). Therefore, Bet Or's inflexible interpretation is at odds with the complicated data he has collected. For example, his numbers show that of kibbutz members⁴³ (N=157), 74.5% both gossip and are gossiped about (N=117), 18.5% gossip but are not gossiped about (N=29), and that only 7% (N=11) neither gossip nor are gossiped about. In other words, gossip is a regularized activity that most members of the group partake in, in various locations and at different times, with all sorts of topics and interpretations.

⁴³Here he means actual members; there are other residents of the kibbutz who aren't members of the kibbutz community -- salaried residents, temporary residents, etc.

It's bizarre, then, that with the breadth of his conclusions, and with the progressive nature of much of his methodology (essentially, as he makes clear, he gathers his information by eavesdropping and initiating gossip [349-352]; at one point he avers that you "can't study gossip without participating" [299]); Bet Or nonetheless retains many of the most rigid and constraining aspects of gossip study. For example, after acknowledging that defining gossip is hard not only because of the linguistic constraints but because of the social science paradox that you will only confirm what you set out to discover (342), Bet Or returns to the tried-and-true definition of gossip as evaluative, negative storytelling about the absent (305-306, 347). Bet Or also mysteriously describes gossip at one point as "more structured, defined, delimited, amplified and programmed [than conversation]. It is much less flexible. Rather than being open to change, it acts against them" (309). This analysis seems flatly contradictory to Bet Or's repeated remarks that gossip is hard to categorize and define, and that gossip-situations are quite fluid, their contents, intents and interpretations constantly shifting (182-183, 385). Fundamentally, Bet Or's theoretical ambitions are held back by his methodological timidity. Therefore, he ultimately reaches conclusions that only reproduce Haviland's analysis of the decade before, albeit with new data.

The diminishing of the conception of gossip, even with elaborately particular methodology, is nothing new. Those anthropologists seeking to articulate theories about gossip early in its study (by responding to Gluckman's groundbreaking 1963 article) are themselves guilty of skewing the concept of gossip too much one way or another, levelling gossip into conceptual flatness. One competing theory recognizes gossip entirely by virtue of very individual, particularized, psychological roots (Paine [1967]). Another grounds gossip entirely within a crudely political framework; gossip happens whenever someone has an agenda to push of protecting their own good name or attacking another's (Wilson [1974]). A third (Abrahams [1970]) reduces gossip to its status as nonsense performance (291, 293-4). These professionals all seek to consider gossip as meaningful purely in terms of its status as communicative tender. Reducing gossip to communication only (it is a channel for individual twitches only, purely for advancing political aims, or simply to perform), for all of these writers, is tantamount to reducing gossip's proximity to truth.

Wilson is explicit about this fact -- he argues that the Makah Indians use gossip as a tactic to deceive a visiting anthropologist (by gossiping to her about themselves and others, he suggests, they can mislead her about the true nature of community ranking and self-

knowledge [95-97])). Abrahams contrasts the "nonsense" activity of gossip with "sensible" conversation; "sensible" means "well-spoken" and "knowledgeable," "emphasiz[ing] the order and decorum afforded by knowledge" (294). For these anthropologists, it seems, gossip can only reveal its various agendas (personal, political, performative) by preserving a status as cunning fakery. In other words, all the different anthropologists miss what's truly exciting about Gluckman's work -- the vital connectedness of gossip to all of our conversation, its indiscernability amongst important talk.

The underlying problem I observe both in this section and in the previous one is that social researchers on gossip ultimately cannot resist the negative reputation of gossip, no matter how hard they try and how much their theoretical training prepares them (and I think it is fair to say that the spin doctors are better prepared than the social meteorologists). While it might be odd to present him out of order here, I think it is important to document how someone who is so initially positive towards gossip can himself fall under the spell of its reputation -- Max Gluckman, responding to his initial exciting article, in 1968. A passage from this response is worth quoting in depth:

...Doubtless there is gossip among financiers, and they may in the course of it acquire information of pecuniary value to them; and there definitely is gossip among senior academics in the course of

which they acquire information which guides them in making appointments, or in awarding research grants. But this, I consider, is the passing of confidential information for specific utilitarian purposes. It cannot be classed as gossip, if we pay any regard to what the dictionary defines as that [sic!] - idle chatter. . . It might become impossible, as a friend of mine told me, for a British colonial official to do his job under an independent African Government when what he called the 'gossip channels' were closed to him, so that he did not know what were the relationships among members of the Cabinet. But the chat in which such information is set can only be placed on the margin between true gossip -- idle talk -- and necessary information. [33]

Of course, what Gluckman omits saying here is that the kind of gossip he's now ruling out is precisely what he included in his 1963 article; notice that when he talks about professional gossip originally, he exemplifies it as "slight personal knockdown --concealed in a technical recital, or the technical sneer which is contained in a personal gibe" (309). More particularly, Gluckman explains his pedagogy as a teacher of young anthropologists, in part, as teaching about the scandals of the field: "I believe I am not alone among senior anthropologists in finding it more interesting to teach students about anthropologists than about anthropology" (314). Anthropologists gossiping about each other **as part of their work** is his very first example of professional gossip. I think this juxtaposition of passages puts us (and Gluckman) into an uncomfortable position -- either he must hold strictly to the words of his later article, in which case there's a clear distinction between gossip and non-gossip (and that distinction is essentially

between minutiae and what matters), or he must side by his earlier statement of inclusion, in which case gossip again can be necessary information, and in which the lines between gossip and non-gossip are all the harder to draw.

To explain: in his later article Gluckman argues that necessity and idleness are the defining (and oppositional) criteria that separate directed talk from gossip -- while there's a grey area (professional gossip), such talk is so directed (he says) that it can't **really** be idle, hence it's not really gossip. He's effectively writing away any legitimacy for gossip other than his own, group-maintaining and -defining anthropological purposes. What's depressing about this formulation is that with it, Gluckman lumps himself in with all of the other professionals producing work on gossip and rumor; each of them are guilty of reducing gossip to one kind or another, accountable by one monolithic theory or another. Each of them must wholeheartedly dismiss out of hand what all their disagreeing counterparts has to say, because the theory of gossip is a zero-sum game (if it's personal, it can't be collective. If it's performative, then there's certainly no agenda). What every member of this group misses is the possibility that gossip and rumor are simply more complicated, more convoluted than these dismissive theories suggest. The Max Gluckman of 1963 made fascinating strides towards accounting for gossip in a complicated way that took

into account all sorts of positive and negative results, intentions and agendas. The Max Gluckman of 1968 is rushing to appease his wounded colleagues, who are certainly never themselves guilty of idle chitchat, only "necessary information" (to which Bergmann can enthusiastically attest, no doubt).

Sadly, rumor scientists fare no better in this arena than the gossipists; Tamotsu Shibutani's Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor (1966), suffers flaws of a trivializing attitude towards gossip, disingenuously tricked up as a pluralistic attitude towards truth. On the surface, there is much to commend about Shibutani's work: he examines the data for 60 different rumor-locations (a rumor location being the ambiguous set of historical circumstances around which numerous unverified or unverifiable oral reports were generated; the actual number of rumors Shibutani studies is 471); while the bulk of the rumors Shibutani is considering are Western-hemisphere located and in the twentieth century, the rumors occur in various countries, and stretch in time from the plague in Central Europe (14th century) to President Kennedy's assassination in the United States (1963).

Aside from the breadth of Shibutani's research, his approach is also refreshingly realistic. He points out that while rumors may have something less than the preferred absolute standards of verifiability and reliability, that

they must be studied simply because people adhere to them. His outlook is sensibly pragmatic -- when we evaluate beliefs, we do so not by the strict constraints given us by contemporary epistemology -- in his words, "truth and falsity are attributes of propositions; conviction and skepticism are attributes of a man's judgement" (7). Shibutani advocates early on for a "continuum" between truth and rumor -- there are no clearcut boundaries, no crystal moments in epistemic time when some propositions pass from rumor to fact (8). Indeed, Shibutani has sharp words of criticism for his colleagues in social science who persist in labelling rumor a pathological activity (exceptional, engaged in only by the psychologically damaged) instead of a more widely practiced activity. Such distorting vision, Shibutani argues, leads to an over-narrow and generalizing account of what rumors are and how they occur -- these accounts look only at the content, the empirical facts and distortions therein, and assume that rumors present an 'obstacle' to normal, accurate, reliable communication (ibid).

Shibutani's counterattack relies on his conception of rumors (and indeed, communication) as transactional occurrences; that is, collective (not individual) processes where a variety of roles (narrator, auditor, interpreter, messenger, antagonist, skeptic, agitator) may be assumed by

the participants⁴⁴. The transactional analysis of communication, informal communication in particular, is nothing new; what's unusual about Shibutani's argument is that he (unlike even more recent critics such as Bergmann and Haviland) does not confine participants to particular roles. In one conversation a person can move from being a narrator to an interpreter, agitator, auditor, etc. Shibutani's image of rumor-conversations is much more fluid, much more malleable and developing, than those of his colleagues -- indeed, it should be clear, Shibutani's analysis seems (as yet in this chapter) to be the only one that appropriately captures the "informal" nature of such communication.

Shibutani uses this transactional critique to undermine the content-oriented rumor analysis that comes before him. One reason earlier rumorists have no conception of rumor as related to truth is that they can only appreciate rumor as static stories (a rumor is created, spread [maliciously], distorting reality); rather, what actually happens according to Shibutani's schematic (and amply documented by his historical data) is that rumors **develop** as they are spread, that the spreading process is actually a period of testing, comparing, selecting. The end result is that even when a

⁴⁴Transactional analysis of communication differs from its predecessors in that the purpose, end result is **not** the expression of ideas but the establishment and maintenance of communicative relationships between individuals.

plethora of seemingly wild and utterly incompatible, farfetched rumors crop up in some ambiguous set of circumstances, the inevitability of time, natural curiosity, and a lack of convincing 'authoritative' information result in rumors that **grow more truthful** as they circulate (16-17). Instead of rumors getting wilder (as conventional wisdom tells us), then, they get more nuanced, more particular, more credible -- more truthful. In particular, rumor participants' capacity to assume different roles in the consideration of rumors ensures that rumors are compared, evaluated and rejected or accepted rigorously (contrary to the assumption of carelessness that almost always accompanies analysis of informal communication). Shibutani even explicitly links rumors to rational discussion at one point -- the rumor is actually the rational tool for moving the dialectic of information-gathering forward (71). So there are some reasons to be enthusiastic about this book.

Shibutani also has a handful of casual historical notes to point out the more mainstream ways in which rumor and gossip have come to be relied upon -- revolutionary uprisings, the functioning of the stock market, press reports (the ubiquitous "anonymous source" "unnamed Administration official", etc.), doctors testing and experimenting with new drugs (45, 58, 71-72). Indeed, at one point Shibutani goes so far as to say that "most of the decisions one makes in the course of each day are predicated

upon unverified reports...such definitions are not called 'rumors,' the term being reserved for those accounts of which one is suspicious; most of the information upon which men base their lives, however, cannot meet high standards of verification" (94). We infrequently acknowledge but invariably rely on rumors and gossip, doppelgängers of news and truth. While, it is true, several writers on rumor and gossip refer to our day-to-day reliance on hearsay and rumor for decision-making (Knopf, Haviland, Coady [see Chapter Two] are obvious examples); Shibutani is the only writer who pauses long enough to make this case convincing, providing meaningful data of decisions that are made deliberately, that are nonetheless determined by report rather than 'hard' fact.

So what, after all, can be wrong with such an approach to rumor and gossip? Shibutani has acknowledged the historical situatedness of rumors, their fluid, mobile, developing nature, the collective, constructive roles participants play, and most fundamentally, he alleges a significant relationship between rumor and truth. It would seem that for an avowed defender of the integrity of rumor and gossip, little else could be done to salvage the honor of the two besmirched institutions. However, Shibutani's position as an adherent to empirical social science belies his status as a full advocate for rumor and gossip. Shibutani is a spin doctor because he's trying to subsume

rumor under a category of rational, empirical knowledge. The category itself doesn't change, it just gets bigger, includes more things. This tactic can't possibly work, and it shouldn't. From rumor and gossip we learn not only that they can be truthful but that truth is constructed differently than we might think it -- in other words, that **truth itself** is not rational, empirical, clearly defensible. So simply trying to push rumor (and gossip) off into one category, where frankly no one accepts them anyway, without giving a solid account for why it is that that category must **change** to accommodate them -- in other words, that our notion of truth must be a different kind of truth, to allow for disparate elements like rumor and gossip -- is a futile task.

In other words, spending such inordinate amounts of time solely on proving that gossip and rumor "really" are rational accomplishes nothing so much as to underscore the justification for rational, orderly knowledge -- to admit that standard conceptions of knowledge and belief really are for the most part accurate and well-grounded, they just need tinkering with here and there. Examining both sides of the issue -- showing that not only are gossip and rumor more rational than we're comfortable thinking, but that "legitimate" knowledge is in fact far **less** rational and orderly than we'd like to think -- throws the whole bifurcation of knowledge (certain fact/less certain opinion)

into doubt. In so doing, space is created for a more pluralistic conception of knowledge. By only doing one-half of this job, Shibutani perpetuates that bifurcation. Shibutani's well-meaning, but impossible pluralism is mindful of nothing so much as the recent Republican allusion to their party as "one big tent," accommodating all who are interested. Of course, as their rhetoric makes clear, you are only welcome to stand under the tent if you disavow everything about you that labels you deviant in the first place, and even then official acknowledgement will be infrequent and artificial only. Sadly, this can only be the status of rumor and gossip if we were to buy Shibutani's schema; we could happily nod along and endorse our multiplicitous attitude towards information and knowledge, while quietly continuing to dismiss or disregard lots of information as just scuttlebutt.

The mechanism Shibutani chooses to analyze how the truth of rumor develops demonstrates this rationalistic bias. After all is said and done, Shibutani argues, it is by a process of "natural selection" that rumors are sifted, compared, evaluated, and ultimately accepted as fact or rejected as 'mere rumor' (186). In other words, while Shibutani is advancing a dialectical notion of truth (we come to understand situations over time), his dialectic is closed -- final interpretations become selected and ossified (75). The closing of this dialectic cannot help but to

maintain such an uneven weighting of rumor to truth. Imagine a rumor that "becomes" true through Shibutani's natural selection. Clearly, we stop thinking of such a rumor as a rumor; it transmogrifies into fact. So rumor doesn't really have a truth content for Shibutani; it is a proposition that has **yet** to prove itself true. The truth/falsehood dichotomy still exists; it is only a matter of time before particular rumors pick sides (or are picked).

Further, in the situations that remain open and ambiguous, it is clear that Shibutani believes the correct interpretation exists, only that it has yet to be put in operation. While Shibutani is sophisticated in that he believes in incrementalism -- we gradually come to know things, our beliefs and methods change as we implement them (169-70); he still operates with assumptions that there's an order connecting our currently variant paths of knowledge. More to the point, as the very language of transactionalism suggests, this order is a marketplace order, where truth, falsehood, rumor, and gossip are so many commodities to be traded for (individual and social) profit. Shibutani's language of natural selection suggests that there is an overdetermined momentum to the entire process of chaos-crisis-resolution, where rumors compete on an intellectual marketplace, for the prizes of palatable, implemented social action (177). Communication, then, is still task-oriented; even though each unveiling is simultaneously a reveiling, we

reconstruct them according to the theme of connected enlightenment to which we all intuitively throng.

More to the point, the field of consideration (of possible rumor-scenarios) that Shibutani is willing to grant is initially constrained -- assumed public tenets of rationality and pragmatism mean that necessarily some explanations will be instantly thrown out. Witness Shibutani's strong language in demonstrating this: "When perplexed men are trying to develop a **realistic** orientation toward their environment, **pragmatic** considerations come first. Some individuals may become **hysterical**, but their remarks are discounted by others" (93, emphasis mine).

Shibutani also gives himself away as fundamentally suspicious of the irrational character of rumor-action. When he describes the behavior of rumor-spreading, his examples of the emotional contagion that precipitates rumor formation are such lurid displays of mass mania as mobs, stampedes, bank runs, even lynchings and collective hallucinations (95). He describes crowd behavior as a collective lack of self-consciousness, critical ability, and self control (96). Further, Shibutani is suspicious of the mechanism by which rumors can be evaluated: our ideas of logic change when we're talking rumor; "images are juxtaposed and associated rather than logically connected" (113). And while Shibutani offers up an excess of evidence showing the rational and social nature of meaning

negotiation (in other words, if a group is considering several explanations for a situation, held by different members, the group will almost inevitably work to reconcile extreme explanations into a moderate, uniformly acceptable compromise explanation [143, 145]), this transactional analysis seems to apply only to informal, less empirically verifiable information -- nowhere does Shibutani consider or aver that rational knowledge-assessment may proceed in much the same way that rumor and gossip-mongering do.⁴⁵

What this tap-dancing around the issue amounts to, in my reading, is an analysis of rumor that still leaves it with the taint of distortion, inaccuracy, emotionalism, irrationality, and ultimately falsehood. This reading slips out here and there in the text, most notably when Shibutani discusses rumors as coincidentally true -- not because they convey accurate information but because they **produce** information or behavior that confirms the initial (and initially false) rumor (148). In other words, accuse someone of cheating often enough, and eventually you'll discover some suspicious crib notes under his chair. False rumors are uniquely important to Shibutani because they convey an atmosphere (118, 120); they provide data for sociological analysis of why a crowd believed the

⁴⁵On this point, see Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's Laboratory Life (1986), for an exhaustive interpretation of exactly how such 'rational negotiation' takes place, in the august milieu of contemporary science.

necessarily absurd things they did (or behaved in the positively irrational ways they did). For all his transactional talk, then, Shibutani is still making a fundamental content-style distinction here -- it's important to empirically verify or refute rumors, because only true rumors show us how truth is produced, and false rumors show us **only** how controllable and directable social behavior is.

What's important for us to understand here is that this dichotomy must necessarily be false. Shibutani's saying that when we call something a rumor (something that eventually becomes true, say that Michael Hooker is looking for a job as a president of any university other than UMASS), then clearly that thing was never really a rumor in the first place -- it was truth waiting to happen. But this other rumor -- this rumor about UFOs landing in Harvard Yard -- this was clearly identifiable as a rumor (e.g. false) from the beginning. The two items are **by nature** different; we can learn different things from them (one produces truth, one produces falsehood). Only rumors can be false, for Shibutani; therefore whenever we call something a rumor that becomes true we were misusing language at the time. Shibutani's connecting up of truth and rumor comes at the cost of creating an unbridgeable chasm between rumors with the ring of empirical truth, and false rumors that are

merely sociological curiosities and not useful for the information they convey.⁴⁶

Shibutani's false dichotomy produces a similarly artificial pacing for rumor. He traces a crisis-stasis path to explain how rumors occur and are resolved. Because Shibutani's bias is towards rational, complete, consistent knowledge-gathering that fundamentally is at odds with rumor formation, Shibutani's explanation for how rumors occur is essentially only that ambiguous historical situations "occur" (in other words, situations that can't easily be explained away by current beliefs and ideologies), then the vacuum of explanation generates excitement, and rumors just start happening. The major difficulty with this schematic is that it simply fails to explain how the movement from stasis to crisis and back again really would occur⁴⁷. In other words, Shibutani has been arguing that rumors depend on trusting networks reliably trading information to supplement existing institutional channels. So he's acknowledging that rumors and rumor-traders are always already present in normal social life. But suddenly, this

⁴⁶One has only to look at the noticeably condescending language with which Shibutani describes belief in false rumors, and the absurd character Shibutani ascribes to false rumors, to justify this point (93, 96, 108, 113, 123).

⁴⁷This analysis is analogically drawn from the critical analysis Henry Thieriault provides, to explain why most identity accounts of nationalism fail to explain both the continuing existence of nations and why counter-nationalist rebellions do and do not occur, in his paper "Antinationalism and Armenia".

mechanism of authority/ subterranean communication becomes incapacitated by historical coincidence, and communication breaks down -- rumors become the predominant currency of information, until peace is restored (a dominant explanation is accepted). But except for the cases in which information is clearly simply not mechanically available (e.g. natural disasters, after which presses are inoperable, phone lines are down, etc.), there's no justification given for why suddenly institutional channels are much less trustworthy than previously, or suddenly rumor channels are much more trustworthy⁴⁸. I think it takes a different kind of analysis of rumor and gossip to answer successfully these questions of why and how gossip and rumor happen (or, more to the point, to demonstrate why and how they're omnipresent and coextensive with our 'legitimated' knowledge).

So as we have seen, the spin doctors, while preserving a more sophisticated notion of truth and falsehood than the social meteorologists (making much more of intermediating categories such as judgment), and while allowing gossip and rumor the power at least partially to construct reality (instead of acting as mere social indicators), are ultimately perpetuating the same stale old myths as their more primitive counterparts. For these theorists, gossip and rumor are still negative, destructive forces. While

⁴⁸Cf. the Harper's forum (1986), where gossipists argue, with little justification, that suddenly we're gossiping more because we've become more cynical.

they may not carry the harsh taint of virus or poison with them, it is only because their methods are more devious. Gossip and rumor construct **false** realities, these word- and idea-twisters and manipulators; their activity is never wholly constructive, and usually reducible to one or another readable agenda (be it personal or political). The theoretical dance-steps are more fun to watch than Bergmann's old one-two, but ultimately, we're dancing to the same tune (ouch).

1.3 Gossipy Voices

Happily enough, it is clear that the disciplines within the social sciences are clearly not anathema to the production of good work on gossip. Three works in anthropology, by Sarah Elizabeth Miller (1992), Max Gluckman (1963), and Bruno Latour and Steven Woolgar (1979), as well as one writer in communications, Peter DeBenedittis (1993), have managed to produce creative and productive analyses of gossip and rumor that give some play to the complications inherent within it. Each are not like the meteorologists, in that they are not reductive about their conceptions of gossip; nor are they like the spin doctors, reading gossip conversations as personal (or political) manipulations only, with shadowy, ultimately false relations to truth. Miller, Gluckman, DeBenedittis, Latour and Woolgar are able to appreciate gossip and rumor that is purposive without

necessarily being malicious. It's appropriate to begin with Gluckman, first because his 1963 article is really the important touchstone to this entire debate, and second, because I've been dropping some rather gossipy hints about him for some time now.

From the opening of his article, Gluckman takes a strong stance with gossip, and challenges his readers, **on the basis of our own experience** (as he continually reminds us), to reexamine our preconceptions of gossip and give it the weight in our lives it deserves. He writes:

I imagine that if we were to keep a record of how we use our waking-time, gossiping would come only after "work" -- for some of us -- in the score. Nevertheless, popular comments about gossip tend to treat it as something chance and haphazard and often as something to be disapproved of.

[308]

This is a provocative and accurate point (which way[s] do you think he intends "for some of us"?). It is also, I think, one that could be applied to the professional writings about gossip. Part of the reason Gluckman takes such a strong stance towards gossip is that his perspective on what counts as gossip is much broader than previous and contemporary accounts of gossip. When reading Gluckman's article in the context of all the other works on gossip, one difference immediately becomes striking: Gluckman does not rush to define gossip, and when he does make definitional statements about gossip, none of them are in the dictionary category of "personal talk or stories about an absent party"

used by almost every other writer on gossip. Gluckman never forces himself to come right out and clearly define gossip, which might strike some as methodologically shocking, but in this context is remarkably refreshing. Gluckman from the start incorporates his own intuitions and experiences into his analysis of prior anthropological research, and the result is a refreshingly expansive notion of gossip.

The magnitude of Gluckman's treatment becomes clear when he begins to discuss in what contexts gossip occurs. Gluckman gives a quick account of professional gossip (309) that is both compellingly clear and indicative of all the fluidity and indeterminacy of gossip as it actually happens. Professional gossip, notes Gluckman, "is built into technical discussion so tightly that the outsider cannot always detect the slight personal knockdown which is concealed in a technical recital, or the technical sneer which is contained in a personal gibe" (ibid). This brief statement is a dramatic recasting of gossip on several levels. First, it acknowledges that gossip happens at work, and second, that it happens in working situations - not simply at the water cooler, in the cafeteria, while waiting for the bus. And third, it acknowledges that the borders between work comments and gossip comments are not easy to draw -- one of the reasons, Gluckman avers, that it is so difficult to be a social scientist (or any other kind of outsider) in this context is that it is so difficult to tell

which comments are apropos and which are not -- which are professional and which are gossip.

While Gluckman doesn't address this point further, this analysis invites speculation -- is this problem merely one for outsiders, or do the insiders themselves also have this problem (if indeed we were to think of it as a problem, which I wouldn't)? In other words, could a participant in a professional conversation be able to differentiate clearly in retrospect between the personal gibes and the technical evaluations? Following Gluckman's dictate, and reflecting on my own personal experience, I would have to say that some distinctions are easy to draw, but that there are many remarks which are both professional and gossipy. And more importantly, it doesn't make sense simply to pull remarks out of the conversational context and label them as one thing or another, because regardless what we might call them, these remarks have effect as to the outcome and decisions in conversations; therefore, Gluckman's quick point suggests the importance of **not** rushing to draw distinctions between gossip and non-gossip, because the two are so interrelated in our lives. Both happen at once, and interdependently, to inform our decisions and beliefs -- therefore the only result of fixating on whether or not some one remark is gossip or not can be that we look for excuses to discount the merit of the remark.

However, this is far from the only creative observation of Gluckman's. As Gluckman's analysis of Elizabeth Colson's study of the Makah Indians demonstrates, gossip is not a phenomenon confined to one group or kind of group (women, the unemployed, the poor, particular ethnic groups) -- in fact, one of the effects of studying gossip is the recognition that social classings are hardly static, and do not necessarily determine how locals define themselves. Gluckman describes how the small community (400) of Makah, their lives having been redefined and reorganized on every possible scale for the past century by this country's government, do not maintain community unity or possess univocal beliefs. Rather, as their gossip shows, there is constant strife in the community, as members seek to define themselves against each other in terms of class, social position, religious capacities, and the practice of witchcraft (310). In particular, Gluckman's article establishes how these categories by which the Makah are constantly redefining themselves are not static -- there is no set (or even reasonably agreed-upon) community standard for what it means to be higher or lower class. Standards are totally individualized (essentially, every Makah Colson talks to describes herself/himself as high class and her/his neighbors as lower class [311]), and totally chaotic. What this ultimately proves for Gluckman (and Colson) is not that the standards are useless or valueless, because clearly the

notion of social standards carries weight in Makah society, but that gossip is the meta-standard by which the social standards are set.

...Makah values and traditions largely persist in the gossip and in no other way. To be a Makah, you must be able to join in the gossip, and to be fully a Makah you must be able to scandalize skillfully. [311]

Since the categories by which Makah judge each other (buying rights to participate in religious or civil ceremonies, prosperity, practicing witchcraft) aren't discussed in any clearly public sphere but only through gossip, the only means by which Makah have access to their society and their standards is through gossip. Gossip creates both the standards (such as they are) and the channels by which standards are known and debated. Gossip is the only standard that is fixed.

Since gossip is the only accessible channel for social definition and redefinition, it is fortunate indeed that Gluckman opens gossip up to the widest possible audience. Unlike some of the social scientists we examined earlier in this chapter, Gluckman doesn't attempt to confine or restrict the practicing of gossip to certain social groupings only. In fact, he makes it clear that the gossip he is most interested in is the gossip that can't be so stratified. The gossip he focuses on is neighborly (i.e. not confined to one gender or one social/economic class), and he closes his article by specifically addressing gossip

from one class about another -- gossip about the distant (media stars, royalty). He notes that those kinds of gossip are less interesting because there's less invested in the gossip itself -- it's more like a conversational nicety for people who are only transitorily acquainted (i.e., a slightly more interesting version of talking about the weather [315])). While I don't fully agree with his analysis of the function of distant gossip, what's refreshing about his analysis of gossip is that it focuses on intimate gossip as it occurs in all different kinds of situations, and for all different kinds of reasons. His account of gossip focuses more on group competitiveness and power struggles than it does on group bonding, but it's clear for Gluckman that both work interdependently, and are blurred -- in other words, part of the ways in which groups bond is by gossiping about other members of the group or measuring themselves against perceived other groups.

Hence the playful conclusion of Gluckman's article, that we do indeed need "schools for scandal" (313). Gossip has an important enough function, helping us to learn about our social selves and social surroundings, says Gluckman, that it's worth articulating the basic rules of gossip and encouraging the practice of gossip (without guilt) even for the very young. The more we understand about the way gossip works -- about its multiplicity of functions and methods -- the more we can recognize and be able to operate its many

voices. Gluckman is a perceptive reader of gossip. He points out that a single line of gossip can have many meanings; that there can be both a manifest and latent meaning in the gossip and that both can be right (314). Again, he differs sharply from his professional descendants here, in that most contemporary gossipists only recognize the apparent meaning of gossip conversations. As we have seen when we examined Haviland and Bergmann in particular, inflection in gossip (body language, facial expression, laughter or other non-verbal responses) either goes unobserved, unrecorded, or unremarked. This suggests that the non-verbal components of gossip have no real place or relevance to its analysis (except perhaps, as part of the amorphous setting of stage so that the reader can feel like a real insider). But quite to the contrary, several times, when the non-verbal gossip is recorded but not analyzed (cf. Haviland), a reading of the gossip nearly opposite to the one produced by the gossipist is easily apparent.

But Gluckman's call for schools of scandal, while provocative, is also hypostatizing. Gluckman thinks that gossip should be understood (and taught) as a means of communication that already exists -- that we should be able to understand and appreciate the patterns it describes. This is a dramatic move because it calls for a broad-based legitimization of gossip, on the basis that we all already do it and that it has good social effects (it has many social

effects, some of which are holding communities together). Gluckman simply wants his readers to acknowledge what already occurs around them -- while this is a simple task, it is one many social scientists do not face (the post-Gluckman gossipists never make such calls themselves).

Of course, on the other hand, there is an aspect of Gluckman's charge that is not provocative at all -- that in fact, encourages control through gossip. Gluckman wants gossip to be legitimate in part because he thinks it is (or should be) a defined and definable social phenomenon -- because he thinks we should be able to learn all the rules of gossip. While this is an understandable move from within the social sciences (study a society and its patterns of behavior so that you can explain them to outsiders, translate them into other kinds of behavior), the effect of this kind of move is often to erase the very social aspect of the patterns so described. To steal E.B. White's famous line about humor analysis, gossip analysis is like dissecting a frog -- you can do it, but the frog tends to die in the process. There clearly are ways in which we can talk and write about gossip -- there are regularities to be observed and discussed. But when we attempt to isolate and describe what really matters about gossip, what its real function is, then we limit ourselves in our understanding of gossip to our predesignated agenda.

Gluckman lets his presuppositions about gossip come clean when towards the end of his article he starts to offer a few basic rules for gossiping well (313-314); rules that suggest that values of loyalty, of continuing to get good dirt and preserving group intimacy and stasis are paramount. While these rules and values are certainly plausible as operators in gossip, they are hardly the categorical imperatives Gluckman makes them out to be (suggesting that someone wouldn't really be a participant in society if she failed to observe these rules). As Gluckman's article makes clear, he is interested in gossip because it provides him with an interesting index by which to determine group memberships -- who is in and out, and why -- how one moves from group to group, and how groups maintain cohesion or disintegrate. But gossip's functions go far beyond that, and it is important in our various attempts to legitimate gossip that we do not let our controlling agendas take over the character of the phenomenon we are trying to describe.

So what are we to make of Gluckman's refusal to explain gossip's social disreputability; is it merely (as Bergmann suggests) methodological or definitional irresponsibility on his part? Gluckman himself suggests some of the answer to this question. Contrary to Bergmann's insinuation, Gluckman does address the fact of gossip's social disreputability as a given -- he merely does so obliquely. When Gluckman closes the article, he remarks that while gossip he engages

in is interesting to him and full of possibility and enjoyment, gossip others engage in about him fills him "rightfully ...with righteous indignation" (315). Ignoring his repetitive locution, what's striking about this statement is that Gluckman does not at all deny the association of social and moral disreputability with gossip (nor does he question its appropriateness; note that he says he is "rightfully" indignant). Rather, Gluckman is simply locating moral and social disreputability within a particular sphere, and hence explaining it (exactly as Bergmann thinks ought to be done, only the explanation's not one Bergmann can appreciate [or perhaps understand]). Since, as Gluckman acknowledges in the opening of the article, we all engage in gossip, and all engage in it frequently and with enthusiasm, it would be rather simplistic and disingenuous (we can conclude) for any of us to disapprove of gossip (socially or morally) *carte blanche*. Instead, Gluckman simply acknowledges what seems more appropriately to be the empirical fact about gossip -- the only gossip we denounce *a priori* is that about us, that gossip over which we have little control, that gossip that can in fact hold the most power over us.

The entire measure of Gluckman's article is that gossip holds power because it determines group membership and position -- it only follows that hearing gossip about ourselves would sting (and seem inappropriate and wrong)

because that gossip would determine whether or not we were included or excluded, whether or not we measured up to the currently applicable group standards. This does not mean that gossip has a necessary moral or social value. Indeed, Bergmann's assumption of such a categorical moral and social value to gossip colors his account just as much as (he alleges) Gluckman's lack of consideration of value colors Gluckman's account. But that is hardly the most salient point about Gluckman to remember; the critical points for us here are Gluckman's carefree style, his inclusive consideration of gossip, along with his attention to analytic detail, and his ear for gossip. Gluckman's self-described status as a player in the gossip game, even with his overgeneralizing weaknesses (for surely gossip is about more than simply group ranking), is the virtue that ultimately makes his article stand out from the crowd, even after over 30 years.

Where the exciting multiplicity in Gluckman is to be found mainly in his awareness of myriad forms of gossip (e.g., that men and women gossip, that people from all sorts of class and employment backgrounds gossip, and about all sort of topics), Sarah E. Miller (1992), makes a convincing demonstration of the multiplicity of gossip-threads and interpretations. Like Gluckman, she begins her work determined to look for varied but related stories; indeed, she considers making sense (not logical) of the variations -

- why all variations are told, not an account of which one is "right" -- one of her main projects (xxix). At one point, when describing the difficulty she had getting relative strangers to gossip with her in some intimacy, she says:

Unless the person knew me well, turning the interview into an informal chat, the stories I gleaned by asking are all stiff and empty, catalogues of the motifs that come alive in other, appropriate recitations...I hesitate to commit the same violence that the interviews did, labeling a story and then reciting the motifs common to it. This tedious process that categorizes each story neatly, the runaway, the illegitimate pregnancy, the cross-caste elopement suffers from the same ills that delivering an ethnography in a series of categories does -- 'kinship,' 'religion,' 'marriage customs,' etc.
[233-234]

This is a lesson Haviland and Bergmann would do well to learn; reducing stories to their ostensive content amounts to stripping the stories (and their subsequent interpretations) of all complexity, all resemblance to the human lives they supposedly articulate.

Miller acknowledges that gossip is very serious business in Kathmandu (it **is** the negotiation in the wedding negotiations that are the background for her study -- the formal negotiations that follow the gossip are often merely windowdressing). Compared to our other social scientists, Miller is doing a lot of things right in her analysis of gossip: she's admitting first off that the "going native" aspect of anthropology is primarily important as a credentialling exercise ("only I know where 'there' is", she

points out [xxii]); she acknowledges several times the limits of what she can hear and understand, given her finite contacts within the Nepali community (xiv, xxix); indeed, a significant strength of her study is that she acknowledges that her informants might not have been giving her exactly the story she wanted to hear, or the story they gave others (2-5). The point in all of this, the explicit point Miller acknowledges that sets her apart from the other social scientists, is that gossip is not the constrained passing on of an objective, neutral story that **then** becomes connected to its auditors without ever changing its fundamental shape, content or meaning.

Miller's goal with her dissertation is to show how words make reality -- not simply in the naively linguistic sense of words shaping the reality we can understand, but in the deeper sense of words themselves actually being actions, of speaking and conceptualizing something actually amounting to changing prior perceptions, indeed prior situations. I see three unique conclusions in Miller's dissertation that are nowhere else in the social science literature covered in this chapter: gossip forecasts reality, gossip reconstructs new narratives to explain old, inexplicable events, and gossip acts as a connector between communities that wouldn't otherwise be connecting (contra nearly every other social scientist here, who make it explicit that they think gossip happens only within small, morally or ethnographically

homogeneous communities). The notion that links these three conclusions is that gossip, by its very triviality and informality, provides a kind of epistemic and conversational safe space to make remarks and construct theories that simply couldn't be uttered in other kinds of conversations. Before I explore my criticisms of **that** notion, let me explain how I see those three claims substantiated in Miller's work.

Gossip forecasts reality for the Nepali, first because conversation has a much more exalted status there than it does, for example, in this country. The Nepali word for "word," "**kuraa**," means not only word but "thing, talk, matter, affair" (166). Further connotations of "kuraa" all revolve around movement, change and transfer (231); indeed, kuraa is often used with the word "laagchha" -- "to effect reality" (ibid). It's not simply the language itself that sets a greater epistemic store by conversation; as Miller demonstrates, the path the negotiations take often is determined not by the formal negotiations themselves but by the informal visits wives (yes) pay to each other (364). Through the course of teasing each other, telling each other jokes, making delicate inquiries into others' lives, and repeating stories about others' negotiations and weddings, Nepali women are often able to sound out potential grooms or brides, persuade the less enthusiastic or calm down the over-interested, and even attend to the more practical sides

of negotiations (getting a sense of appropriate dowries, wedding gifts [8-12])). Sometimes simply the repetition of a particular story or joke can do the work of narrowing future possibilities; the speculative talk creates the reality from the plurality (178-184). Stories are purposively told: "histories are brought in as if to describe a situation already established, in the hopes of persuading and effecting a beneficial future situation to fit with the past. Thus the relation to the temporal movement of a discursive identity is different" (158).

As this quote so abundantly demonstrates, not only can storytelling gossip work ahead in this fashion, so can it similarly work to reconstruct previous, unsatisfactory events into a plausible narrative. The stories are told to make the future "fit with the past," Miller says. Gossip can be forecasting and reconstructive at the same time -- a multilayered functionality that is definitely new to this field. More particularly, Miller tells the story of a ritual amongst the Nepali, "eating one's rice." The Nepali believe that some marriages are predetermined; that one spouse ate the rice of the other in a previous lifetime; that they were bound to end up together (219). As Miller makes clear, this belief fulfills a very practical demand for the Nepali; it gives them a way by which to explain otherwise inexplicable pairings. "There is actually something minutely illicit about this movement of fate,"

Miller writes; "in overriding all other considerations, it seems to be most appropriate in scenes where other factors are not quite right" (ibid). Even very particular rituals, and the gossip surrounding them, can have a reconstructive purpose. Indeed, as Miller points out, the Nepali word for event ("bhaisaky"/ already done) is applied only to events that are long past (224).

Finally, gossip can be connecting, can work amongst heterogeneous communities. Miller phrases it simply: "[wedding negotiations] represent a kind of switchpoint between cultures, a liaison between disparate discourses" (422-423). Wedding negotiations, and the gossip that surrounds (creates) them, simply are the links between otherwise disconnected people. These links quickly gain strength; even Miller herself, a relative stranger in this social milieu, soon found herself relating differently to the gossip because of her particular connection to one household: "the very kin relation that allowed people to include me in a story also prevented me from hearing elaborate versions from others" (xxix). Exactly those relations also helped her to have more complicated, nuanced readings of the gossip she **was** hearing. Miller makes this clear as well:

It makes no sense to pass a story on to you if you are not already interconnected by a network of places and relationships: to whom would you circulate it in your turn? How can you relate a story that is not related to you?

[xiv]

While those relations, those connections are sometimes hard to document (Miller finds that occasionally she doesn't fully understand a story she is rereading from her notes, because so much of what she heard at the time of telling was context or significance that she didn't think crucial and didn't record), their technical absence in the dissertation is far from a dismissal of their relevance. Rather, they demonstrate all the more clearly how deeply nuanced in its inception gossip is, and how it simply can't be reduced to members of one tight community trading and re-trading the same tired old sawhorses of scandal.

Gossip doesn't function this way in Nepali society in part because of its status as a counterauthoritative conversational tack. To explain: conversation has a higher, metaphysically substantial status in Nepali language, but in part this is so because gossip-conversation is seen as making reality **from a pre-existing plurality**. Gossip conversation, and not authoritative conversation (e.g. men's talk, the wedding negotiations **per se**), accomplishes these tasks alone. Miller points out that gossip "suspend[s] the authoritative production of meaning... [to glory] in possibilities, spitting them out hard and fast, all mingled up together" (178-179). So the methodology that Shibutani exactly criticizes (associating and combining rather than coldly evaluating) not only takes place here, but effectively so; "spitting out possibilities"

for Nepali women as often as not means having one of those possibilities actually occur.

More pointedly, gossip creates a safe space for the undermining of authority, not simply by gossip happening, but by the things the freedom of gossip allows you to say. Miller notes that informal conversation "allows important statements about hierarchy and subordination to be made unscathed" (186). Chatter allows people not only to assert their own social position, but to challenge others'.

These kind of methodological and ideological challenges can occur, Miller attests, because of gossip's position as trivial and idle. Miller draws a clear distinction between "just" gossip, which is idle (19), and "real" talk, which is the purposive pre-negotiation Nepali women carry out (under the guise of just gossip, we must assume). She has the caveat that the truly trivial is necessary, for without it the real talk could not happen (21-22); indeed, she closes her dissertation, "the innocence and triviality of talk may constitute its power" (409). This, to me, is the point where Miller's dissertation falls short. Other than this, she has fully accepted the notion that there can be many layers to gossip, many meanings, many intentions, many nuances. She has enthusiastically argued that gossip can both foretell and retell stories; that it can create strong relations while also undermining them. So why then, is she still clinging to the unnecessary final belief that if

something isn't transparently purposive, then it's just gossip; that when all is said and done, gossip really is just idle talk? This one last move is reminiscent of the spin doctors, just as Gluckman's final reductiveness of the origins of gossip amounts to social meteorology.

This thinking (that gossip can be purposive through its very idleness) is supported for gossip's corollary of rumor in Peter DeBenedittis' generally fine Guam's Trial of the Century (1993), a tale of a former governor of Guam, Ricky Bordallo, who while running for re-election in 1987 was indicted with corruption of office (hence losing the election). (Bordallo was eventually acquitted of more than half of the charges, but sentenced to jury time for the remaining charges; in a protest of his sentencing, Bordallo fled police custody and shot himself in the head while chained to a statue in Guam's capital.)

DeBenedittis, who served as the press secretary to Bordallo's primary opponent, begins his study with impressive clarity of purpose -- he admits that he thinks rumors were used unfairly against his candidate, but acknowledges his own use of rumor, and their power to convey or undermine misleading official information (21-22). Further, he notes the accuracy and immediacy of rumors; "the rumor mill was about six months ahead of the papers for information concerning FBI and local investigations" (19). Indeed, he argues that rumors should be treated as media

artifacts, advocating for a kind of pluralism to truth in history: "the rumors recounted [here] are intended to fill in the gaps between what was reported by the press, claimed by officials, and believed by the community" (22-23).

Sifting through the amassed print and television news accounts and editorials on the case, as well as interviewing the local and international officials involved, DeBenedittis draws many conclusions. Primary among them, though, is his theory that rumors are a necessary challenge to hegemony, and even that in some sense hegemony creates challenges to itself such as rumor. DeBenedittis argues that for a power bloc to form and survive (and admittedly, he argues, hegemonic blocs are far from static, univocal or non-evolving), an internalized ideology is necessary for its participants and perpetrators. DeBenedittis traces the effect of this ideology in the news accounts and interviews about the case; to wit, that journalists, while strongly emotional about the case and its effects upon Guam's political reputation, regarded themselves as reporting "just the facts" while clearly sifting through and ignoring facts (165-166), and that several of the principals involved (most self-evidently the the prosecuting attorney in the case against Bordallo) similarly considered themselves to be "just doing their jobs" while they took an unusually rapid, emphatic course of action in Bordallo's case (e.g., it is not unheard-of in Guam to delay preparing indictments for

women about to give birth, people near death). The prosecuting attorney repeatedly dismisses rumors associated with the Bordallo case as "silly" or "laughable" (97-109). DeBenedittis' response to these self-images is that the participants can only see themselves as neutral, effective public servants, whereas their actions betray a(n inevitable) perspective to perpetuate a structure of power that benefits them. In this setting, where those in power give away so little information (107-109), it is only natural, DeBenedittis argues, that rumors will occur and spread, acting both as a counterpart to "official" theories and justifying a cynicism in the naive faith in the purity of the legal system that its proponents hold. The only weakness in DeBenedittis' analysis occurs in his refusal to trace out effects of rumors; DeBenedittis does not explain exactly how the spreading of rumors undermines structures of power, other than by their simple existence.

Those familiar with the work may be surprised at my inclusion of Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts (1979) in this section, as nowhere in the book do Latour and Woolgar ever explicitly reference gossip or rumor as influence or evidence in their social constructive theory of science production⁴⁹. However, a closer examination of the facts

⁴⁹The main exception, of course, comes not from the authors but from their introducer, Jonas Salk, who disconcertingly regards as high praise of the book that "[it]

that Latour and Woolgar consider when evaluating what constructs scientific facts reveals some extraordinarily gossipy tactics going on in science.

An important caveat is necessary here. Latour and Woolgar explicitly condemn gossipy sociology of science (sociology of science that has more to do with the sociology of scientists than of science itself [24]), that is often little more than "scholarly muckraking" (21)⁵⁰. They profess themselves disinterested in breathless tales of scandal or of the everydayness of scientific invention (as they phrase it, "the exchange of great ideas over coffee" [19]). These remarks of theirs might seem explicitly to disallow any interjection of gossip into scientific analysis as an inappropriately strong reading of the text. In response, I would first remind readers of my attempts to discount stereotypical definitions of gossip as useless for our purposes here, and suggest that Latour and Woolgar's invocations of gossip and scandal here represent only such a stereotypical usage of the words, and not a philosophically interesting consideration of gossip. Further, as the detail of Latour and Woolgar's ethnographic research manifestly demonstrates, casual conversation has a significant role to play in the construction of scientific fact. In that sense,

is free of the kind of gossip, innuendo, and embarrassing stories, and of the psychologizing often seen in other studies or commentaries" (12).

⁵⁰See also page 32 for further irritated commentary.

then, we might fairly consider Latour and Woolgar important, though perhaps unconscious, advocates of the use and significance of gossip in scientific construction.

Consider first how Latour and Woolgar define their own project: their "anthropological" account considers how "many aspects of science described by sociologists depend on the routinely occurring minutiae of scientific activity... the work done by a scientist located firmly at his laboratory bench" (27). Latour and Woolgar wish their project to be in some sense classical social science -- adopting an outsider perspective so that all actions are equally worthy of observation and recording. (I say "in some sense" because Latour and Woolgar also write with great emphasis about the dangers of pretending objectivity, and ultimately describe themselves as trying both to respect the culture of science [its internal demands, language] while writing from the outsider's perspective [39].) Only then, they argue, can a genuinely thick-descriptive account of how science works proceed. Indeed, exactly their criticism of much of social studies of science lies in the very extraordinariness with which social factors are regarded; for example, the ways in which social factors are taken into account only in unusual, controversial, or suspect cases of science. By choosing to examine a very well regarded laboratory, and looking at a team working on a scientific problem that is not under significant public scrutiny,

Latour and Woolgar wish to be able to describe how "everyday" sociality contributes to the production of science (31-32, 37).

And describe they do. After giving an exhaustive depiction of the layout of the laboratory (including more unexpectedly descriptions of individual desks, the refrigerator, and the roof) and the culture of research production, Latour and Woolgar assert a 5-type system for the adoption of scientific fact, from speculative assertions (type 1) to taken-for-granted fact (type 5) (76-79). They then monitor one particular scientific fact (the existence and makeup of hormone TRF[H]) as it travels the five steps, both within articles and in the more informal laboratory culture, and demonstrate the ways in which micro- and macro-social forces contribute and shape the reception of this fact. In the course of examining the research trail, Latour and Woolgar discover that several research teams attempted to isolate TRF(H), using different strategies (114-120). The scientist who ultimately gets the bulk of the credit for isolating the existence and structure of TRF(H), R. Guillemin, pursues a research strategy and arrives at conclusions substantially similar to several other researchers and virtually identical to one other researcher (who is popularly discredited as a researcher early on in the seven-year process) (119-122).

The existence of TRF(H) (its movement from speculative hypothesis to contested scientific fact) gets jump-started when Guillemin proposed new research and methodology constraints for the TRF(H) project (in lay terms, the goal was now to seek an integrated proof of the existence and structure of TRF(H) through teams from a variety of professional trainings and testings [endocrinological, physiological, chemical], rather than the previous hypotheses produced by partial testing), which when acceded to by the professional community served to eliminate alternative strategies and researchers(120-123) ⁵¹. Because Guillemin proposed new, "rigorous" constraints to TRF(H) research, he was simultaneously able to dismiss previous research and theories as to the existence and structure of TRF(H) as "hasty" (and correlatively, of course, establish himself and his laboratory as the leader in the subfield) (121). Among those publications Guillemin dismisses are both of the alternative theories referred to above, that substantially or virtually adumbrate Guillemin's eventual, celebrated theory of the structure of TRF(H). Latour and Woolgar do not conclude from this saga that TRF(H) is not a scientific fact, nor that Guillemin is incorrectly or

⁵¹ Individual researchers were eliminated because of the cost of the equipment or chemicals necessary to run the great variety of tests, and the necessity of researchers gaining additional research experience or hiring additional researchers, a time and money investment not available in a pressured research environment. One researcher who abandoned the TRF(H) project noted that the new constraints limited research pretty strictly to the United States labs.

unethically attributed with credit for working on the structure of TRF(H). Rather, their tracing out of this metamorphosis of reputation and fact serves both to undermine our notion of a preexisting natural, categorized "reality" that is somehow newly seen by scientists (129), and correlatively to disconnect ourselves from the conclusion that scientific chases are somehow inevitably end-directed. Several other researchers articulated the structure of TRF(H); but only one researcher, due in part to his reputation as the definer of the field, holds the credit.

More strikingly, Latour and Woolgar identify the hundreds of informal conversational negotiations of expertise, evaluation, reputation, and alliance that take place in laboratories -- consultations about whether or not to read an article (is the author reputable? how do field experts regard the conclusions?), an evaluation of a potential professional threat (how good a reputation does a competing research team have?), where a drafted article should be sent for publication, ranging to more mundane enquiries, such as where an item of scientific apparatus has been placed (or misplaced) in the lab (157-160). What is critical for our purposes about Latour and Woolgar's analysis here is the way in which they choose not to isolate or overemphasize the uniqueness or extraordinariness of

these conversations, and their emphasis of these conversations' intrinsic diversity. Witness these remarks:

...there is no indication that such exchanges comprise a kind of reasoning process which is markedly different from those characteristics of exchanges in nonscientific settings. **Indeed, for an observer, any presupposed difference between the quality of 'scientific' and 'commonsense' exchanges soon disappears.** [158, emphasis mine]

In short, "scientific" thinking is not some special, ultra-rational occurrence; to put it analogically, there is no mental "gear-shift" that takes place to magically transform a scientist from her "normal" thinking manner to her "professional" one. Scientific conversations as a matter of course contain social negotiations; the important caveat Latour and Woolgar have to offer here is that this in no way undermines or devalues the scientific conclusions they draw (it simply socializes and localizes them). And further on:

The wealth of evaluations makes it impossible to conceive of thought processes or reasoning procedures occurring in isolation from the actual material setting where these conversations took place. [159]

This passage can be rather straightforwardly read as an empirical demonstration of one of Gluckman's central points in his 1963 article: that technical gossip (pointed evaluation of a fellow) can occur invisibly within professional conversation, can be undetectable to the outsider. That series of conversation topics I quickly listed above surely offers the possibility for gossip amongst it -- we "check in" with colleagues about their off-

the-cuff opinions about an article, a colleague, a competitor. Latour and Woolgar offer up evidence of these conversations' informality; remarks include frequent jokes, laughter, and casually extreme comments that publication-minded scientists would be unlikely to utilize in more formal settings, such as commenting that one colleague had "made an ass of himself" at a recent conference (164).

While the topics and information may be serious, the conveying of the information is ironic, humorous, casual, intimate -- all hallmarks of the kind of gossip conversation Miller and Gluckman observe.

Further, Latour and Woolgar note that occasionally scientific statement evaluation will be explicitly personal:

...Instead of assessing a statement itself, participants [occasionally] tended to talk about its author and to account for the statement either in terms of authors' social strategy or their psychological make-up. [163]

Technical gossip, then, can be more and less explicit in the scientific laboratory; Latour and Woolgar give us examples along a range. The sort demonstrated in the TRF(H) saga (Guillemin with one stroke establishing a reputation for himself by disreputing others) is more formal; these casual conversations Latour and Woolgar document far less so. All sorts accomplish similar goals, just more and less documentably. Of course, I would argue that these latter sorts of technical evaluations are so invisible to Latour and Woolgar that they are incapable of labelling them gossip

(the sole failing I find with this book), but they are gossip nonetheless.

It is of course irritating that even those authors most sympathetic to the variety in aim and function in gossip still hold reservations, seemingly about the word itself and its accompanying reputation. But other than that, all the writers in this section allow for an impressive, and useful, amount of critical analysis of gossip and rumor that permit them variety and interest, pleasure and purpose. In other words, as Gluckman, Miller, and DeBenedittis attest (unlike **every** other writer in this chapter) they write like real gossips -- high praise, indeed.

Conclusion

The social accounts of gossip and rumor that form the backbone of this chapter (Bergmann, Haviland, Shibutani, Tannen, Bet Or, Allport and Postman, Knopf) are importantly flawed -- they either ignore or distort many of the important observations in Gluckman's article. Some analyses of gossip trivialize the topic -- while they recognize that gossip and rumor are interesting and worthy of study, they take their value to lie primarily in the fact that they give us a view of how people behave in their "off" time. This "off" time, so it seems from my reading of these social scientists, is demonstrably less important than "on" time⁵². Social scientists like to see how people behave when they're really being themselves (i.e., they're relaxing, they're chatting), but only because it's important to know the whole community, not because there's any relation to or intermingling of on time and off time. In short, it's important for contemporary social scientists to have an account and explanation of gossip in society because it's a credentialling exercise -- it's a demonstration that they know the "real" community. However, the gossipy

⁵²Any skeptics need only read Haviland's preface (ix), for a direct inscription of exactly this assumption as a "worry" about the efficacy of gossip-centric anthropology; a worry that "stems not from a dissatisfaction over what I have learned about how Zinacantecos think and talk - I am glad to have gotten as far as I have - but from the fear that much of this book is irrelevant to the lives of Zinacantecos and the conditions that underlie those lives."

knowledge they have of a community doesn't get related back to the knowledge that really matters of a community (which still lies along traditional ethnographic lines: religious beliefs and practices, work behavior, family constitution, class structure, kinship, civil government, sexual practices, dietary practices, etc.); gossip is still an outsider in social science, and still a trivial (but now weighty) factor in understanding a society⁵³. In other words, for Gluckman gossip is important to understanding how a society works because of what gossip does, and what happens during gossip; but for these other gossipists, gossip is important for formal reasons only.

Why is it important to read (or care about) what these professionals have to say about gossip in society -- why was it a relevant move (other than self-credentialling) to do this long criticism of these folks? I have two answers to this question that I think I pertinent right now.

The first pertains to this work. If I had to, after reading the social scientists, restrict myself to one criticism of all of them (difficult task), I would have to

⁵³Jörg Bergmann, himself one of the preeminent trivializers of gossip while singing its praises, makes precisely this point when he considers his gossip-friendly social scientist colleagues. As he puts it, conversation enters the domain of scientific research "only to be captured there like an illegal border jumper and either put into quarantine or 'sent back' again" (24). Gossip, and more generally conversation, gets oversimplified and hence frozen as a topic of scientific research, or researched so that its inadequacy as a topic of fruitful research can be revealed.

say that all authors have written tautologous books here. What I consider to be tautology here is the omnipotence of all authors' assumptions about who gossips, what gossip is about, and what power gossip can (or cannot) have. Their assumptions very clearly determine the methods they choose, the definitions they use, and ultimately the conclusions they draw. Their assumptions are in general tacit, and have to be teased from the works by what I hope was my close analysis of their various inclusions and exclusions from the text.

Now, before I sound too arrogant, let me assure you that I think most books are pretty tautologous. The reason someone chooses to write at length about a topic is because s/he has something to say to motivate the writing (the '50s science-nerd fantasy that we write simply to explore neutrally a topic is exactly and only a fantasy) -- s/he has some initial ideas, intuitions that spur the work. So in essence I think there are more and less interesting tautologies - there are assumptions people have (and analyses people carry out and conclusions people draw) that are productive to read because they go against the tautologies that are conventional wisdom (assuming there really is conventional wisdom). I find the social science analyses of gossip that are the subject of this chapter uninteresting ultimately because they seek only to reproduce conventional wisdom -- to explain why we should go on

believing that gossip is trivial, often wrong, often nasty, often morally dubious if not outright evil, and never powerful. It is too easy to hold those beliefs about gossip, and it is too uninformative. I think my work (such as it is) on gossip is a more interesting tautology because my initial intuitions about gossip -- that it can be important, right, positive, morally powerful and strictly powerful, and epistemologically relevant -- have the capability to be informative, because they challenge overwhelming conventional wisdom and 'everyday conceptions'.

Less centrally, I think it is important to take seriously how the social scientists consider gossip because it is a microcosm of how the social scientists work, and hence how it is we arrive at our social beliefs (or whether or not we maintain them). What I have tried to suggest throughout this chapter (hopefully not too hamhandedly) is my general reaction to the social scientists' treatment of gossip -- as awkward, ill-fitting, clumsy. The scientific method is not a pristine Platonic ideal to be clumsily attempted to apply to the clay of humanity, it is simply one construct of a technique of arriving at human understanding. There are many others. Much has been written about the impossibility of assuming rationality to be the only means of analysis and understanding; I think it is curious that when taking on a topic as unwieldy, as difficult to analyze, and as fluid and uncategorized as gossip (other than by that

darn conventional wisdom), that the social scientists we examine here choose to apply the truth of their training in the most elementary, compulsively rational, compulsively over-categorizing and subsumptive way possible⁵⁴. I think it is similarly curious that the authors think that they have learned real, rational truths from such divisive and dichotomizing approaches to gossip. Max Gluckman concisely opened some possibilities for a productive, creative analysis of gossip. I think his professional descendants (save Sarah Miller) have failed to do either, and in doing so demonstrate some of the outdated character of social science in applying to truly social, and hence very truly human, phenomena.

⁵⁴I particularly savor the irony of the post-1963 gossip writing (again, including Gluckman's own) being so especially ungainly in its analysis. Before Gluckman "outed" gossip, and made it a "legitimate" topic for scientific analysis, gossipwork could be more carefree, perhaps. Only after gossip became a "real" issue did social scientists have to work more carefully; that is, with much less creativity, and a method much less applicable to the confusion and clamor of social life.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY LITE; WHY GOSSIP IS ALMOST ALWAYS TRIVIAL IN THE HUMANITIES

The previous chapter reveals nothing so much as the wide-reaching homogeneity in social science. Gossip and rumor's impressively long-lived, broadly studied pedigree in the social sciences is essentially a mirage -- social scientist upon social scientist takes it upon him or herself to establish what gossip and rumor **really are**, and again and again these well-credentialed professionals come up with the unsurprising fact that gossip and rumor are nothing so much as what common wisdom says they are.-- malicious, community-destroying distortions (if not outright lies), whose only virtue can claim to be in revealing exactly the petty ground upon which social ranking and ordering happens (my former friend broke this or that social taboo, and so in gossip I will reveal this fact and denigrate him socially).

The review of the social science literature reveals that not only do most of the scientists seem never themselves actually to gossip (hence the moralizing tones their analyses often take), but that (even more surprisingly) their work is riddled with condescension towards those unwitting people who do indulge in gossip. At best, gossipers are shallow (enjoying trivial conversation for its unself-conscious pleasures); at worst, gossipers are J. Edgar Hoovers in miniature, conducting localized witch-

hunts appropriately to root out and punish community deviants, for social stakes far more insignificant than those of seventeenth-century Salem. Indeed, Henry Kissinger's remark when he left the tempest-in-teapot Harvard for the headier political climate of Washington recalls this attitude of the social scientists: "the battles are so fierce," he sneered, "because the stakes are so small" (Isaacson). Social scientists' flattening out of the meaning of gossip and rumor is interesting not only for what it does to those two concepts (reduce them to social indexes), but because for what it correlatively does to the social agents in question. Gossipers become laughable either in their triviality, or in their malevolence. In neither case does gossip or rumor seem a worthwhile topic for study; for what meaningful lessons are we learning from such people, whatever could they teach us?

To use these points as springboards into the discussion of humanists, the first obvious comparison between the fields is their respective methodologies. The lit critters, the philosophers, the theologians, the folklorists and the historians don't seem to have nearly the obsession with rigorous accounts of how they proceeded (no graphs so far) - but this isn't to say that they're sloppy. To illustrate, it's clear from the bibliographies and source discussions in the book-length works discussed here that authors painstakingly reviewed and evaluated the respective

literatures on gossip and rumor; writers analyzing rumor often supply exhaustive primary source reference to document rumor transmission and evolution. Lack of precision in terminology and method does not equal carelessness. As we saw in the first chapter, overwhelming expanse of method does not guarantee originality of insight -- in fact, it can be a clear stultifier of insight.

To reformulate this, the striking thing about the social scientists is their compulsive need to control gossip -- to use their methodology so absolutely that gossip, the ultimate in uncontrollable phenomena, appears restrained and transparent. Of course, the transparency of social scientists' gossip is essentially an emptiness -- they can learn nothing about gossip, they can understand nothing about the way it occurs or why, because they commit themselves to understanding only its orderliness, of which there is none. So their insights are not simply surface, they're illusory. The fun thing about the lit critters (and other "lite" methodologists, like philosophers [!]), is that they're not so compulsive about controlling gossip through their methodology, so some problematic insights and fissures in the smooth surface of textual analysis can appear. These more problematizing analyses of gossip and rumor are discussed in the latter sections of this chapter; specifically, 2.3, "Doppelgänger Gossips," and 2.4, "Archaeologists of Gossip" present analyses of gossip and

rumor that grant epistemic legitimacy to the contents of idle chat. This granting is permissible in large part because the varying humanists consider a multiplicity of perspective a non-controversial component to social reality.

Still, humanists are no less capable of constricting gossip and rumor into socially restricted categories (to use Bergmann's phrase, quarantining it from everyday, kosher discourse). Historians, for example, in utilizing gossip and rumor as analytical tools, resist the obvious application -- suggesting its persistence and importance in modern-day ethical and social issues. Literary theorists, in analyzing gossip as a trope in texts, overwhelmingly restrict gossip from having particular, determinate effects on life -- and in so doing observe a kind of unspoken distinction between gossip-time and real-time, fictional life and real life (these humanists are discussed in the first section of the chapter, "The Trope of Gossip and Rumor"). Philosophers, in analyzing gossip as a subcategory of conversation, cannot resist the temptation to lay down strict rules of when it is and is not appropriate to chat about one's fellows (see 2.2, "Referees of Chatter"). Let me map out the categories of analysis, following the bounds of the preceding chapter¹:

¹As in the first chapter, there are apparently no humanists who can conceive of gossip or rumor being both passive (simply a social index, uncontrollable and unpredictable) and truthful; again the category remains empty. I divide those humanists who regard gossip and rumor as an

	Truth	Falsity
Passive Gossip	see footnote 1	2.1 Trope of and Rumor
Active Gossip	2.4 Archaeologists of	2.2 Referees of Chatter
		2.3 Doppelgänger Gossips

In sum, then, there is substantially more to celebrate, for the catty of mind, about the humanists than there is about the social scientists. The social scientists are more overt and hamhanded in their distinctions between gossip-time and real-time, with concomitant values of idleness and waste versus purpose and seriousness; whereas the lite methodologists almost always acknowledge the possibility of competing interpretations of the purpose and value of gossip as compared to "serious" conversation. We can see this reflected in the structure of this chapter; ultimately, humanists can conceive of more theoretical possibilities for gossip and rumor. In the final analysis, however, most humanists tend to observe the same lines in the sand, and dismiss or trivialize gossip and rumor. If they do not do so more directly (as do this chapter's opening theorists),

active social construct and largely false into two sections because I think it is important to distinguish between those humanists feigning no judgmental tone, and those who write largely to adjudicate disputes of gossip.

they do so indirectly -- by heightening the value of all-too-scarce, rational, purposive discourse.

2.1 The Trope of Gossip and Rumor

Despite the creativity of their approaches, many humanists fall into the same trap of their social science colleagues: reducing gossip and rumor to entirely passive literary devices. For these academics, studying gossip and rumor is relevant only insofar as they demonstrate other fundamental human truths (how intimate are humans; do humans mean what they say; what are communal norms), rather than for what they actually do. In other words, gossip and rumor possess status only for what they represent, not for what they depict, change, challenge, or construct.

Foremost within this category stands Patricia Meyer Spacks' now-authoritative Gossip (1985). Principal among the book's virtues, if we are to take its dustjacket blurbs seriously, is its successful commingling of gossip with story, showing the ways in which our conversational and literary stories similarly tell tales of human foibles and intimacy. Indeed, two commentators (one of them Sissela Bok) commend Spacks for her (apparently surprising) ability to show some kind of substance to the "triviality" of gossip. While this praise at first might sound important (a theorist of gossip who does not hold gossip to stern standards of validity/invalidity, a scholar interested in how gossip functions both in literature and life, a scholar who challenges widely held cultural norms of the serious and trivial), the content of Spacks' work actually leaves much

to be desired. In particular, Spacks' emphasis on gossip as storytelling ultimately not only restricts its import in non-literary spheres, but presents gossip for us as nothing more than a trope, a literary version of the social barometer the social scientists presented last chapter. In short, Spacks' gossip is an entirely passive literary phenomenon, revealing (not creating, challenging, or interpreting) eternal and immutable human truths.

Spacks herself would not agree with this interpretation. She begins her book by announcing her project as "a rescue operation: to restore positive meaning to a word that had once held it" (x). "Rescuing" gossip, it soon becomes clear, means reasserting the complicatedness of gossip that lies behind the narrow public condemnation of it. Indeed, she closes the book by reminding us that gossip isn't an easy topic -- we can't trivialize it, it's not easily judgeable (morally or intellectually), and its impact is often impossible to assess or predict. Gossip has "essential ambiguity," she writes, "mixed and often unconscious motives. Reassuring and connecting, troubling and divisive, relentlessly ambiguous, gossip evades easy ethical distinctions" (258-259). Gossip is interesting, Spacks ultimately observes, because it manifests itself in such divergent fashions, to such wide effects. Its positive effects -- its constructions of personal intimacy, interpretations of community norms or mores -- erupt exactly

through gossip's small-mindedness, its pettiness, its triviality. Indeed, the function of literature in some sense is nothing more than gossip writ large, "reveal[ing] the complexity of a self in its own consciousness and in the consciousness of others, uncover[ing] discrepancies between the two vies, dramatiz[ing] the tension of self and society" (261). We would do best, Spacks concludes by suggesting, not by denouncing the moral danger inherent within gossip, but rather by marking gossip's path and impacts through our circles and communities. For it is only through inevitable gossip that we gain any possibility of a new perspective on ourselves and each other.

While such strong statements in defense of gossip² may spark exhilaration, they contrast sharply with the rest of Spacks' work. Indeed, as Spacks makes clear as she analyzes manifestations of gossip in (primarily English and American) literature, not only does gossip not ultimately resist easy forms of categorization, but in fact her book is nothing quite so much as a series of discrete analytical categorizations that don't seem to leave us much further

²Incidentally, Spacks also remarks in this concluding chapter that such a popular defense of gossip was "inconceivable" twenty years ago (259). While it is certainly clear that the bulk of mainstream "defenses" of gossip (if indeed they are that) as well as academic treatments appeared after Max Gluckman's 1963 article, it is still important to note (as I did in Chapter 1) that defenses of gossip were not unheard of, even before the sixties. Gluckman's article simply brought gossip to the academic mainstream, a far different kind of advance.

along in understanding a conception of gossip. Gossip here is not so much uncategorizable as categorized right out of existence. As a first example, let us look to the issue so important to the theorists of the last chapter -- how gossip is defined. Indeed, as the language in Spacks' final chapter makes clear, she has difficulty coming up with one sense of how gossip appears or makes its effect known; it can have highly divergent motivations, intentions, impacts, communities. Given that, the reasonable reader might wonder, what then connects the different literary conversations Spacks is grouping together under the rubric of "gossip"? Is it gossip simply when an epistolary novelist proclaims it so?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, what makes a conversation gossip for Spacks is the now-standard dictionary definition: "idle talk about persons not present" (26). Of course, all the predeterminations such a definition presents (as discussed in Chapter 1) occur here (gossip is content-driven, can only be about people, comes with a necessary air of secretiveness or the clandestine [58]). In addition, Spacks immediately refines her definition by clarifying "idle" -- "lack of announced purpose: talk in a personnel committee about the behavior of a candidate for promotion presumably does not qualify as gossip -- although it can get mighty close" (ibid). While in her applications of this definition to analysis of literary texts, Spacks ascribes

various effects from gossip, what is clear from the outset is that these consequences are only accidentally connected to or resulting from the gossip itself; inherently, gossip is purposeless³. So purposeless is gossip, indeed, that Spacks makes a particular point (**pace** Gluckman [1968]) of distinguishing between what are merely gossipy (but still purposive) discussions in meetings, and **real** gossip, which has no motivating purpose. Spacks grounds this lack of purposiveness, in part, in gossip's uncontrollability; at one point she likens gossip to rumor, dinner-table chat, aphorism, news, and story -- all in their varying degrees of individual intellectual control (52). Gossip, like these other conversational formations, is interesting in part because its effects and paths are so hard to trace or direct⁴. This initial awareness of complexity is

³The example of the personnel committee meeting recollects Max Gluckman's eager backpedaling in 1968 -- professionals don't really gossip (or there is no such thing as "professional gossip", to wit, gossip that is part of doing a professional's job) because they are too purposive, any talk that has a point can't be gossip. Only the truly fruitless talk can be gossip, which happily lets chatty academics inclined to trade naughty rumors about their colleagues under the guise of "serious" evaluation off the hook. Spacks, apparently, suffers the same prejudice.

⁴Of course, Spacks later on seems to contradict this very point, suggesting that "gossipers generate meanings, which they may choose to keep within their group" (103). While it is certainly not implausible to consider gossip-generated readings of events or persons that **are** strictly confidential, the mildness of "may" suggests that this occurrence is far more individually controllable, as well as far more common, than simple observation indicates. Indeed, the reason why Spacks admires gossip along with rumor, news, conversation etc. is because of their social constructions of events -- as

promising; my contention is simply that Spacks fails to follow through with the implications of this line of thinking.

It is important to note at this point that Spacks' definition of gossip crops up in the midst of a blistering attack on the unfair connotations attributed to the word over the centuries. Spacks lays out a tidy etymology of the word "gossip" from its origins in ancient English as a close relative or friend of the family (25), to its contemporary definition, dating from the 18th century, of gossip as a necessarily morally scurrilous activity (and ultimately, in the 19th century, gossip takes on the status of a noun as well as a verb [26]). Such moral advocacy disguised as lexicography, argues Spacks, misses the positive values to gossip, and hence fails at capturing the concept (ibid). Later in the book, Spacks offers an additional definition of gossip as a "mode of relatedness" (204), and chastises other writers for considering gossip to be "human dirt" or the "ballast" which connects us to the earth. This muck, Spacks energetically responds, is exactly the stuff great novels are made of; gossip is about the topics most interesting to people. The topics and voices of gossip reassert themselves in novels (204-205).

even the most rudimentary understanding of social science informs us, the social world is hardly characterized by its submission to individual intentions.

However, for all this vitality in argument, Spacks herself, in her own attempts to gain control over what gossip means, similarly fails to grasp the variety implicit in gossip. She begins by noting that gossip "spill[s] over, sometimes dangerously, into the real world" (3). While the meaning of "dangerously" here is not immediately clarified (is "dangerous" descriptive or prescriptive?), the real meaning soon becomes clear enough. Spacks' first distinction in the book is between two modes of gossip (most gossip, she argues, lies along a continuum with these two modes at its antipodes). The first is malicious gossip, which "plays with reputations, circulating truths and half-truths and falsehoods about the activities, sometimes about the motives and feelings, of others" (4); the second is "serious" gossip, "which exists only as a function of intimacy...in a context of truth...its purposes bear little on the world beyond the talkers except inasmuch as that world impinges on them" (5). Two points are immediately clear. Gossip's modality is identifiable to Spacks centrally as moral: gossip is either good or bad (adumbrations of Tannen here). While of course the social scientists of the previous chapter would refrain (at least overtly) from using this morally tinged language, the important point for our purposes is not so much that Spacks distinguishes between gossip as good or bad morally but how that difference manifests itself. Bad gossip is active

gossip -- it is the gossip that changes reputations, reports, perceptions about activities or people. Good gossip is the ineffective gossip -- we really only talk about ourselves, take the external world into our own subjective perspective⁵. This may provide comfort for us (Spacks continues on to talk about intimate gossip as being particularly useful for those in a subordinated position, as a venting technique for their frustrating lives), but it certainly has no meaningful effect on anything other than our personal perceptions and stories. We write our own fictions of how we would like the world to be when we gossip in the right way -- and the world continues on its own path, indifferent to our chatter. So for gossip to be useful, it must also be useless. Gossip intrudes "dangerously" on the real world, then, when it threatens to change it, to challenge previously unargued norms or beliefs. The intrusion is dangerous not simply because it is false (malicious, overinterpreting, exaggerating, outright lying - all these connotations are contained within Spacks' brief quote), but because it works. Presumably those in subordinated positions can take no lasting pleasure or relief from challenging overgenerous reputations or

⁵Indeed, when Spacks reviews the social science literature on gossip, while she admires the completeness with which they trace out the causes and paths of gossip (how it happens and over what, how it ranks), she calls them all to task for "avoid[ing] moral judgment" (34).

rankings; their real relief comes only from complaining to sympathetic, and equally disempowered, peers (46).

Most interesting here is the kind of gossip Spacks places in the middle of this continuum of good and evil, inactive and active. The most common kind of gossip Spacks observes is (of course) not purposive, but idle in the most straightforward sense of the word. Citing Kierkegaard and Heidegger, Spacks refers to this kind of (literally) "idle talk" as originating from "lack of thought...unconsidered desire to say something without having to ponder too deeply" (5). But this kind of idle talk, apparently also itself inactive, ends up being much closer to the active end of the spectrum than the other. "Of course, it too damages reputations and hurts feelings, its consequences uncontrollable and incalculable...blunted awareness marks such gossip; involving little real consideration of the issues its discourse touches, it constitutes moral avoidance" (ibid). At least with the first version of malicious gossip we are given the scant comfort of knowing its directness; malicious participants know they are doing damage, and do so with at least some intention. Serious idle talkers here resemble no one so much as hypocrites, seeking out to do damage by their very thoughtlessness, avoiding entirely the injurious implications of the issues they raise. Spacks criticizes Heidegger only for failing to allow for the full range of possibilities within gossip, but

not for the intrinsic limitations within his concept of idle chat. "I would not wish to claim that Heidegger is necessarily wrong about the idleness of 'idle talk,'" she observes (17); indeed, further on she adds an even more ringing endorsement of gossip's irrelevance: "Heidegger and Kierkegaard accurately locate the moral insufficiency of gossip in its frivolous modes" (20).

While Spacks qualifies this restrictive analysis of gossip by observing (rightly) that gossip can easily mutate forms, or that forms may overlap (her example is malicious talk provoking intimate alliance [6]), ultimately, "gossip insists on its own frivolity" (ibid). So while gossip may go from honestly malicious to truly intimate, or vice versa, it can only do so, it seems, through its own irrelevance. Gossip's multitudinous forms are rest on the central tenet of its own status as non sequitur, as harmless play. Spacks' most serious charge against Heidegger and Kierkegaard is that they fail to appreciate the necessarily dialogic character to gossip (21-22); however, as is clear from the preceding, the dialogues Spacks hears have very restricted applications. Indeed, when Spacks at one point iterates gossip's "usual purposes," they are sadly limited: "mak[ing] people feel important, declar[ing] moral and social allegiances, fill[ing] time" (189). Dialogue is important only for the illusions it creates (importance), the (pre-existing) lines it recognizes (alliances), or

merely the fact of its existence (filling time), apparently, and not for what it accomplishes (creates or constructs).

This dismissive attitude towards gossip reproduces itself throughout the book; several times Spacks distinguishes between good gossip, which promotes and explores relationships and connections, and bad gossip, which amounts to nothing more than straightforward maneuverings for power (43, 63). The fact that human relationships themselves form through dynamics of power seems to escape Spacks; good gossip is devoid of power relations, existing only on a Kantian in-itself plane of human interaction -- good gossip, in short, is a egalitarian fantasy. Even when Spacks seems to acknowledge the centrality of power to any conception of gossip -- "gossip, however, constitutes not only a discourse about power but in itself a code of power" (68) -- this observation is only within a negative context. These observations appear while Spacks is in the middle of excoriating People magazine, tabloids in general and talk shows for their petty trafficking in private lives. Presumably, then, the kind of power gossip deals with is only effective power when destructive; good gossip is simply commentary about power, not invocation of it. As the rest of the book makes clear, while gossip is grounded within discourses about power, this is a fact we must be wary of, and not manipulate for our own sordid ends. The best gossip is a genteel commentary on

power relations that helps us illuminate ourselves to ourselves (60); precisely the worst gossip is that which seeks to publicize what really oughtn't be public, debasing the complexity of human relations.

This chiding tone runs throughout Spacks' considerable discussion of People magazines and personality journalism in general. Spacks' decision to analyze gossip magazines in juxtaposition to eighteenth-century gossip letters, while initially intriguing, soon reveals itself as a tactic for distinguishing and dignifying her analysis of gossip at the expense of much of what many people might first think of as gossip. Spacks comments, with ill-disguised distaste, "I would find it in many ways more convenient for my argument simply to ignore People and its shady relatives" (68). One might wonder what a scholar of gossip is doing, to so enthusiastically express at the outset a complete lack of interest in what after all constitutes a rather large portion of what we could reasonably consider to be part of her field of information. Mightn't an analysis produced from such a reduced field of information be similarly reductive in its conclusions, or applications? Still, bravely she presses on, only to reveal that tabloid journalism isn't **real** gossip, given its hopeless lack of sincerity, voice, complexity, depth, or directness (66, 73, 77, 85). At her most outraged, she analogizes People versus the series of letters to "a one-night stand rather than an

extended relationship" (78). The aggressiveness of this language aside, what is curious about this entire analysis is in how exactly it overturns and ignores much of what, as she expresses clearly early on in the book, makes gossip gossip.

In short, we call something gossip quite often because of its indirectness, its subversiveness -- gossip says what we can't quite print or say publicly, or "seriously"; gossip creates an oral space to do what are quite often very serious investigations and explorations with lower stakes than, say, op-ed pages of newspapers, seminar rooms, or meetings with one's boss. But when it comes to People, such indirectness is apparently only something to be scorned: "the People style relies heavily on denial...[it] hints more than it states...the unmentionable is mentioned, the unphotographable photographed, by skillful deflection...the magazine thus avoids responsibility for its suggestions" (67-68). While the indirection may be "skillful", this is damning with faint praise indeed -- skillful indirection simply means for Spacks that People's editors and writers can make whatever (no doubt false or exaggerated) allegations they care to, while protecting themselves from litigation or public outcry. But the real payoff to such indirection is clear; People provides its readers with the false illusion that they really know the celebrities in question, that their lives really are open books. The sad

fact, for Spacks, is that not only are human lives not comprehensible, but that People provides dubious information -- in fact, and appropriateness, and accountability (67).

"It both imitates and debases social functions of oral gossip," she concludes (ibid). For Spacks, gossip only exists along a moral cliff, constantly wavering between productive and destructive; celebrity gossip outright hurtles over the edge.

In particular, this spurning of celebrity gossip sharply contrasts with the quite extensive treatment Spacks gives to literary gossip in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, spinning out the manifest functions and presentations of gossip within their frames. As her chapter titles make clear, Spacks has some productive interpretations to offer about the function of gossip: she thinks it works as a voice for otherwise voiceless communities; it acts to produce knowledge or interpretations that otherwise cannot be said; it serves to reproduce or enforce community standards, albeit with individualistic interpretations; and finally, it serves to bring the remote close to home, to make seemingly hard-to-fathom characters or events familiar, human. The other main agenda item of the book is a debunking of the Enlightenment mythos of the autonomous, self-sufficient, rationally guided self; indeed, part of what makes gossip such an effective trope for Spacks in this book is due in part to its running at such cross-

purposes to the themes of the novels analyzed within its pages. Indeed, Spacks makes clear at several points in the book that there exists a rather peculiar paradox of gossip: overtly, many of the authors treating gossip have their characters using in quite lamentable fashions ("it emanates from this kind of idleness: from understocked minds of limited energy" [176]), where gossip is clearly a social and moral vice (161, 162, 164, 169).

This overt repudiation of gossip, of course, arrives in the fact of gossip being quite obviously a necessary literary technique for these very same authors (*ibid*), and indeed, as Spacks makes explicit, the one available tool for agency for disempowered wives and spinsters (170)⁶.

Spacks' willingness to construct extended analyses of gossip's paradoxical uses and statuses in fiction is damning testimony to her rigid inability to observe similar complexities or paradoxes within celebrity gossip. Now, it is certainly true that simply because gossip in one manifestation is so complicated and paradoxical, that the same is not necessarily true in every manifestation of gossip. However, for a literary theorist as interested in how literature reflects (and constructs) social reality, Spacks apparently has a difficult time conceiving of the

⁶Indeed, novelists' apparent discomfort with appearing to openly praise or rely upon gossip as a trope is reflected by Spacks' singular praise of William Faulkner as one of the few novelists who can write through gossip naturalistically (240).

fact that literary gossip in "classic" novels isn't simply reflecting the paradoxical and contradictory status gossip has in our own lives.

This brings me to one final point about Spacks' analysis of the People. It's clear, from the tone of Spacks' prose in those pages, that she thinks that celebrity magazines simply pander to our most base tastes, and do so disingenuously. However, what is less clear (indeed, what goes unaddressed in Spacks' analysis), is how we as readers take in celebrity gossip magazines. One is tempted to ask, after finishing Spacks' outraged diatribe against the amorality of tabloid journalism: does she think everyone who reads them is really stupid? Spacks suggests that we read celebrity magazines so that we can really get to know celebrities; to bring them to our human level (from their presumably extraterrestrial planes of spectacularity). Of course, she is hardly alone in this analysis: Jack Levin et al.'s analysis of tabloid gossip columns announces one of the main themes of celebrity columns to be that "everyday life is worthwhile and exciting, even for the 'little' people of the world. And the world of celebrities is not so great after all" (Levin [1985] 517). Of course, the flaw in this analysis is that it presumes that the millions of readers of celebrity gossip are simply taking in the gossip uncritically, enthusiastically endorsing it in exactly the same tone in which it is presented. Simply analyzing the

themes by which tabloid journalism appears doesn't guarantee a univocal, unthinking reader response.

More to the point, Spacks is clearly willing to spend lengthy amounts of time discussing the "text" of classic novels (critical of gossip as a moral vice, focusing on locating gossips as immoral, manipulative people) versus their "subtexts" (vitaly relying upon gossip to create the complexity of their storylines and characters, empowering women characters through their ability to freely evaluate other people and behaviors without being constrained by rigid social mores [228])). However, this complexity of reading (which I find often very acute and impressively thorough) somehow stops at the borders of the canon: apparently, some texts are subtext-free; and correlatively, some readers have apparently no ability to distinguish or decide between multiple lines of analysis. I think what's important to note here is not that Spacks, or Levin et al., consider this point and then reject it, or study reader response or critical literature about popular magazines (in part, no doubt, because it doesn't exist when they write); in short, it's not the fact of their disagreement with my perspective that I challenge. The central point I would make here is that it apparently never crosses anyone's mind that readers of celebrity journalism could have brainpower or analytic skills comparable to those holding Ph.D.s in

communication, or English literature; complexity, apparently, is field- (and person-) specific⁷.

No doubt I leave myself open for a reasonable response here: isn't it feasible to imagine some readers (in fact, don't we all know at least one or two people, people who might include ourselves depending upon the topic?) who do uncritically lap up celebrity gossip, gorging their brains on random facts about Time Warner deals or Julia Roberts' and Lyle Lovett's marital troubles, believing exactly what's printed and thrilling to the "just folks" tones of the articles? I certainly have no problem allowing for that possibility: the whole purpose of granting reader agency is to acknowledge its spectrum, which certainly must include enthusiastic true believers of every gossip item. But correlatively, it is certainly the case that there are plenty of scholars of communication and English literature

⁷And of course, sometimes even Ph.D.s fail to detect complexity within texts. Witness Spacks' reading of Henry James' What Maisie Knew, where she suggests that there is really one kind of voice, or subject, to gossip: "Gossip, always personal, never dispassionate, full of emotion and judgment, bears little resemblance to such controlled narrative as this. Although divorce, allegations of moral and financial turpitude, and matters of child custody comprise conventional material for speculation, this story-teller goes out of his way to avoid gossip's atmosphere. Yet the insistent rejection of gossip's voice and feeling only underlines the book's preoccupation with gossip's substance -- not just its subject matter, but the issues of knowledge, interpretation, and morality that focus gossip as a discourse" (216). While Spacks is talking about a whole range of gossip-hermeneutics, it is impossible here to miss the suggestion that there is one typology of how gossip sounds, and what sorts of topics it discusses. Not much in the way of subtext here.

(to say nothing of philosophy) who are equally uncritical within their fields, who simply restrict their reading to the narrow field of their specialty, and hence have pretty pre-programmed, unthinking responses to every article and book they come across. If it agrees with their agenda, they like it; if the perspective is different, they know exactly why they don't like it⁸. But the point is that we do not deny the possibility of thought, creativity, or genuine disagreement within academic fields simply because some practitioners are less thoughtful than others; conversely, it makes us look all the more closely at dissenting perspectives⁹. Given that, we should be willing to grant the same possibility to tabloids and their readers¹⁰.

⁸To get catty for a minute, a recent talk by Michael Klare at Smith College (September 21, 1995) illustrates this point rather tidily: in discussing the evolution of U.S. foreign policy over the last several Presidential administrations and Congresses, Klare [an ardent progressive] made the novel argument that the 104th Congress' foreign policy doyens were distinct from those of previous Congresses, because this latest group was patently insane, whereas others were simply conservative. Klare's presumably non-clinical judgment of insanity seemed to rest entirely on an estimation of Jesse Helms' emphatic disagreement with principles which Klare holds dear.

⁹Denis Donoghue's review of Leo Bersani's Homos and Marjorie Garber's Vice Versa in the New York Times Book Review is just one recent example of exactly that kind of hyper-critical treatment.

¹⁰In particular, it seems to me that this is an argument with at least minimal merit, given that the novels Spacks is so fond of analyzing are themselves recent entries into the literary canon; and more pointedly, that novels themselves were in the not-too-distant past decried as foolish, "womanly" wastes of time that conveyed no information worth unearthing. If we have been flexible enough to learn to appreciate

I have one possible, and rather gossipy, explanation for why it is Spacks is so uncomfortable with the notion of complexity within more "downmarket" gossip. To put it bluntly, there is a variety of evidence within Spacks' own text that suggests a continuing fascination, tinged with discomfort, with much of what she regards as the substance of gossip -- sexuality. Spacks begins her explanation of gossip's power over us by referring, fairly, to its status as power -- to trade gossip about someone or something is to share knowledge that isn't publicly available. Such information, Spacks observes rightly, is voyeuristic in nature; "gossip, even when it avoids the sexual, bears about it a faint flavor of the erotic" (11). Spacks' initial forthrightness about the voyeuristic character of gossip, though, to me soon gives way to overemphasis. For indeed, Spacks wishes to attack many of gossip's decriers for exactly this kind of obsession with the voyeurism of gossip; such obsession, presumably, reveals more about those obsessed than the gossipers who may have mildly voyeuristic practices. Spacks presents and criticizes the seventeenth-century literary tendency to embody talkativeness in phallic metaphors (loose tongues, whorishness [123-125]). These literary works, Spacks

greatness in Austen, the Bröntes, and Eliot, and indeed novels in general rather than simply philosophy and history, why is it so implausible to imagine substance in our more modern versions of lingua franca?

argues, reveal more about writerly anxiety (gossips may possess phallic power through the tongue, but their gossip is impotent; it has no effect [124]), and fear of individual expression against social mores ("the world functions as enemy of sex" [125]), than they do about the actual function of gossip. That being said, of course, the sexualized stigma of gossip of course continues to this day. But analysis aside, Spacks uncritically reproduces the terms of comparison so crudely displayed in the Restoration poem.

The passage is worth quoting at length:

The intimate involvement between gossip and sexuality extends beyond metaphor. To be sure, gossip employs the tongue in both its phallic and its whorish aspects. Particularly as the dreaded, fantasized voice of the world, it possesses the dangerous generativity, the uncontrollable power, the unsettling authority of phallic force. In the trivialized form of sexual tattle, it reveals its whorish side. The degree to which all gossip, both rendered and imagined, in Restoration comedy obsessively concentrates on sex points to another, more ambiguous, connection between gossip and sex: the relation of gossip to fulfillment. At once agent and enemy of desire, gossip allows the individual expression of hidden wishes. People talk about sex because they care about it; they work out for themselves, or remind themselves of, the limits of the permissible by discussing other people's activities; they satisfy themselves vicariously by dwelling on what others have done. Such satisfaction makes room for the other side of gossip: its repressive force, its insistence on social norms at the expense of individual expressiveness. [135-136]

The dualism that Spacks observes here (we are obsessed both with the fact of sex and with the taboo of our obsession) is certainly nothing controversial; what is curious is that she chooses to reproduce the earlier terms in such an explicit

fashion. While we can gossip about many different kinds of topics, the strong image in this paragraph is not so much the careful dissection of the dualism, but the memory that when we gossip we are both phallic and whorish. (Recall Spacks' line quoted earlier, about celebrity magazines being "one-night stands," for additional resonance that that is our role as gossips.)

Indeed, should we have any doubt that by indulging in gossip we are treading dangerously on sordid subjects, Spacks hastens to reassure us that this is the case. She writes that:

Literature, unlike gossip, has didactic pretensions; the novelist may aspire (or claim to aspire) to make mankind wiser and better by exemplary fictions...Minimal introspection would probably reveal to most readers their own incompatible wishes for fictional satisfaction. We yearn for fairy-tale fantasies (sufficiently plausible to encourage suspension of disbelief) about flawless beauties and dashing adventurers whose lives work out precisely as we would wish; and we respond to the opportunity for dwelling on life's seamy side, imaginatively fulfilling forbidden desires. Gossip, of course, satisfies the latter needs. [191]

Despite the fact that Spacks has spent much of this book documenting and arguing for the closeness (if not identity) between literature and gossip (each serves to illuminate each other and ourselves to ourselves, each serves to make half-fictions and truths out of our lives), there ultimately are neat lines to be drawn between gossip and fiction -- fiction really can teach us something (even though they may only be "pretensions," fiction still has the potential to

claim overt usefulness), whereas gossip is, after all is said and done, still in the muck of human relations. Later, when Spacks discusses Thackeray's Vanity Fair, she reminds us that it succeeds as a novel in part because it successfully displaces onto the fictional Becky Sharpe our own inappropriate interests in our neighbors' bedroom activities (205-206).

Spacks grounds this point by reminding us that the higher truths are **not** in fact learned through gossip: she avers that in Middlemarch, Celia and Dorothea are both right even in their staunch disagreement about the utility of gossip (Celia sees it pragmatically, as a resource for information; Dorothea sees it morally, as a vice).

"Dorothea," she writes, "is of course 'right' at a higher level. Dorothea's rejection of gossip stems from her admirable determination to find her own way to the good" (197-198). While Spacks continues on to endorse Celia's pragmatism, pragmatic interests in human relations are not accorded status as "admirable"; this is reserved only for individuals who rise above community mutterings.

This brings me to the bulk of my criticism against this book's argument. Throughout the book, Spacks makes much of her interest in constructing a social knowledge that stands against, reinforces, challenges, or empowers individual knowledge and development; she sees gossip as one of the tools by which we can appreciate the individual and social

worlds colliding and collaborating (8). Spacks concentrates on this point because it holds importance for the book -- it demonstrates some of the ways in which gossip confuses the naturalized boundaries between private and public.

Gossipers assume (create, invent) both insider and outsider positions simultaneously, she writes, they "encourage a certain confusion in [their] participants" (212, 214).

While this reasoning is productive, in that it suggests some of the chaos inherent within social production of meaning (e.g. that there is no one clear entity that is the "social", to say nothing of the "individual"); ultimately, Spacks undermines this whole argument by suggesting that the knowledge and role-playing created by gossip is meaningless. Either gossip functions simply to corrode and delegitimize notions of the social without offering new possibilities (225, 226), or it simply universalizes community rankings and conceptions, erasing any possibility for a more chaotic theory (179).

In part, it seems to me that this tactic is doomed to failure because the sides (individual v. social) are actually assumed to be more totalizing than they really are in this work. When Spacks analogizes gossip to Freud's treatment of jokes, she accepts whole-hog his casting of jokes as individual aggression against either other individuals or social norms (50-51). Of course, while Spacks' own analysis allows room for gossip in which the

roles are switched (gossip is the voice of the community attacking particular individuals), the fact is that gossip in this book is almost always of an adversarial nature, and generally individual(s) pitted against social norms, with the white and black hats alternating. This stasis in casting doesn't allow for a broad range of scenarios.

Because of this limitation in casting, (and purpose, and flavor) of gossip, the ultimate theory of gossip epistemology that Spacks produces falls somewhat short. As I said earlier, Spacks sees gossip (like literature) as producing stories of our lives, created knowledge that can have a knowledge-like status. But, similar to the Spin Doctors in the previous chapter, this theory amounts to little more than quarantining off literary gossip as a quasi-knowledge that will still fail to be taken seriously, because it has "different", "special" standards of defense, in contrast to "real" (i.e. scientific, objective, really tested) knowledge. Spacks illustrates the dubious nature of gossip-knowledge right from the start: "all gossip also circulates information (duly mixed, of course, with misinformation)" (8). This lamentable beginning ("misinformation", after all, could hardly be a less damning qualifier -- there might be some truth to gossip, but it's sure disguised by plenty of falsehood), is modestly compromised by an account of what "storied" gossip-knowledge is; in essence, being able to construct broadly

interpretative accounts of events from scant evidence (10, 181-182, 230). Gossip draws meaning from "surfaces" (53). Of course, when we are given no reason to doubt the veracity of scientific evidence, and rationally arrived-at conclusions, these appeals to creating large stories from big assumptions and thin evidence holds little sway; in particular, Spacks reminds us that these are community stories (256). After the corrosive, invasive, transactional, exploitative, and manipulative powers of gossip have been amply demonstrated for us, an appeal that we should be willing to let go of the only tool almost unceasingly admired for its accuracy in all circumstances (the almighty logos), in lieu of information that's not really going to be very empirically true anyway, has only the feeblest of persuasive power.

For lest we forget, gossip isn't very accurate. Spacks hastens to remind us through literary examples that gossip is right in a broad, metaphorical sense, but tends to fall apart on the details. Writing again on Middlemarch, she observes that:

The gossip about Ladislav and Dorothea is always 'wrong': the community cannot at all comprehend either of these unusual beings. But the money-focused gossip about Fred and Lydgate and Casaubon and Farebrother and Brooke and Bulstrode often touches oddly on truth. I mean by that much the same thing I meant when I pointed out that the stories about Lily Barth, in The House of Mirth, although literally false, accurately chart her moral deterioration. Fred and Lydgate are in trouble when the community thinks they are, though their deepest trouble is not financial...Money, the

communal object of desire, provides an appropriate metaphor for other kinds of imaginative focus.
[200]

Gossip can have accuracy only in the crudest sense; "something's got to be wrong," we mutter to each other, noticing unusual behavior. But since our analytical skills are so unsharpened by the titter of parlor-chat, we can only jump to our typical, lumpenproletariat conclusions (presumably, only social standards of decorum prevent the chattering of Middlemarch from seizing upon that other great obsession, sex). Spacks quickly follows this passage with a reminder of exactly how crude gossip's analytical tools are: "Middlemarch gossips do not realize the questions implicit in their judgments; once they decide, for example, that Lydgate has sold himself, they do not inquire about motives or about other possible interpretations for his actions" (201). Gossip is no more a tool for understanding here than it is a tool for snap judgments, quick conclusions; the "stories" gossip tells have little in the way of depth or meat. It seems without accident that Spacks chooses the metaphor of surface to express the character of gossip.

This is why I find Spacks' book to be far from a rescuing of the concept of gossip. Rather, it seems to me that under the guise of recovering gossip for guilty-free usage and analysis, what we have here is ultimately a gloomy indictment of both the omnipresence and the negative, distorting power of gossip. When we gossip, we ultimately

fail at understanding others or ourselves; Spacks reminds us of this fact at several points (90, 96, 206). But sadly, gossip is an inescapable fact; Spacks reminds us that we live in a world constructed by language more than by action (125). Of course, given the character and the power of the language Spacks observes, it is no small wonder that she uncritically quotes William De Britaine's 1680 observation that "if ... we live upon the credit and reports of others, we live always in danger" (127-128). While the social unpredictability and uncontrollability of knowledge should hardly be news, even in 1985, it is startling nonetheless that lack of clarity amounts to "danger," instead of (more blandly if also more fairly), simply the way of the world. More to the point, the real damage I see by Spacks' book is a happy reduction of gossip's sphere to an ever-tightening realm. Gossip is overwhelmingly personal: we gossip about other people, in individualistic fashions for idiosyncratic reasons (to get power, to manipulate, to get close, to adapt/endorse/challenge social rules), and for damningly individualistic effects. Nothing gossip does or represents has effect beyond the klatsch. Gossip still remains the bluntest of instruments, of interest clearly only to those in such reduced circumstances that they don't need more challenging (and reliable) techniques (logic, the scientific method). Ultimately, gossip remains opposed and

separate from domains of "rationality". This kind of Gossip nobody needs to read, or hear.

Spacks has a horde of companions in making this claim; indeed, the vast majority of commentators on gossip and rumor as tropes in English literature make much of an emphasis on how gossip misses the **real** truth of the situation, in lieu of gross exaggeration of simplified stories and invoking of tired stereotypes. Alexander's (1990) analysis of Charles Dickens' use of then-hot gossip to create some of the characters in his Bleak House bears out this observation. After briefly recounting the incident that inspires Dickens (a failed romance between John Forster and Letitia Elizabeth Landon, about whom many scandalous stories were told; Landon ended the romance because Forster believed the stories), Alexander argues that it's up to Dickens to ascertain the real truth in this situation: that Landon in question ended the romance not because of her (stated) horror at her paramour's inconstancy in believing rumors, but because she in fact had a "compulsion to punish herself and others" (90-91). This, according to Alexander, is the "deeper truth" (ibid), only accessible through the fiction of Bleak House. What's curious about this interpretation is not so much Alexander's interest in how Dickens chooses to reinscribe the details of his contemporaries' lives (for surely that is a rather mundane feature of being a novelist), but her emphasis on how much

more accurate, **more truthful**, the fictional accounting becomes than its gossip counterpart. All the gossip produces is inaccuracy (for supposedly Landon in actuality did not have the affairs implied in the rumors), and a trivializing of human psychological truths (Alexander refers sniffily to the "strained sense of horror" Landon expresses in a letter to a friend explaining her breaking off the affair, averring that Landon cannot possibly be sincere here [ibid])). This asymmetry of interpretation (fiction produces the meaningful truth; gossip produces only sordid manipulation of event and self-aggrandizing) seems rather more strained than the original horror Alexander observes. It's as if truth is a zero-sum game; and that the truth Dickens creates in his fiction can only come at the expense of the truth Landon observes about herself and her friends in letters and community conversation.

The terrain Spacks travels in Gossip -- gossip as a trope in the work of writers like Austen, Eliot, James, the Brontes, Chaucer -- has since been covered and re-covered by many commentators, most of whom admire, along with Spacks, gossip's theatricality, and the freedom by which gossip can reproduce previously unsayable community mores. Indeed, two commentators argue, writing about Austen's Emma, that "gossip travels fast because in a sense it is always already known; it is not news at all but part of a social agenda already recognized by the community and already

unconsciously internalized" (Finch and Bowen [1990] 1). But the speed and omnipresence of gossip, tacitly accepted by so many writers, have little to do with its ability to interpret accurately events or persons. Indeed, Jan Gordon (1984) writes about gossip in Anne Brönte's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall that "the first 10 chapters of the novel are really nothing more than the attempt of gossip to come to terms with meaning" (722). This attempt, Gordon clarifies, must necessarily fail, "not because of the inscrutability of their object, but because of the nature of the discourse" (ibid). The nature of gossip is "speculative," Gordon writes, and its objects are necessarily impossible to understand (e.g. gossip aims at people's private lives), and so therefore gossip must always be tragic in nature -- engaged in futile tasks.

Given that dismal report on gossip's ability to ferret out and interpret information, it's only natural that we might wonder why then people engage in gossip, to say nothing of why it is such a favored tactic among novelists, **so that** characters' innermost thoughts and beliefs may be revealed. Gordon has a ready answer for this question; she points out that gossip spreads compulsively (virally¹¹),

¹¹My use of this metaphor is neither accidental nor the result of compulsion on my part. Indeed, just as "poison" was by far the favorite negative metaphor by which social scientists characterized gossip, as shown in the last chapter, its counterpart of "disease" seems equally popular with the humanists. Gordon, for her part, uses the metaphor in a later article (1988) on Jane Austen, writing that "gossip, like

exactly because the power it holds over a person is that s/he is becoming "a character, an 'other', in someone else's fiction" (723). In short, to be gossiped about is to be lied about, to be created in a non-realistic fashion at the behest of someone else, for omnipotent purposes (for Gordon clearly does not doubt the absolute control of the author). Gordon underscores this point by averring that "gossip always attempts to be what it is not by incorporating the patterns of relatedness appropriate to the novel; i.e., it creates plots where none exist" (724). So, contra Spacks, gossipers **wish** they could be as creative (and truthful) as novelists), but they fail at even that -- their only specialty becomes outright lying, with the consolation that their lies have absolute power in communities.

The lies of gossip are traced back to its roots in collectivity. Without individual sources, or individual accountability, Gordon argues, gossip is "financially, theologically, and narratively unredeemable" (725). This outlaw status of gossip runs anathema to Gordon's literary instincts -- it means that gossip always works counter to novelistic interests of closure, plot development, climax and denouement. She contrasts gossip to other epistolary novel techniques (the diary, the letter), suggesting that if only we could write completed diaries in the Brönte novel,

illness, is a system of informational storage which appears as random and undirected -- a kind of oral plague without an identifiable source" (20). See footnote 8, chapter 1.

the story could attain its previously-unachieved closure (and transparency [728-729]). This kind of transparency can, by simple fact of its character, never be accessible through chatter, anonymous, false gossip. What Gordon does not do here is to pause to consider the priority of transparency and closure on novels. Indeed, Gordon pronounces Brönte's aim in Tenant finally to be aggressive; an argument that writing must be spiritual, must rise above simple trafficking in human relations (i.e. gossip [734]). Otherwise, Gordon closes, we will find ourselves increasingly in a Tower of Babel, where discourse proliferates, and truth disappears (738-739). Aside from the stringently moralistic tenor of this conclusion, note the over content of Gordon's assertion. We only access truth, it seems, through formal investigation and conversation -- informality and anonymity only bring out transactional, mercurial, and exploitative impulses in us which we can't help but spread to others. The possibility that gossip and rumor somehow help us to formulate and consider possibilities that could be worthwhile, if unpleasant to many ears, simply passes beneath Gordon's radar.

For some literary theorists, gossip is less a trope about knowledge (and its lack) than about intimacy (and its lack). Parroting the language of the social scientists, L.J. Morrissey (1988) presents an interpretation of Robert

Frost's "Mending Wall" that straddles the by-now predictable paradox of gossip:

Despite the apparent message of 'brotherhood,' the poem's achievement is clear. Frost has structured a poem in which the message of brotherhood is enacted from the rhetorical stance of gossip, which excludes, isolates, and distorts. He has constructed a rheotircal 'wall' under the cover of pleading against walls. [63]

Morrissey sees Frost's strategy as inviting the reader to gossip with him about a third person (the neighbor who rebuilds a fence between properties with Frost, repeating only that "good fences make good neighbors"). This gossip, Morrissey argues, encourages us to exclude, isolate and distort the character of the neighbor, so that we can feel superior, and then uncomfortable, about our (similar) disinclination towards the connection a removed fence represents. The poem, which is a meditation on the non-necessity of fences, contains little analysis of the neighbor's disinclination to let the fence fall, observing only that the neighbor "will not go behind his father's saying,/And he likes having thought of it so well" [Ellmann 396]. Because the neighbor is such a non-presence here, Morrissey argues, we are encouraged to see him through the lens of gossip -- as a laughable caricature.

It is not simply the fact that Morrissey is here presenting a very strong reading of the text that disturbs me, but the nature of his strong reading. Clearly, Morrissey is uncritically reproducing a judgmental

definition of gossip (it is distorting, it is isolating -- it is malicious)¹²; and more to the point, this judgmental definition to me seems to obscure the much more obvious symbolism of the poem.

To explain: I have no quarrel with the structural observation that Frost is inviting us to reflect with him about his neighbor. Of course, what's clear first is that it's not the second-order commentary **itself** that marks this poem as gossipy, but the particular, moral overtones of that commentary as distorting, excluding, and isolating -- to gossip is somehow to miss what could be for our own preferable, if ruder, stories of what we think we see. What I find curious in this reading is the supposition that Frost is being narrowly dismissive and distortive, and inviting us to reflect upon our own readiness to join him in nasty evaluation. It strikes me as much more straightforward that Frost is simply reflecting on the nature of division in humans, and that fences between properties are only a pleasantly visual way to characterize the non-navigable impasses that divide humans from another.

¹²On this point, note again the title of Morrissey's article; Frost and the "**Structure** of Gossip." Like Bergmann in the last chapter, Morrissey takes an apparently "mild, objective" term to take on whatever stronger evaluative terms he wishes it -- for where in the dictionary is gossip defined as "isolating, excluding, distorting"? Instead of "structuring" gossip as its means of proceeding (e.g., those selfsame dictionary definitions of "idle talk about those absent" all our other theorists enjoy so much), Morrissey uses the supposedly neutral language of structure to pack in snobbish invective about the social unutility of gossip.

Notice the way in which Frost is clear to articulate the difference between his neighbor's properties and his own: "He is all pine and I am apple orchard./My apple trees will never get across/And eat the cones under his pines..." (Ellmann 395). In this poem Frost is provoked by the obscurity of his neighbor (who he only seems to see at mending time, the poem insinuates); this provocation is doomed to failure: "He moves in darkness as it seems to me" (Ellmann 396). It seems to me that rather in lieu of being an invigorating poem about brotherhood (or an ironic commentary about how non-brotherly some people, i.e. all of us, are), Frost is making a much more universal point here; that not only are other people not knowable to us, but that we even keep ourselves from making the attempts to transgress self-imposed boundaries. For in the poem, despite Frost's evocation of wanting to ask why walls are necessary, what we wall in or out by erecting them, at the end Frost refrains from any of his "mischievous" impulses towards his neighbor; presumably continuing quietly on to reestablish the boundary, as his neighbor repeats "good fences make good neighbors." This is hardly the incriminating, vindictive tongue-lashing Morrissey would have us see it as. Indeed, it seems that if there is a judgment to be had in the poem, it would be Frost judging himself for his New England reticence, and not his neighbor, who after all, is simply "dark", or unknown (and presumable

unjudgable) to us. Given these observations, I find it curious indeed that Morrissey insists on the particular agency to gossip: for by Morrissey's reading, it is the **structure** of gossip that somehow compels us to contort Frost's neighbor to fit our own (sordid, petty) presuppositions. Gossip is the real (only malevolent) agent here, we simply move along, propelled by its destructive force.

What we are left with, when we digest these literary theorists, is the overwhelming aftertaste of dour morality - to gossip is to engage in idle (if not vindictive) judgment. While the judgments may in themselves reveal truths about humanity (principally our venality, our need for social reinforcement of moral codes, and our distractability), the content of the judgments do nothing to dignify the human endeavor.

2.2. Referees of Chatter

While many humanists simply see gossip and rumor as passive, static literary entities, to be observed and remarked upon but little else, some of their cohorts take a more activist approach to tackling analyses of gossip and rumor. These referees see their projects as variously amounting to writing rulebooks for gossip and rumor -- understanding why we do and don't gossip and spread rumors, and when (if ever) we should spread them or abide by them.

While the referees are primarily philosophers, working within the domain of ethics, other humanists tackle these "what-if" situational questions; additionally, the vast literature on hearsay in jurisprudence pretty much amounts to a consideration of when it is legally acceptable to spread nasty chitchat about someone in a court of law as evidence. Unsurprisingly, the etiquette tenor that permeates this body of literature suggests the strategic flaw here -- that gossip and rumor are problems to be solved. I think it's fair to say that there are two assumptions grounding the various prescriptions authors in this section produce. First, gossip and rumor must be controlled because they are inevitable human impulses; second, they should be contained because they are at a minimum dangerous (epistemically), and probably at least partially false. With the proper understanding (theorize the referees), we will only gossip or spread rumors in morally acceptable ways.

The philosophers provide the most fecund material for analysis within this group. Sissela Bok's Secrets (1983) has stood as a popular standard of a rigorous philosophic analysis of gossip. Bok sees her book as an exploration of the concrete issues in ethics -- in other words, a more systematic guide for when and how to follow what kinds of moral rules. She's a Russian in her approach to ethics -- she thinks that we have basic moral imperatives that we

should and do follow, but that we should and do adapt them to certain kinds of situational restraints on different occasions. Thus, her book is less an exploration of why we gossip and what gossip and rumor are, then under what circumstances we gossip and when and why those circumstances are appropriate or not. While there are some brief definitional comments about what gossip is and the motivations for it (91-93), the definitions don't deviate enough from the standard analyses of gossip to deserve much comment. What is rather more interesting is her account of how and when we should gossip, or more accurately, when we shouldn't. While Bok's book at first glance appears to be interesting, in that it proposes a situational approach to moral conundra (i.e., that the moral rules we take to be second-nature are not all that second-nature, nor should they be all that ruling), the actual playing out of her Rossian theory is rather rigid -- the brief chapter on gossip is entirely focused on when we shouldn't gossip, and the reasons why. Therefore, the effect of her chapter simply seems to be an endorsement of the existence and the appropriateness of those second-nature rules, rather than an exploration of the possibility that rules ought to be applied to situations lightly, or not at all. In short, Bok's situational analysis is none too situational in nature. In this respect, Bok is even less adventurous than other rules-oriented theorists like Haviland.

After explaining what gossip is, Bok divides her book into two sections, "Reprehensible Gossip" and "Trivializing Gossip", itself a revealing dichotomy (this after some admiring early comments that gossip is unfairly treated as always negative [90]). Bok's justification for such a move, of course, is that it is of particular moral import to discern precisely when gossip should be avoided (since if you're constructing a moral scale from most important to least important, it is by her [and Ross'] standards more important not to do the harmful thing than it is to do the beneficial thing, or merely to do the benign thing); but the absence of any even modestly sustained discussion of when it might be legitimate to gossip leaves the obvious taint that gossip can never be beneficial enough to merit any real discussion (especially by a credentialled philosopher!). Bok puts significant effort into coming up with stern reasons why gossip can be reprehensible (if it is false, if it is unduly invasive, or if it breaches confidence). Bok's implicit conviction that gossip is generally harmful is most clear when she cites what would seem to be a pretty benign case of gossip (making up salacious stories about other people to entertain a dying relative [96]), and admonishes sharply against its practice, as debasing because it involves lying and reflects a paucity of communication between those supposedly close.

These harsh words are simply startling in their excessiveness, and Bok's reliance and assumptions of common values (of course it's second nature never to want to say something untrue) seems simplistic. Most noticeable about this passage, however, is Bok's overdirect and reductive conceptions of what human relations can be. It's clear from this that Bok thinks that human intimacy is only reflected through sincere, thoughtful, direct communication; that if someone is telling deliberately untrue stories that of course this behavior is necessarily deceptive, and malicious (ignoring the possibility that someone could be perfectly aware that they are hearing fictional stories and enjoying it all the same [or rather, while Bok raises that possibility {96}, she dismisses it instantly as incapable of holding anyone's sustained interest¹³]). Essentially, Bok is dictating only one course of human action and motivation -- we must try to be transparent at all times, we must want to be transparent to others at all time, and any evidence of opacity, intentional or not, must be personally disturbing at the least, if not actually harmful. This is a psychologically simplistic approach.

¹³Compare this to Spacks' discussion of People magazine and its sibling tabloids; both share the attitude that we only read and hear gossip in the most direct, uninterpretive, inactive fashion possible. Somehow, it seems, critical faculties that theorists are willing to grant people in a variety of situations simply fall by the wayside when we are confronted with gossip. It is nothing short of amazing that something decried as so clearly trivial and meanspirited is somehow so all-powerful as simply to take minds hostage.

Other than that, her section on reprehensible gossip is unremarkable; however, the section on trivializing gossip is illuminating indeed¹⁴. After exploring carefully the myriad of reasons and situations that discourage gossip, Bok then continues on to argue against the very notion of gossiping at all, swiftly characterizing gossip by its very nature as shallow, demeaning to both its participants and their subjects, distorting, misleading, stereotyping, and levelling (as she revealingly phrases it, "even the exceptionally gifted, the dissident, and the artist are brought down to the lowest common denominator" [100])). Bok's elitist bias is impossible to miss here -- the language of "lowest common denominator", when compared to artists (creators), dissidents (individualists) and the gifted (intelligentsia) is striking in its snobbery -- gossip reduces us all to unthinking robots, united by base urges. More to the point, precisely what is demeaning,

¹⁴And of course, we shouldn't ignore the fact that this very pedestrian approach to gossip is in the midst of an often enlightening book -- a book that frequently seeks to discount our justifications for keeping secrets. Bok mixes personal secrets with professional, governmental, and military secrets in her analysis, and the general take on secrets that she proposes is that at the very least, the reasons behind keeping something secret need to be accessible. Given that a thinker who seems on some levels to be very interested in discounted commonly held perceptions about right and wrong and desert in the case of gossip can only rigidly underscore commonly held perception, I am depressed by the fact that Bok apparently has no problems with moral rigidity, as long as it is confined to "trivial" topics like gossip. Her subterranean message in this work seems to be that perhaps moral rigidity is ultimately preferable, but so unpracticable in real life that it is best maintained when it is "easiest".

erasing, and levelling about gossip is the fact that it recognizes commonalities between humans, and links humans we would otherwise **naturally** think of as different (i.e., the rich and the poor, the powerful and the disenfranchised, the intelligent and the unintelligent). Clearly, for Bok this cannot be a good thing. On a more basic level, Bok noncritically quotes Heidegger's remark that gossip cannot be positive because it is "something which anyone can rake up" (90). The implication here -- that true knowledge or understanding by its nature can be accessible only to the few elite -- is regrettably selective.

The section is brief but devastating -- it suggests that not only is gossip a poor ethical risk to begin with (because it is a veritable minefield of moral errors), but that even if you can manage to gossip without doing actual damage to the person about whom you gossip, you almost certainly debase yourself and your cohorts. While Bok closes the chapter with a quick paragraph acknowledging the elitism of such a view of gossip, and suggesting that this view can't be right (that it's just as stereotyping as the kind of gossip it is condemning), the paragraph is so brief and non-specific that it carries no weight, and seems only the most formal of a qualifier. In sum, then, Bok's attitude towards gossip seems even stricter than simply "when in doubt, silence," her ultimate moral prescription for gossip-situations. Her essential attitude seems to be

that gossip is inherently a deleterious practice, and an unavoidable one. Her task, in this pragmatic book on how to conduct yourself, seems to be to minimize the moral damage that must take place in this less than absolute world. The take on Ross that seems to dictate this approach is simple: it's too bad we can't live in a world dictated perfectly by absolute rules, because then everything would be consistent and good. But, given that we won't all always follow rules, because situations and people are so messy as not to be able to be completely circumscribable by rules, the least we can do is to come up with second-order rules that make the first-order rules more followable, particularly when the stakes are as low as they are in gossip.

Bok has a compatriot in the field of popular theology; Joseph Telushkin's Words that Hurt, Words That Heal (1996) contains arguments against gossip so strikingly similar to Bok's that I will not detail them here; rather, I will contain myself to a few observations about the significant differences between his book and Bok's chapter. What is most striking about this book is Telushkin's resistance to argument and analysis about gossip as a social manifestation; whereas most commentators on gossip seek to provide at least some initial analysis of what gossip is and how it functions, Telushkin apparently regards such work as entirely beside the point, assuming that everyone regards gossip similarly, as idle, sensational talk about others who

are absent (16). This assumption is underscored by Telushkin's apparent obsession with gossip as a negative and destructive phenomenon of speech -- fully three out of ten of his chapters on hurtful language are focused on gossip and rumor; no other form of hurtful speech gets more than one.

The one-sidedness of this approach makes clear the way in which Telushkin simply makes more explicit what is implicit about Bok's theory: that gossip is an exceptional kind of (normal, civil, rational) speech. Telushkin's call for a return to "civil" language of the past¹⁵ (64) contrasts sharply with his descriptions of gossip: as like "a loaded gun" (5), "malicious", "sadistic" (43), and ultimately, words that "incite" rather than "inform" (9). Gossip's uniqueness, its identifiability, its difference from regular, rational, civil speech is what renders it both so powerful and so harmful.

Telushkin is an ardent advocate of speech control; he frames the book with an analogy of hurtful language to alcohol addiction, and suggests that words can be as damaging as murder (xxvii-xxviii, xx). To minimize the harm of words, he advises unrepentant gossips to follow the teachings of Alcoholics Anonymous, and control our speech

¹⁵A call which in itself should sound alarms in anyone even casually acquainted with literary or world history; for surely, documents of past civil interactions reveal nothing so much as a constant liveliness of discourse, some of which is exceedingly uncivil, as well as friendly.

"one day at a time" (169-170). It's not simply the fact that Telushkin draws much of his evidence and principles from Talmudic writings that make his book sound like little else than a collection of sermons; it is also the excessive, dire tone he adopts throughout the book. Telushkin's attitude that gossiping is a serious vice that it is difficult to resist withdraws gossip from the plane of rational, civil discourse, and renders any defense of gossip nothing less than self-serving hypocrisy.

And indeed, Telushkin is explicit about his belief that gossip can be nothing more than self-serving hypocrisy (showing that while his arguments about gossip are similar to Bok's, the effect of his book is to carry her conclusions to more extreme ends). While he acknowledges the existence of innocuous gossip, he still admonishes strictly against its practice, noting that it cannot remain innocuous for long with inevitably descending into malice (18). Further, he thinks that we gossip only to protect and enhance our (clearly pathetic, or why else would we need to gossip) social reputations; we gossip only about our social equals or betters, for it is only through bringing them down that we elevate ourselves. There is no prestige in discussing the "cleaning woman's or gardener's life" (36). This elitism, of course, echoes Bok's; it is inconceivable to Telushkin that we might see those in lower social stations to us as interestingly human enough to merit gossip. In

sum, then, Telushkin has such a restricted notion of gossip -- what it is and what it does -- that while his sermons are clear and compelling, they are hardly educational; they do nothing other than reinforce the most shallow and stereotypical notions of gossip.

Even such sympathetic readers of chatter as John Sabini and Maury Silver, working in their refreshingly concrete and conversationally written Moralities of Everyday Life (1982), can only come up with a defense of gossip as a useful moral tool in the most secondary sense. For Sabini and Silver, gossip is "a training ground for both self-clarification and public moral action" (106). What they mean by "training ground" is clear -- a low-stakes setting where opinions can be clarified and potentially dicey scenarios can be explored without offending or upsetting anyone. The reason gossip can be free of emotional trauma is because it is clandestine -- it involves trading secrets (96). More directly, Sabini and Silver follow the standard definition of gossip; that it is idle, evaluative talk about someone behind their back (98, 92)¹⁶.

¹⁶Sabini and Silver qualify their definition to allow that our gossip may be institutional: "gossip, of course, can be about honorary people -- universities, corporations, or governments -- as long as they are treated as animated by motives and subject to moral constraint. Clearly these cases are parasitic to our talk about people" (90). In short, the centrality of Sabini and Silver's definition lies in the evaluativeness of gossip -- what makes gossip so is its (presumably uniquely) opinionated character, more than its subject.

Sabini and Silver's argument, however, is not without its sophistication: they make much of the fact that gossip's idleness is apparent only, disguising real purposiveness (92, 94). Indeed, far from being idle, they continue, gossip in part is recognizable as such because of its very relevance to issues and personalities of interest to us. Sabini and Silver add a corollary to this observation: even old news or non-relevant personalities can become subjects of gossip if the facts traded about them are appropriately (e.g. relevantly) emphasized or interpreted anew (91, 92, 95, 97).

But again, the impression that lasts long after the prose of purposiveness has lost its novelty is one of gossip as dealing only with the tiniest of life details: gossip deals with less important human behavior (4); gossip is ethics applied practically to the "mundane" (100); gossip is an important outlet for "trivial irritations" (104). When we gossip, we dramatize, evaluate, apply and adapt abstract moral rules, Sabini and Silver write (102). All of those adjectives share among them a kind of passivity -- we react to preestablished moral rules when we illustrate or apply, even when we evaluate or adapt. Not only do Sabini and Silver not write about us resisting moral rules (e.g. criticizing, debunking, rejecting), notions that carry with them the sense of more activity and engagement; but more directly, nowhere in this chapter is there a sense that with

gossip we genuinely create knowledge -- e.g., articulate new moral rules, use our "outlets" to arrive at genuinely novel interpretations or explanations of what is before us.

For Sabini and Silver, gossip is an important feature of our psychological life, but mainly because it helps us to see our own complexity; how we can't be summed up by one tidy theory (5), because we do too many things that can't be reduced down to singular motives or reasons (98). But our complexity amounts to nothing more than very particular interpretations and variations on that preestablished code of social and moral rules, for that indeed is presupposed whenever gossip occurs (102). This phrasing, which recalls John Beard Haviland's Winchian theory of gossip as an interpretation of abstract moral rules, set us up as gossipers to take a purely theoretical interest in gossip -- we can come up with particular explanations for why it is we gossip at different times (and why it is we should and shouldn't), and indeed, we can come up with feasible justifications for gossiping at certain times (like when we need to blow off steam at someone for some "trivial" reason, when it's not worth a direct confrontation). But what this beginning of a rulebook for gossip doesn't provide us with is a fuller analysis of why it's worth thinking of the rules of gossip at all -- for indeed, if gossip only traffics in the most meaningless details of our life, why indeed should we care about our behaviors in that fashion at all? Why

shouldn't we simply assume that their effects will be pretty negligible, and that hence we can feel free to act as our whims and interests guide us? Moralities of Everyday Life fails to address that question, ultimately because it cannot recognize gossip as an important topic.

Of course, when the stakes are somewhat higher, as in the gossip that foregrounds Chaucer's Manciple's Tale (in the Canterbury Tales), still, the solution for commentators often is to try and decode how Chaucer would have us gossip: what are the ethics of gossiping in delicate situations (for this one, revealing a wife's infidelity to her previously unaware husband)? As Peter C. Herman (1991) sees it, gossip reveals an all-too-human temptation: to act maliciously because possessors of gossip have corrupting knowledge that both everyone and no one wants to hear -- everyone because it is on taboo subjects (like adultery), and no one because gossiping reveals human pettiness. Chaucer's ultimate message in the Manciple's Tale, according to Herman, is "illustrating the depravity of earthly politics" (325). The Crow, loose-tongued creature who spreads the unhappy news to his master the Manciple, is both agent and victim of this illustration. The Crow occupies both roles not simply because he relays the news but because he "takes malevolent glee in revealing [the gossip] to Phebus [the Manciple]" (323). By his malevolence, and the brutality of his speech, the Crow loses his justification in passing along

information, and according to Herman, is "a murderer by occasion" (324) -- for the consequence of this revelation is Phebus' deadly assault on his wife. While Herman clearly holds both Phebus and his wife in contempt (the first for murder, and the second for "treasonous" adultery), his severest criticism by far goes to the Crow, who somehow takes on guilt for both crimes. Not only is the Crow part of the murder, but also part of the adultery, by "rejoic[ing] in his lord's downfall" (ibid). The Manciple's Tale, for Herman, becomes a morality play endorsing the virtue of silence, or pious disapproval of earthly vices. To do otherwise is to assert complicity; and somehow, this complicity ends up overshadowing the events themselves. Gordon's fear in her Austen article (that shared by Spacks), that interpretation somehow constitutes the world to truth's detriment, gets fleshed out here in the most gruesome of terms. Somehow, gossiping becomes the most reprehensible of actions, that most responsible for other earthly vices¹⁷.

¹⁷It's important to note here that not all commentators on Chaucer share this gloomy view of the fate of gossip in a community. Michaela Paasche Grudin (1991) explicitly writes against such a quietistic interpretation of the Crow's fate, arguing that "the solutions posed in the fables do not exhaust the possibilities for confronting the problem [of whether to speak or to remain silent]...Chaucer everywhere in the tale evokes the idea of creative or mimetic expression" (333). In short, simply because the Manciple's Tale presents two unattractive options doesn't mean that this represents the entire spectrum of possibilities for speaking-against norms. Additionally, we might also observe that just because there might be malice in the Crow's speech doesn't imply that to gossip is necessarily to be malicious.

To gossip is indulge in brutality (if its substance is accidentally true), avoidable only through abstinence (Spacksian overtones fully intended). These rulebooks of gossip, then, are less books than simple commandments: thou shalt not.

2.3 Doppelgänger Gossips

Unsurprisingly, there are many humanists who wish to ascribe some kind of epistemic legitimacy to gossip and rumor. For many humanists, gossip is a vital construct for assessing human and social knowledge; but its vitality is suspect. The theorists in this section overwhelmingly accept postmodern dictates that "real", "natural", "objective" knowledge simply aren't accessible, because of various reasons (subject positioning, dynamics of power, facticity, etc.). However, as is clear from a close examination of their approaches to gossip, they have yet to let go of some abstract notion of Truth that simply hangs in the air, imperceptible but Still There. That being so, the knowledge gossip and rumor provides us is always a sad second-best, a grudgingly admitted substitute which doesn't really fill the bill. These theorists improve upon Spacks in the sense that they seem to allow a genuine epistemic content to the truth of gossip (whereas for tropesters the emphasis is always on the falsehood of gossip), but this content must always be presented as adulterated, critically

altered or exaggerated away from the (still-held) absolute standard.

Lorraine Code's Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations (1995) attempts the mightily impressive task of debunking contemporary epistemology's fascination with, as she phrases it, "single and presumably self-contained philosophical utterances pronounced by no one in particular and as though into a neutral space" (x). Code's exploration of the spaces of talk and meaning is an attempt to explore how nuance and texture in language and knowledge claims must significantly alter how we think about language and knowledge themselves (one of the results, to begin with, being that the very idea of language and knowledge "claims" or propositions becomes meaningless). She uses the mapping metaphor quite deliberately, in its most active sense: how do we map our knowledge claims? how do we claim epistemic territory? For Code, thinking in terms of a concrete metaphor such as mapping territory (moreover, a metaphor with rich resonances of power, struggle, and ambiguity disguised as clarity -- "lines in the sand") is necessary, if our discussions of knowledge are to have any relevance to the ways in which we use knowledge in real life. "The language of rhetorical spaces," she writes, "removes the onus of establishing credibility and gaining acknowledgement away from the abstract, 'generalized,' disengaged, moral-epistemic individual of the Anglo-American tradition, and

into the lives, social structures, and circumstances where 'concrete' moral and epistemic agents are engaged in deliberations that matter to them" (xi). In short, Code's work here is significantly in concordance with my project, and I will happily map out(!) our agreement now. However, the points at which we differ (the territory over which we would be fighting) to me indicates important gaps between our perspectives.

Code positions herself, in her chapter on gossip within this book, as a necessary mediation between two extremes in analyses of gossip epistemology. She contrasts the argument that gossip is entirely instrumental, and useful for epistemology (her principal source here is Maryann Ayim [1994]), with the more typically feminist epistemological analysis of gossip, that it is simply women's private language, or 'house' talk' (her example is Deborah Jones; our analogue might be Deborah Tannen). The first approach, Code argues, makes too much of gossip, rendering it so instrumental that it becomes indistinguishable from traditional, disinterested epistemology; the second simply trivializes it (152). Code writes to uncover gossip as it actually functions in our knowledge-gathering; not as we might wish it to, nor as we assume it to.

Her analysis of gossip's "actual" function, delightfully, rests on an examination of gossip in a film, A

Jury of Her Peers¹⁸. The injustice of an accusation of murder of her husband leveled at the wife is only uncovered by two women (who do not meet until the murder investigation begins) who are able to come up with a correct interpretation of the (on the surface damning) facts through gossip (145). Code sees a tripartite analysis of knowledge emerge through the facts of the film: first, that an interested, engaged knowledge process (such as happens with gossip) yields more plausible knowledge than the work of the professional, rational investigators; second, that knowledge emerges through a community (the community, by its own connections, produces knowledge that is internally consistent and sensible but will be incomprehensible to outsiders -- investigators have a hard time accepting the women's interpretations of the facts) rather than through objective, disinterested individuals; and finally, that gossip functions as effective chaos (there are no rules by which one goes about gossiping, but its effectiveness is undeniable [146, 152]).

¹⁸Indeed, it's worth noting that Ayim, cited in Code's chapter, uses the Miss Marple character from Agatha Christie's mystery novels to justify how gossip can be instrumental, and knowledge-revealing. Fictional gossip seems to be a favorite resource for those seeking to defend the epistemic worth of gossip; perhaps because the only other documented sources of gossip (those scintillating social science accounts appearing in the first chapter here) have such a predisposition against gossip's validity that the far less authoritative source of art is a much more fecund ground for analysis.

Code's arguments in favor of the effectiveness of gossip are sensible: she points out that knowledge simply can't be removed from its location in situations infused by power dynamics (149); and indeed, that exactly that kind of removal is what produces the curiously antiseptic, unrealistic accounts of knowledge that pepper Anglo-American epistemology. We must displace, she argues, "persistent liberal assumptions that people are all, really, alike and interchangeable" (148). She quickly and capably dissects the power dynamics operating in the film (the gender connection and class dissonance between the two principal female "investigators," the more marked contrast between the women and the formal, officious, and suspicious male investigators [ibid.]). But ultimately, Code's analysis fails to be convincing, because of her insistence upon maintaining traditional conceptions of epistemology. This might sound curious (for indeed, Code couches the entire book as an argument against those very conceptions), but Code's arguments for a purposeless notion of gossip, and why it is necessary, demonstrate why this is a fair analysis.

Code dismisses more aggressively purposive accounts of gossip such as Ayim's; it is foolishly overgeneralizing, she suggests, to think of gossip as if it is always, only, and exclusively purposive and instrumental -- to do so misses the necessarily chaotic nature of gossip. Indeed, she suggests, to do so is to fall into the clutches of

traditional epistemology. "[G]ossip has instrumental uses," she acknowledges, "[but] it is important to note that characterizing it as inquiry, as intrinsically instrumental, amounts to reclaiming it for respectable epistemological discourse cast in a traditionally disinterested mold. Such a reclamation obscures its power as a located, idiosyncratic, and hence peculiarly perceptive activity" (151). There are several points we must pause to analyze here. The first is the claim that gossip can't be intrinsically purposive without also being intrinsically disinterested; the second is that (correlatively) gossip can't be intrinsically purposive and located, idiosyncratic, or perceptive. The third is the unstated implication here that we can't actually talk about inquiry without slipping into the language of disinterest, objectivity, neutrality. Indeed, she suggests as much when she criticizes Ayim's attempt to claim instrumentality for gossip: "the point is not, as I see it, to champion the worthiness of gossip by showing that scientific communities do it too, in the serious, fact-finding aspects of their work. Rather it is to show that gossip, for all its randomness, produces knowledge so valuable that it can contest the paradigm status of scientific method as the only reliable means of establishing truth" (150).

Notice the wording in that quote. Code is not arguing with the **legitimacy** of the argument that scientists work **by**

gossip; she's contesting the relevance of talking about that very topic. Code is arguing that we must simply defend the fact that gossip produces knowledge, **in its own idiosyncratic way** (if I might juxtapose quotations), so much so that it challenges scientific truth as **the** only means possible. But what does this mean? Quite simply, that the paradigms of science versus gossip remain separate (but equal!); that scientific truth and method remain unassailed. Certainly, we might from time to time step down from our scientific pedestals to indulge in a spot of gossipy fact-finding, but we keep our borders clearly drawn (the epistemic map can be distinct and finalized -- now we are hypothesizing scientifically, and now we will gossip). This analysis brings forth resonances both of Bergmann's portrait of gossip "quarantined" in much of social science analysis, and Shibutani's attempt to legitimate rumor as useful, and occasional rational (in its own, special, i.e. ultimately useless, way). This analysis, in short, perpetuates gossip's status as distinct from isolated, still rational, scientific method. And, as I said while discussing Shibutani, if given the choice between suddenly-acceptable-in-unique-ways gossip and still-rational-and-universally-acceptable science, it hardly boggles the mind to imagine which choice people will make (at least overtly).

Code's conviction that gossip must necessarily be unruly in part I think stems from her definition of gossip.

In the first place, it seems clear that she thinks of gossip as only being about other people; she describes gossip as "a finely-tuned instrument for establishing truths -- albeit often corrigible, renegotiable truths -- about people" (147)¹⁹. In the second place, Code characterizes gossip as simply a mode of activity while doing other things: "[gossipers] are otherwise engaged; the gossip accompanies, grows out of, and embellishes (cognitively) their practical preoccupations" (146). Indeed, she attacks Ayim's Miss Marple-generated gossip as an inappropriate simulation of gossip; the inappropriateness, Code argues, comes from its overarching intentional and deliberate character (151). I think there is some legitimacy to her statement about gossip; I do think we tend not to think about gossip when we

¹⁹Incidentally, her description of gossip-truths as corrigible and renegotiable for me represents more evidence that she ascribes significantly less legitimacy to the truth of gossip than to that of science. It is hard to imagine Code defining scientific truths as corrigible and renegotiable (or having to graft on the apologetic qualifier of "albeit often"); although of course, as anyone who's studied even elementary school science knows, exactly those adjectives quite appropriately characterize science. (Even our still-cherished mythology of science being one long linear process into final cohesion and a revelation of all knowledge is itself based on a belief that we **are** in fact always progressing -- e.g., that scientific truth is always renegotiating itself [if in a unidirectional fashion].) Indeed, those adjectives are in a limited sense especially appropriate in these days of speedily outdated, to say nothing of simultaneously contradictory but appealing scientific theories. But no one would think it a worthwhile point of analysis; Code's failure to hit upon exactly these sorts of comparisons shores up her ultimate inability to see gossip as epistemically worthwhile in the same way as more "conventional" forms of knowledge.

do it, or after the fact (e.g., if someone asked you what you did today, you might rattle off a laundry list of activities like working, eating, cleaning, exercising, [even laundry!], while neglecting to mention that you spent 45 minutes gossiping about whether or not your division would get more budget or labor cuts, or if the new neighbors across the street would ever stop arguing loudly with their windows open, or why it was that they were arguing so much). But it seems to me that analyzing gossip as a mode of behavior, or a necessarily parenthetical behavior, for Code necessitates its status as purposeless, or only accidentally purposive. I do not mean to overemphasize the importance of admittedly rationalistic concepts like intentionality or consciousness (for surely it is consciousness that differentiates the parenthetical behaviors from the deliberate), not least because I think that we can do many things with purposes that are in fact quite unbeknownst to us, and therefore unconscious behaviors can often be quite purposive (the Freudian slip is only the most obvious example). However, I still hold that is important not to cordon off gossip and rumor into one mode of occurrence only. Gossip can not only or always be accidental or less conscious than other epistemic behaviors; to hold this is to perpetuate Enlightenment distinctions between intention and accident, with the inevitable result that gossip holds a

lesser epistemic status than the "rationally-acquired" knowledge. I do not think this is the case.

But let me return to the fallout of this modal analysis, those first two claims Code makes about gossip (that it can't be intrinsically purposive without also being disinterested; that if it is intrinsically purposive it cannot be located and idiosyncratic). My first reaction is that I think Code must see this dilemma as emerging because she is maintaining this covert distinction between the paradigms of science and gossip, knowledge and chatter. In short, I think that we shatter the notion of a disinterested epistemology **exactly by** demonstrating that epistemology is often and by construction interested.

It also seems to me that the assumption that intrinsic purpose and the disinterested scientific observer posture are automatic companions is based upon a naive and outmoded conception of how science operates. As Laboratory Life (1986) demonstrates, scientists do not proceed along a neutral quest for the Truth; their motivations for increased income, notoriety, a longer and more noteworthy resume, besting the other research groups, and indeed hard to categorize or rationalize motivations all factor in along with traditional interests in finding solutions and completing problems. This does not delegitimize the conclusions scientists arrive at; it situates and humanizes them.

Code's modal analysis also seems to contribute to her conviction that gossip must be pretty purposeless, or rather only accidentally purposive. Perhaps it is difficult to reconcile the notion of an activity that is not deliberative and orderly also being purposive. Because gossip is not fully intentional, Code seems to be arguing, such intentionality as it possesses can't really be relevant or essential. However, I think there are many such analogues (admittedly less glamorous) to be drawn from our everyday life of behavior that are clearly not deliberative or orderly, but also purposive. The most appropriate example is that so poorly used by Bergmann -- dancing. Now certainly, there can be a basic purposiveness to dancing. Quite often, people get up to dance from a sitting position, or move away from a bar or the wall, or even another room, so as to dance. This is clearly done with the kind of full, transparent intentionality Code wants to ascribe to non-gossipy knowledge²⁰. But imagine yourself dancing once you are on the floor; in particular, imagine yourself dancing in a club, where there are no prescribed (Bergmannian!) dances

²⁰Of course, we can easily imagine a situation where even beginning to dance would not be done with the kind of full intentionality Code seeks. In a crowded dance club, the "border" between the dance area and the standing-and-chatting-and-drinking area is not clearly inscribed; and it's not difficult to imagine standing at what was once "the edge" and simply starting to dance there, not entirely deciding to do it (perhaps starting mildly to move one arm or bob one knee to the beat of the music, then more energetically, then joining in fully).

to be danced according to rigid musical norms (now we must waltz, now we twist, now we tango, now we mosh, and now a Virginia reel). Once you are dancing, the movements you undertake are not clearly thought out (why now, I'm going move from side to side for 8 beats, and then I'll start swinging my arms back and forth; and you know, right now I think I'll make like John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever and do a one-girl line dance), and certainly not orderly (unless, of course, you're a rehearsing chorine, John Travolta on film, or simply reenacting the routine from an aerobics class). This is even more true when two (or more) people dance together in a club. Each partner might start following each other's moves, but in partial, tentative ways (or aggressive, elaborative ways), and the order is neither clear nor prescribed. More to the point, no one person has control of the dance; each partner often does entirely their own movements (my partner might be spinning around at a nausea-inducing rate while I erratically circumnavigate her vortex). The movements will simply resonate with each other, following the same beat (if sometimes only roughly). Yet no one would say that the chaos of one person or two people or a group of people dancing in a club has no purpose; indeed, it's not hard to deduce multiple purposes or intentions (often simultaneously in action) from dancing (getting exercise, cheering up after a depressing day, celebrating a triumph, getting to know someone, trying to

lose an annoying person, testing someone's compatibility, bonding with a group of friends, simply forgetting about external reality, etc). More particularly, we can also construct multiple purposes and intentions for particular moves of the dance (all those listed above, and more direct ones -- chasing out a kink in a joint, moving particularly underused muscles, just moving differently than one is conventionally allowed to do on the street, in a classroom or workplace, while eating). Purposive behavior doesn't have to be transparently deliberative, with monolithic reasons graftable isomorphically onto behavior-moments.

In sum, then, the main difficulty I have with Code's analysis of gossip is her reliance on a zero-sum model of epistemology. To name gossip as instrumental, purposive, or investigative is to renounce its merit or existence as chaotic or accidental, or **anti-rational**, in Code's perspective. And it is clear that for Code, while there might be some plurality and play to her notion of gossip, ultimately, gossip's chaos and unruliness stand as its essential characteristics; any purpose we might ascribe to particular gossip-conversations is in fact only situational, not essential. This kind of zero-sum modeling (your conversations can be one or another, your truth can be either/or) seems far more pervasively modernist than the simple instrumentality Code ascribes to feminist analyses of gossip like Ayim's. Surely it must be possible to imagine a

scheme of gossipy epistemology that leaves the zero-sum model behind (such, indeed, will be my task in the third chapter); couldn't it be so that gossip could be **both** instrumental and chaotic, in short, chaotically purposive? Couldn't our knowledge be rational and disorderly? Why isn't our knowledge-gathering idiosyncratic and organized? The fact that Code cannot even conceive of or recognize these as possibilities indicates the limitations with which she sees gossip as valuable²¹. And again, given her implicit praising of science (sure, it can be located, but not as much, not as inherently, as gossip), it seems to me that it is she who casts gossip on the outskirts of a maintained Enlightenment epistemology. Code's gossip can, for all her provocative language in the beginning of her book, be nothing more than a creator of knowledge in lieu of the real thing.

Unfortunately, Code has ample company in the philosophical field in feigning praise of gossipy, chaotic forms of knowledge-gathering while secretly holding back the real rewards of Truth. C.A.J. Coady is the most recent

²¹Indeed, Code's final provocation comes when she sums up her territory of gossip as "neither essentially good nor essentially evil, essentially the province of women nor of men, essentially private nor essentially public" (152). What is striking here is that she is willing to challenge so many of the traditional dichotomies held to gossip (women's evil private talk), but cleaves so resolutely to gossip's idleness: clearly, idleness is unavoidably essential for Code to be able to cognize gossip. I shall challenge this presupposition further in Chapter 3.

example of this analysis. Coady's highly praised book Testimony: A Philosophical Study (1992), articulates a simple, potentially momentous philosophical argument -- that we must let go of the individualistic bias towards direct knowledge, because most of our knowledge is indirectly attained (13). Coady articulates an exciting agenda for his consideration of indirect knowledge through testimony -- rescuing its appropriate significant status in epistemic theory. He writes that "[t]he judgements of others constitute an important, indeed perhaps the most important, test of whether my own judgements reflect a reality independent of subjectivity" (12). Not only does interpersonal testimony **not** amount to substandard, purely evaluative knowledge, he says, it is the only meaningful escape we have from solipsism. Coady's refreshingly skeptical attitude towards professional epistemology is apparent here as well -- Zeno's paradox is less the problem facing theorists of knowledge, his remark suggests, than our own logically consistent and coherent, but hopelessly microcosmic theories of knowledge. His task in this book, then, becomes nothing less than to defend a recasting of epistemology with indirect testimony as one (among many) first priority(ies), instead of a distant second cousin. While this argument has potentially devastating consequences for the bulk of modernist epistemology, Coady ultimately withdraws from all the serious implications of his

argument -- and more to the point, qualifies the argument so that testimony itself maintains a lesser-order status in knowledge.

Coady does an impressive job of categorizing and critiquing the contemporary literature on testimony. Philosophic responses to testimony range from the puritan (testimony exists, but only to demonstrate how rare real knowledge is; Plato, Collingwood), the reductive (we are only dependent on testimony because we check it so rigorously, we are scientists of testimony; Mackie, Hume, Russell, James), the fundamental (testimony is a part of the foundation of knowledge; Thomas Reid), to the end-of-epistemology (because epistemology fails to provide an adequate of knowledge, we must turn to psychological accounts of why and how we believe, at which point fallible testimony enters the picture; Quine, Popper [22-24]). Coady places himself nearest the obscure Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid in this recounting of testimonials about testimony, but nonetheless has some criticisms of Reid's approach, as well as the rest. In general, Coady argues that all the philosophers to one degree or another beg the question about testimony; that they are all guilty of some circularity. Coady does an impressive job of documenting the extent to which even to talk about testimony, the philosophers must accept its existence and sensibility (e.g., we trade and understand others' testimony [79, 117,

263-264]²². But to be able to trade testimony, Coady argues, is to acknowledge the success of human language. To understand human language simply is to accept testimony (for human communications to be traded continually means that they are believed; the act of believing is nothing more than an internal act of testimony: "you say **this**"). Therefore, the philosophers who attempt to accept the existence of testimony and then try to problematize its epistemic value (sure, we do it, but should we?) miss the point.

For Coady, exactly the error these philosophers make is in trying to isolate testimony as one sort of epistemic faculty -- an independent faculty of the mind, separable from perception or judgment or memory (133). Like Thomas Reid, Coady puts perception, judgment, memory and testimony on an equally fundamental footing. Each is a central, originating feature of human knowledge; none can hold priority. More to the point, Coady's foundation is interpenetrating -- perceptions can be indirectly transmitted, our memories can be judgmental (146-147). These two points (the communality of knowledge and the non-hierarchical nature of individual knowledge) are intertwined for Coady; we can only do away with the fallacy of the Autonomous Knower if we can acknowledge the breadth of its

²²More broadly, Coady does an exhaustive amount of documentation to establish the variety of commonplaces we accept as fact that are nothing short of testimony -- indirect knowledge (50-51).

limitations, how little we operate according to autonomous dictates (either internally or externally, with ourselves or with others)²³.

However, that internal/external distinction, which I see as tacit throughout Coady's argument, to me indicates the central problem I have with Coady's analysis. Let me first make clear that I agree with the bulk of Coady's criticism of much of epistemic theory -- that it is far too focused on an individual knower, and attempts to overisolate how we form knowledge claims (this is a perceptual statement only, and now I am making a judgment). That said, Coady's prescription for the attitudes we should hold towards knowledge more broadly understood is unsatisfactory. Coady's argument, in brief, is that we should suspend our judgment about truth or falsehood towards testimonial propositions, and not rush to include or exclude them in our webs of belief (107, 112-113). He thinks this because he basically takes a pragmatist's approach towards truth -- we come to understand the truth or falsehood of our beliefs over time, as they are tested and received by others. Community knowledge is what matters, not individual holdings

²³Coady criticizes Hume in particular for holding to an implied concept of an autonomous knower. For Hume's theory of habitual, inductive acceptance or denial of testimony to work, Coady says, we would have to be capable of isolating our testimonials and according them high, low, or no degrees of credibility, or denying them outright on a propositional basis. This is simply unfeasible (85, 94). We neither hear nor evaluate reports other people give us in an atomistic fashion.

-- and we only arrive at our individual beliefs through the community.

Coady justifies this suspension of beliefs because he believes in exactly an individual intelligence -- a "controlling intelligence," he calls it, which sorts and determines validity or invalidity of beliefs (again, through a complicated process of community interaction, psychological habits, expectation [99-100]). The notion of a controlling intelligence itself is nothing surprising -- we all have selection mechanisms by which we choose to hear or ignore beliefs, avow or disabuse theories, register or expunge facts or opinions. But exactly what's curious about Coady's argument is that he has clearly held tacit standards about what our sorting mechanisms should look like; what the right and wrong ways are to interact with evidence and opinion. Coady's initially puzzling last chapter (about expert testimony in courts) acts to illustrate his previously unstated opinions about what evidence is really believable or not.

To explain: Coady makes it clear that what is special about testimony (as distinguished from other kinds of knowledge claims) is that we believe the fact **because** we believe the witness; the (disputed) fact itself is less important to our knowledge than the means by which we gather it (46). He illustrates this corollary by pointing out that from someone we consider to be a reliable witness, we will

accept even astonishing testimony; whereas from an unreliable witness we will refuse to believe even the most banal evidence. But the way in which we determine a witness to be believable or not, Coady clearly holds, is itself accessible to universal standards of logic, reason and objectivity. Hence his unusual diatribe, with which he closes the book, about the inadvisability of allowing expert testimony from such "unscientific" sources as humanities professors and psychologists, into such "unscientific" territory as "moral problems" or "human nature" (287-303²⁴). The problem with this tendency, according to Coady, is that these fields are so unremediably tainted with ideology and advocacy that these experts cannot hope but to be subjective, and dictatorial in their evidence-giving. Indeed, Coady neatly contrasts these witnesses with experts from the hard sciences, where he points out their expertise can be clearly demonstrated, and presumably, where their investigations are never tainted with the stain of ideology. The hard sciences can guard themselves, Coady argues, easily able to differentiate amongst the good and bad practitioners, and the better and worse experts (285).

²⁴By the way, there are other moments in the text where this unusual bias creeps out. Coady argues strenuously early on for the unreliability of testimony from children and the mentally ill, based on their clear inabilities either to be sincere or to distinguish fantasy from reality (35, 36); later on in the final chapter, he also comments with profuse asperity on the sad proliferation of "bogus" sciences and their experts' need to be read as the same kind of experts as their more legitimate counterparts (287).

Aside from the clear fact that Coady is suffering from a naively positivist faith in the impenetrability of hard science by ideology (while he admits to reading Paul Feyerabend, he only concedes to Feyerabend's claims about the temporality of science, and not to the fallibility of experts themselves [286] -- I guess Coady missed the passage in Against Method where Feyerabend documents that Galileo's initial telescope generated widely varying reports from its users, and Galileo's subsequent invention of consistent, impressive results [Feyerabend 122-125]), he also is making a clear division here between real knowledge and lesser knowledge. Now, admittedly, both kinds of knowledge can be transmitted through testimony, so he's not arguing against the validity of testimony per se, but the point here is that he's arbitrarily restricting the range of testimony and testifiers we will accept, based on rationalistic criteria (whose knowledge is more viably demonstrable). To do so is to maintain a kind of faith not only in an Autonomous Knower (it's our job to sort the right way), but also in a prioritization of truth over falsehood. And that prioritization is exactly the premise against whose validity Coady has structured his whole book. It seems to me, then, that in attempting to do away with our individualistic, systemic theories of knowledge, Coady has succeeded only in

replacing them with harder-to-detect, but equivalent, substitutes²⁵.

Another, perhaps more philosophically acceptable way of phrasing this objection, proceeds like this: If we are to accept the basic premise of Coady's argument, that in contrast to our essential presuppositions of contemporary epistemology, the majority of what we call knowledge and strong beliefs are **not** direct, autonomous, objectively arrived-at propositions but indirectly assumed nuggets of information, collected in a variety of ways, then clearly there still remains an epistemic problem for philosophers. If knowledge is so variantly collected and assumed, how is it that we decide we know something rather than simply believe it? In other words, the old-fashioned problem of what exactly "knowledge" is (and when it rears its head in lieu of faithful standby belief) reasserts itself in the wake of Coady's analysis. Clearly, Coady's sorting mechanism is supposed to act as the answer for how we know something to be knowledge versus simple belief; equally clearly, Coady's move is a reasonable one. If we accept

²⁵In one sense, Coady's bias towards rational, orderly knowledge (even through testimony) is evident throughout the book. For a work ostensibly concerned with indirect knowledge, with oral transmission of information, it is nothing short of shocking that Coady's book fails to deal with gossip at all, and only mentions rumor once (and that being a rather sniffy mention of rumor's inevitably distorting qualities). This attitude hardly inspires confidence in Coady's awareness of or respect for the broad array of what testimonial information we commonly come to grapple with every day of our lives.

that information is pluralistically gathered, the means by which we gather and sort this information must clearly take on first importance in any sort of non-autonomous theory of knowledge.

Before I lodge my argument clearly, I think it's important to note that Coady's alternative testimonial theorists give really shallow weight to mental sorting mechanisms. Coady's end-of-epistemology adherents (it's all bunkum anyway, so let's just examine the psychological means by which we apprehend and believe items in lieu of grappling with outdated modernist concepts like knowledge) offer us little in terms of how we as individual-yet-social knowers should approach the body of items we consider our knowledge, let along uncertain new prospects on the range. More to the point (here comes my argument), Coady's own means by which we assess and evaluate the information we hold to me seems a bad fit to the variety of sources he's now acknowledging as feeders into our mental hoppers. Acknowledging that testimony provides lots of what we take for knowledge means that we're getting a lot of our information from conversations with other people, from reading things more and less casually, from overhearing remarks, simply from making the leap of interpretation (what I think in my head about the traffic accident I just witnessed is testimonially removed from the scene I just directly perceived). As should be transparently obvious, testimonial knowledge is

directly and necessarily steeped in frameworks of power, preconception, assumption²⁶. Regarding that traffic accident: what if either car is driven by a friend of mine? someone I despise? a car-phone wielding striver? I will inevitably see nuances and resonances in even the most mundane scenes that any random passerby would ignore; similarly, they would have their own spins on this scene that might never occur to me. Theories of knowledge that allow for this variety of information must similarly provide for our ability to determine judgments: when exactly do we determine something to be knowledge?

At this point, Coady's argument stumbles. His let-it-simmer attitude towards uncertain items, combined with his presumptions that some kinds of knoweldge are generally more plausible (precisely those autonomous-knower biased, rationalistic, neutrality-idealizing theories he so furiously debunks early on in his book) guarantees that we are left no closer towards actually understanding knowledge in a pluralistic fashion. It seems peculiar to me that our sorting mechanisms should be so at odds with our intake: that while we collect our knowledge quite socially, we evaluate and judge it in straitlaced, individualistic fashion. Social theories of knowledge, simply put,

²⁶Of course, pace Foucault, I think the entire enterprise of knowledge is duly steeped -- my point here is that testimonial information is most directly infused with these relations, and therefore theories grounded in testimony need most urgently to take these factors into account.

dramatically widen the field of information we consider. Items that before might seem outrageous or simply irrelevant to a question at hand (I need an example here) can seriously determine or affect how we regard beliefs in social theories of knowledge. Therefore, it is all the more imperative that these theories provide a means for us to evaluate and consider the wide array of information we do in fact access, and the means by which it is accessed. In other words, we hear and produce testimony exactly because we are involved in social and political relationships; testimony is by definition a social act, embedded in these relationships. Given that, it seems to be incumbent upon us to evaluate testimonial information in light and in terms of those relationships -- only this sort of evaluation will properly "place" testimony along with its fellow knowledge sources. Coady's overly analytic means by which we are to evaluate testimony (as simple, propositional knowledge claims, to be weighed by preponderance of evidence) creates a "free market" of knowledge creation which simply ensures that the player with the most chips wins.

An alternative to this approach, which I will explore in my third chapter, is (more straightforwardly) the informal approach -- we accept that something called "knowledge" exists but in fact has much less to do with static, unassailable Truths than with social institutions: in short, knowledge is created both along and against

institutional power lines, knowledge simultaneously "evolves" and resists itself. "Knowledge claims" are assessed and reassessed, in explicitly social terms. In other words, it matters less what I and formal logic have to say about the feasibility of a particular knowledge claim than how this knowledge claim is created and its effects felt throughout populaces.

I have one coda for this argument, which may help both as an example of the preceding analysis, and as a contextualization of the entire proceedings. Throughout this book, Coady's examples are highly characteristic of the examples so favored by analytic philosophers -- extremely low-stakes claims it's hard to imagine someone getting excited about their truth or falsehood ("there is mail for you today," "it rained frogs in the 16th century" "you were born on this day in that year²⁷"); these beliefs are hardly

²⁷I know, properly trained analytic philosophers could easily **construct** situations where someone would be excited about the truth or falsehood of these situations -- if I am awaiting word on whether or not the IRS is auditing me, or if my particular brand of religiosity holds amphibian rainstorms as incontrovertible evidence of the existence of God and the imminent Rapture, or if the person uttering a statement of my birthdate is a hostile official of Selective Service averring that yes, I will be expected to serve in the military); that's not the point. Consistently using examples that university-trained Ph.D.s would have to work themselves into lathers in order to find relevance for in my view demonstrates a lack of interest in applying one's analysis to epistemically relevant challenges we face daily. For an example of this, see Christopher Norris' book on the Gulf War, Uncritical Theory (1992), where he points out that given the absence of reliable information about the war from the U.S. government, many contemporary theorists adopted a quietistic stance of nonbelief (and hence inaction) -- we simply couldn't **know**

central to our webs of beliefs (for example, Coady doesn't deal with claims that would be more contentious if only available indirectly, like whether or not gravity exists). More to the point, exactly the sort of beliefs Coady doesn't deal with are those that are centrally unsettled, and the settling of which is highly relevant to a variety of beliefs. To explain: at one point, Coady analyzes Donald Davidson's claim that we can only understand prior false beliefs because of the degree of veracity they claim (in other words, we only understand that people once believed that the earth is flat because we can understand a number of other true beliefs they had). Coady disagrees with that argument (following Colin McGinn) because he thinks that we only recognize false beliefs as such because of **our** subsequent true (superior) beliefs. Davidson's point is that we can only identify beliefs as such by locating them within the pattern in which they initially occur -- we may be misreading not simply the individual belief but the pattern itself (e.g., the ancients might actually have had a different notion of "earth" -- literally the surface only? -

enough relevant details to make moral or epistemic claims about the war, those intellectuals argued. While I disagree with much of the context of Norris' argument, and what I take to be his over-broad applications of his argument to much of contemporary French intellectual theory, his analysis presents exactly the kind of pragmatic situation where how (and whether) one determines belief can have serious consequences, and to my mind exactly the sort of example Coady should work with, if he wishes his analysis about testimony to have any resonance with our lives, and how we think about directly-versus indirectly- received knowledge.

- than the one we inscribe upon them). Coady disagrees with that because he sees our positions as readers as important -
- we only identify false beliefs as such because we've come to show them as so.

The content of this argument seems relatively trivial to me, but what I find interesting about it, again, is the example used -- whether or not the earth is flat. It seems to me that if we replace the contention at hand with a currently unstable contention, that suddenly what was merely arcane becomes much more relevant. Davidson's instinct -- to look at the semantic and propositional parcel by which we come to know things -- to me seems very important when we're dealing with knowledge claims left unsettled. When I think of something like the debate surrounding The Bell Curve, and the fact that, simply by producing a book claiming to argue for the systematic, genetic inferiority of intelligence among African-Americans and poor Caucasian Americans, two theorists have helped determine the direction around which debates about merit, affirmative action, and school funding will go for the next several years, it becomes clear to me that context is as important as content.

Critics of The Bell Curve, of whom there have been many, have generally focused on its implications for policy, and its statistical claims (e.g., statistical correlation does not amount to causation). Left unaddressed (save by

Stephen Jay Gould and Howard Gardner²⁸) are the conceptual claims made by the book -- whether or not such a thing as "g" (general intelligence) exists; whether or not a term like "intelligence" (or Murray and Herrnstein's more duplicitous "cognitive ability") is a meaningful notion. But the point here is that Murray and Herrnstein's book acts as a placeholder -- its conception of intelligence as a highly individualized feature that is immutable is now relatively publicly accepted, even if the more openly repugnant conclusions in the book have been stridently refuted. But it seems to me that these initial conceptions of intelligence as individualized and unchangeable are enough to guarantee the continued, covert holdings of exactly those more repugnant beliefs.

To relate this back to the Davidson-Coady-McGinn spat, it seems to me that Coady's advocacy of suspension of judgment can only work in low-stakes epistemic battles (like the contents of the mailbox), another way of diminishing the ultimate importance of indirect testimony or hearsay. Because Coady says that we can simply not worry about making epistemic decisions (and that indeed, we can assign equal value to the truth or falsehood of indirectly reported testimony! [113]), because time will bear out the truth or fallacy of our conceptions; it seems to me that Coady

²⁸For their responses, as well as a variety of critical responses, see both The Bell Curve Wars (1995) and The Bell Curve Debate (1995).

ultimately is arguing for a kind of epistemic quietism (again, cf. Christopher Norris). And again, this can only be a feasible position if the epistemic decisions we are making are of the regrettably individualistic kind. To simply say "I pass" on the matter of The Bell Curve (or to leave it up to the experts!) is to suggest that it really doesn't matter that much if we're right or wrong in holding a certain conviction. And I guess that while there is a certain kind of philosophic appeal there (in breaking away from a dichotomized notion of truth where we must get the right result, right away), ultimately I find this psychologically and epistemically unfeasible (to say nothing of its contemptibility). Because our beliefs matter, to us and to others, it is important for us to be able to be agents in our own epistemic constructs, and not simply wait for "history" to tell us the answer. Coady's passive approach amounts to no epistemic progress at all.

At this point, then, we have two mildly different philosophic takes on gossip and epistemology: Code's theory that gossip is only accidentally accurate and necessarily idle, and Coady's theory that gossip (implicitly) contributes much to epistemology but only if we sternly, rigorously, individualistically, logically keep it in check. These two positions are compatible with each other: it is all too easy to believe that if we think that gossip is intrinsically purposeless but theoretically interesting, we

might allow it some raw-material bonus points (thanks for the dirt!), but constrict ourselves to adamant analyses of any dubious information gossip provides.

Gilliam Teiman's dissertation on gossip in ladies' magazines in the eighteenth century deals with similarly 'trivial' topics; and like Sarah Miller in the previous chapter, Teiman demonstrates how the apparent triviality of the topics under discussion in her sources belies the actual struggle that is taking place. Teiman's argument, briefly stated, is that the progression of ladies' magazines over the eighteenth century (from the Female Tatler and Female Spectator through the development of the genre of "women's magazines") depicts the linear development of a unique female voice, typical of at the same time as resisting the eighteenth-century ideals of modesty, silence, purity, and domesticity. Teiman is valiantly attempting to bridge the gender gap of conversation; but she is only successful insofar as she quietly erases risqué, inappropriate, 'vicious' chatter from the matrix she establishes of women's voices. Teiman does not bring woman-talk and man-talk to a mutual meeting-place, but instead argues that women are fully capable of adapting to a preexisting masculine model of rational, logical, substantive, impersonal discourse. Harmony is only possible in Teiman's model with a flattening out of how we talk and what we say.

The construction of Teiman's dissertation is the first clue to the flattening aspects of the theory it contains. Teiman just doesn't talk about men's speech, what it is, what it sounds like, what ideals it represents or resists. The Tatler, the Spectator and the Athenian Mercury aren't really referred to, characterized or quoted from other than a few parenthetical remarks (52-53, 57); in fact, the only substantive usage of material from a men's magazine (the Tatler's development of the Jenny Bickerstaff character [82-89]), depicts how men's magazines talk about and for women, but not how they are targeted and composed for men themselves. The absence of context here means that we're working on assumptions of difference between men's talk and women's talk -- the men's magazines hover like unmentioned and unmentionable standards against which women's magazines are compared. Even though men's magazines contained articles for women, and Teiman makes it clear that women often read them (in lieu of going out, which was unseemly), there's no consideration of the significance of this point; and more directly, there's no contemplation of either the asymmetry of men being allowed to talk and write for women but not the reverse, or the possibility that women wrote for or read the men's magazines. Talking about women's voice for Teiman only means talking about women who write exclusively, privately, for themselves. Teiman's linear progression of the women's voice seems to spring up from

nowhere; while she acknowledges that throughout the eighteenth century increasing numbers of women were getting educations and becoming writers, the lack of comparison between women's magazines and men's magazines perpetuates the impression that women were educated and put themselves in the public eye in a vacuum -- women necessarily wrote for, to and about themselves, while men wrote for and to everyone. Teiman presupposes that women spoke a language all their own.

This language, as the rest of the dissertation makes clear, has its origins in irrationality, in intuition, and in gossip. The dissertation depicts four women's voices. We start with the Jenny Bickerstaff character, composed [presumably] by a man in the Tatler, who develops (thanks to instruction from her elderly relative Mr. Bickerstaff) from being an impetuous, argumentative (but often incorrect) young single woman to a modest, married, subservient matron. From there we move to the first Female Tatler, whose voice is a "Mrs. Crackenthorpe," repeating gossip about those she observes (with scrupulous standards of what she will and won't repeat [171]), while at the same time decrying gossip, and advocating women's place in men's after-dinner conversation. The first Tatler (apparently forced temporarily to close after being sued for defamation of someone's reputation) is succeeded by a Tatler written by the "Society of Ladies," who combine rational arguments for

women's education and rights with the occasional gossip and matrimonial discussion. Finally, we have the Female Spectator, written by Eliza Heywood (a novelist of the time), who writes both for women and men, simply assuming that the two share a conversational space of dignity and rationality (and modesty).

From these periodicals, Teiman purports to advance a multilayered reading of the development of a women's voice in the eighteenth century. She sees the gradual inclusion of women into the conversational space of men as not entirely progress (17), because as women are included they are also contained - they can no longer speak about certain subjects or in a certain manner. However, I don't see such multiplicity in Teiman's reading; returning to the primary sources bears this out. Examining the Female Spectator, written by the most apparently standardly feminine author, her introduction of herself reads as follows:

...My life, for some years, was a continued round of what I then called pleasure, and my whole time engrossed by a hurry of promiscuous diversions. But whatever inconveniences such a manner of conduct has brought upon myself, I have this consolation; to think that the public may reap some benefit from it. The company I kept was not, indeed, always so well chosen as it ought to have been, for the sake of my own interest or education; but then it was general, and by consequence furnished me, not only with a knowledge of many occurrences, which otherwise I had been ignorant of, but also enabled me, when the too great vivacity of my nature became tempered with reflection, to see into the secret springs which gave rise to the actions I had either heard or been witness of, to judge of the various passions of the human mind and distinguish

those imperceptible degrees by which they become
matter of the heart, and attain the dominion over
reason. [Heywood {1929} 2]

In short, Heywood does not regret an idle or vivacious past, for it is this that teaches her more about the complexity of human behavior. Further, when she introduces the "method" of her magazine, it is through gossip -- she has several "counterparts," each of whom take turns relaying tales heard or observed in society. Heywood writes that she explicitly prefers her "spy" system (4). And indeed, the bulk of the Spectators consist of many reports about others' behavior, both for good and ill. Heywood's criticism, let us be clear, is hardly restricted to women who transgress acceptable gender norms of docility and passivity; she has harsh criticisms for men are hypocritical with each other (not simply for men who take advantage of women, as Teiman would have it).

In sum, it seems to me that both her construction of a linear relationship of the women's voices (i.e., matching the temporal development of the different periodicals to the growing conformity of women to the male ideal so that they can be allowed to speak), and her lack of commentary on men's voices and men's ideals support the notion the construction of the modest woman's voice is historically necessary. More to the point, what I see as her creation of an artificial division (almost an opposition) between the first and second Female Tatlers, her inability to read the

gossipy Mrs. Crackenthorpe as anything but an inconsistent cipher, and her positing of the Female Spectator as a peak of female rationality and civility speaks to Teiman's internalization of the Enlightenment ideals of rationality, consistency and order.

Other literary theorists have the same reservations about gossip and knowledge as does Teiman. Jan Gordon (1988), who we heard from earlier in this chapter (writing about gossip in Brönte as necessarily false and distortive), regards gossip in Austen as a similarly inadequate substitute for gainful knowledge. Gordon at one point outright denies the possibility of objective truth (27-28), instead focusing on gossip as one of many ways by which novels arrive at "experiential" truth. Initially, she speaks admiringly of gossipers' ability to adjust themselves and their interpretations to the reactions and ideas of others; "gossips must listen while they speak," she writes (13). But her admiration is cautious; she begins by pointing out that the careless reader might simply see flexible gossip as "inconstant narrative" (ibid). But the flexibility Gordon so appreciates in Austenian gossip has its price; Gordon makes a point of noting how gossips in her novels (particularly Persuasion) make mistakes, and have no claim to greater reliability than more authoritative knowledge (15). Since this is hardly the assumption with which most people proceed when talking about gossip in a

formal sense, one wonders why this is the item of particular emphasis, rather than the converse (that gossip is not **less** reliable than the conventional knowledge the novel reproduces). More to the point, Gordon's main argument is that gossip operates in Austen to suggest that the whole story exists and is knowable -- but is just lost (like things lost in novels [ibid]). In other words, the partial reconstructions of truth that appear via novel's special techniques -- diaries, letters, gossip -- can never hope to recover the Whole True Story.

Far from recovering completeness in gossip, gossip can in fact work at cross-purposes to more traditional novelistic techniques (again, e.g. the letter). Unlike more "representative" forms of literary discourse, which according to Gordon actually "represent something antecedent to their inscription" (21), apparently gossip can not only be simple exaggeration or interpretation of event but also outright invention. Given this, the danger unique to gossip within novels is that of "exhaustion of textuality by a totalizing consumption" (22). In short, everything becomes gossip, commentary, interpretation piled upon interpretation, at the ultimate, and lamentable, loss of originating event (i.e. truth, substance). This schematic maintains a bipolar differentiation of truth and falsity -- gossip's function in this formula becomes simply to reemphasize the unbridgeable gap. In this formulation, for

Gordon as well as for the other theorists in this section, gossip clearly fails to have anything positive to contribute to knowledge formation -- marking an absence of a strictly valued positive falls severely short of full knowledge.

2.4 Archaeologists of Gossip

Within the humanities, I am most intrigued by those choosing to use what I loosely term archaeological approaches to gossip and rumor. By this I simply mean that these theorists do historical excavations of gossip and rumor at particular moments or in certain formats, so as to demonstrate how the language of gossip and rumor reveal subterranean veins of belief and mores that go unrecognized in "official", aboveground treatises. While ultimately I find these analyses limiting according to their one-way use of archaeology (gossip is only useful for looking back: we uncover the meaning and significance of gossip after it happens), which restricts it to being essentially an academic tool; nonetheless these writers (like Latour and Woolgar, Miller, DeBenedittis and Gluckman in the first chapter) are all worthy of attention simply for their willingness to consider gossip and rumor not only through social constructivist lenses, but as agents of positive change, not simply rampant social destruction.

Most assertive with this agenda is Patricia Turner's recent book I heard it Through the Grapevine (1993). To

begin with, her methodology is refreshing -- while she reads exhaustively through the fields of rumor, and has lots of historical documentation for the periods in which the rumors she's using occur, her approach with the contemporary rumors is simple. She gathers all the rumors she hears about and then focuses on those that 'work' -- those that get spread. She investigates them simply -- talks to the people named or implicated by the rumors, talks to those spreading the rumors (her "informants"), and investigates the circumstances surrounding the rumor (indeed, she amusingly refers to her assiduous rumor-gathering self as an almost round-the-clock field worker [6]). Her thesis is simple: that rumors can act as tools for resistance within the African-American community (xvi). By personalizing structural inequities (e.g. slavery, economic discrimination, the difficulty surrounding the passage of the Civil Rights Act) into memorable, applicable personal narratives (white slave owners eat their black slaves, Church's Fried Chicken contains a chemical that turns black men sterile, John F. Kennedy Jr. was assassinated by the FBI [32]), African-Americans not only comfort themselves that their unhappiness is shared (and not arbitrary, inhuman inequity), but motivate themselves to make practical changes

in their surroundings (economic boycotts, slave revolts, widespread voter registration)²⁹.

As the previous list makes clear, Turner's examples are varied in subject and historical moment (she follows Shibutani here); more directly, Turner also traces the development of parallel rumors -- for instance white slave owners spread the rumor that their slaves were cannibals concurrently to African-Americans' communal fear that their slave owners planned to eat them (13-20)³⁰. Turner uses this feature (occurring frequently in her history of rumor) to illustrate what becomes central for her when defining rumor -- that content is not simply the issue, but more broadly function and effect of rumor (5). While Turner essentially agrees with the dictionary definition of rumor (unsubstantiated report about some one or thing transmitted orally), she amends it to include the fact that rumors only spread because of reasons external to the proposition itself -- the dictionary notion of rumor is sadly limited to its

²⁹At this point, my summation of Turner might make her sound surprisingly like Knopf, whom I criticize for exactly that point (I consider her thesis of rumors' crystallization of larger political structures as passive). As I see it, Turner departs from Knopf's analysis strictly on her emphasis: she repeatedly reminds us that rumor **accomplishes** things within the African-American community -- foment resistance, directs anger, motivates boycotts. Rumor for Knopf is symptomatic only -- it **represents** action that happens remotely (riots occurring elsewhere). Rumor for Turner is action itself -- it is a construction of knowledge that determines future actions.

³⁰This observation of parallel rumors developing in politically opposed communities follows Knopf.

material manifestations. More directly, Turner argues that rumors help us to construct narratives of our lives that aren't simply passive stories of complication (pace Spacks), but invigorating tales of disenfranchisement that can act to motivate us, to spur us to action -- refusing to buy products whose companies are subjects of rumors, even simply spreading the rumor is sometimes a critical action (letting other people know about organized suspicions or analyses of malfeasance [96-97, 133, 151]).

Turner repeatedly reminds us that believers in rumor are not, as their critics portray them, simple-minded, under-informed, gullible sorts (Turner quotes several academics making this claim [109, 119]). Rather, she notes, rumor believers are often capable of sophisticated political analysis; their rumors act to synthesize a variety of facts they observe in their social milieus. As an example, Turner's informants who believe or spread the rumor that Church's, funded by the Klan, puts a chemical in their chicken that sterilizes African-American men, note pretty uniformly when questioned about the feasibility of that task (how could a chemical select out only African-American men from the chicken-eating population?) that Church's only operate and advertise in predominantly African-American areas (86)³¹.

³¹This "for blacks only" marketing strategy, which Turner documents in many corporate rumor instances, manifests itself explicitly in one case. Turner reminds us of R.J. Reynolds'

More pointedly, Turner directly contrasts the patronizing academic attitude that rumor believers are goalless idlers, using farfetched rumors to justify their indolent statuses in life with several portraits of genuine subscribers to rumor -- people who are college-educated, working, with developed plans for their futures (106, 194-195). Indeed, the scene Turner prepares for us throughout her book (documenting the wide variety of themes present, sometimes simultaneously, in different rumors -- corporate control over African-Americans, contamination of African-American bodies, conspiracy theories), suggests that more than anything else, rumor functions in the African-American community to assimilate a wide variety of facts and structures, most of which are hostile, in a way that both makes structural problems personal (Church's enormous corporate profits at the expense of African-Americans becomes a literal instead of figurative assault), and that motivates reactions. Rumors become the analytic tool by which African Americans can read their situations -- comparing facts, individual and institutional motives, and histories -- and assemble a narrative that covers the bases feasibly. As Turner puts it when describing her examples of corporate rumors, "a perception [develops] in the rumor-telling public that the costs and risks associated with a

abortive attempt to develop a cigarette brand, "Uptown", explicitly marketed for African Americans (101).

particular product outweigh its usefulness to the consumer" (175). Rumors become simply the crystallization of well-founded disbelief in corporate narratives of fulfillment through consumption. More to the point, the rumors Turner documents are individually significantly more popular than their correlatives in the mainstream press (e.g., Church's denial that they are poisoning black men; Ronald Reagan's denial that he encouraged the drug war); Turner's rumors select out emphases or facts that mainstream accounts miss (82-83).

Despite (or perhaps because of) their effectiveness at organizing and explaining hostile circumstances, the rumors Turner presents are vociferously denied by all of their objects. More to the point, corporate targets of rumor frequently redraw the rumors as misinformation campaigns waged by their enemies (i.e., a Marlboro spokesperson chalks up reports that Marlboro is Klan-financed to anti-tobacco forces [99], a CIA representative attributes the story that the U.S. government developed the AIDS virus as genocidal aggression against African-Americans to anti-U.S. propaganda [156]). Most gruesomely, after widespread rumors of government involvement in the Atlanta child murders, local law enforcement and FBI officials proceeded not only to dismiss the possibility of government influence, but to deny the existence of serial killings themselves -- murders were attributed to some of the children's parents, and a local

African-American man was arrested for two of the murders (81- 82, 126-127). Given that 23 children were killed in the space of a year and a half, and that no arrests were made in the other killings, continued cynicism towards "official" explanations seems more than adequately justified.

To be sure, there is some justification for corporate and governmental suspicion towards rumors: Turner points out that one rumor (that a small beverage company, Brooklyn Bottling, is funded by the Klan), could feasibly have been started by drivers for rival bottling companies, anxious to maintain their business (129). But the denials themselves are still relevant for us, first, due to their extravagant nature. Not only are the rumors empirically wrong, it seems to be quite important to negate any legitimacy whatsoever to the rumors (i.e., the spokespeople have no interest whatsoever in acknowledging that while the conclusion may not have empirical legitimacy, the context by which it is arrived at has relevance)³². To substantiate this, witness that when one executive directly asks Turner how he might defuse the effect of the rumor, and she suggests that his company begin marketing more moderately-priced products (to do away with the image that large conglomerates are

³²It's also important to note here that conspiracy theory rumors themselves are stridently dismissed as absurd, whereas there appears to be no similarly aggressive dismissals of conspiracy theory **responses** to rumors, from appropriately expert spokespeople.

interested only in exploiting African-Americans for their hard-earned, scarce dollars towards expensive consumer goods), this suggestion is instantly dismissed (214). Given this attitude, combined with the blindness to situations that rumor-afflicted moguls show, it isn't difficult to see how and why rumors maintain their folk power. It is perhaps more difficult to see why targets of rumor are so unwilling to recognize the persistence, and the legitimacy, of rumor.

Turner closes her book by recommending that rumors and other folkloric materials be studied along with their more orthodox counterparts for accurate history (219); happily, for several historians this is simply a given. For these academics (James C. Scott [1990], Ranajit Guha [1983], and Kathleen M. Blee [1991] among them), rumor and gossip are important historical resources -- they reveal beliefs and facts that are otherwise not transmissible. Scott puts the matter in theoretical terms: gossip and rumor are efficient means of transmitting information anonymously and safely (without record, without author [142]). Gossip then becomes a vital resource for communities without access to standard venues of power (public forums like newspapers, radio or television), or for groups whose views are controversial enough that public forums will remain always closed to them (143). Gossip and rumor³³ are the only safe ways to

³³According to Scott, only gossip is a means for critiquing powerful people -- we spread gossip about people, and rumors about events or institutions (142).

critique powerful people or institutions. Their safety, indeed, promotes the kind of elaboration and explanation that Turner documents more fully in the book. Because we are free to spread our gossip and rumors without check, we develop them to accord with already-felt but not publicly expressible hopes and fears (145). These features of rumors and gossip, then, are hallmarks of political culture among the dispossessed (151).

Ranajit Guha's Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India concretely foreshadows Scott's theoretical conclusions. Guha creatively analyzes "authoritative" histories and governmental documents of colonial India, dissecting the language and the absences of information to substantiate his theories about how it is that rebellion movements can gain ground and succeed. What he finds, when he analyzes how information is passed both with rebels and with the colonists, is that the Indian and British imperialists saw peasant communication as being like a plague on their country (220-221), infected by outsiders, uncontrollably passed throughout the population, and surely fatal. As we have seen previously, this metaphor has deep resonance -- plagues are out of control ("irrational", Guha notes [222]), disastrous, perhaps inevitable ('natural') but against the perpetuation of the natural order of things (224) -- ultimately, a plague is like a crime against humanity.

Guha calls attention to the features of peasant rebellion that stymie historians -- how seemingly unconnected groups, or apparently trivial events, could trigger significant and successful rebellions (223). Indeed, rather than acknowledge insurgent communicative and interpretive strategies like gossip and rumor, official historians bend over backward to concoct extravagant explanations for rebellion, ultimately arriving at farflung conspiracy theories involving omnipotent, Napoleonic "influential individuals" (226)³⁴. To hold the line against the disease of outside insurgency, colonial governments banned such informal peasant communications as gong-playing and the ritualistic circulation of a local bread (231, 241). But more relevantly, despite the durability of rumors as a counter-insurrectionist medium in India (252), while rumors are collected by the colonial powers, they are regularly discounted as a communicative and political medium by those writing India's histories. Repeatedly, colonial India's historians write off rumors as occasions of mass hysteria, irrationality that is directed away from the truth and towards alarmist distortions (254, 258, 268). The only possibility obscure to the colonial

³⁴Of course, Guha also notes that the rebels themselves were guilty of a similar brand of self-consciousness. The rise of prophetic rumors foreseeing mystical interventions into the colonial structure, Guha attributes to an unwillingness on the part of the rebels to acknowledge their own radical urges and analyses (277).

mind, it seems, is that disempowered people could intelligently and imperceptibly (to the colonists) communicate with themselves, analyze a situation in a fashion that ran counter to official ideology, and compute rational means by which to gain power.

But as Guha concisely explains, rumor is a vitally important medium of communication for the largely illiterate Indian peasantry, for whom official newspaper accounts, even if accessible, are not adequate as explanations for their enduring poverty and diminished status (251, 254).

Rumormongering is not only necessary, Guha continues, it is importantly unique as a method of communication and analysis: it is immediate and collective, in a way that simple transmission of news fails to be (261). To miss this distinction, as the "official" historians of India do (by writing about rumor as "distorted", i.e. false, news), is to fail to appreciate the particular circumstances by which colonial rebels of India had to operate (259). Indeed, rumors are the special provenance of subalterns. Rumors become necessary in particular when there is a dominant ideology or explanation that needs refuting; this refutation is most feasible through lower-risk methods like rumor and gossip (264).

Of course, the diminished risk inherent in rumors and gossip means that they are effective tools not only for resistance, but oppression. Kathleen Blee's Women of the

Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s assiduously documents the use of gossip and rumor as tactics of terrorism in the early 20th-century American South and Midwest. The imagery of the Klan itself, of course, is immediately evocative of the reputation of gossip -- anonymous (the hooded white costume), ominous (the favorite Klan tactic of the burning cross), intrusively surveillant (the well-documented Klan obsession with personal lives). More particularly, Blee's book is a sophisticated accounting of the peculiar status of women within the Klan -- struggling for women's equality, satisfying urges for political representation through the maintenance of a subsidiary Klan, and the promotion of a mythic image of sanctified femininity and motherhood. The very real struggles for power between women and men in the Klan, which Blee thoroughly explores (see especially her section on the Elizabeth Tyler-Edward Clarke revival of the second Klan [17-23]), contextualize Blee's descriptions of the Klanswomen's activities in support of their organization.

Those activities were simultaneously stereotypically non-threatening (at women's Klan [klavern] meetings, women would talk and play cards [129]), and seriously politically effective. Blee crystallizes this fact: "the political power of gossip lay precisely in its apolitical character" (149). Through those channels of gossip, Klanswomen organized votes for local, state and federal elections of

sympathetic representatives, and indeed, boasted of winning otherwise unwinnable elections through their circles of gossiping women. Vivian Wheatcraft, a leader of the Indiana KKK and a vice-chair of the Republican state committee, boasted in 1926 after a successful re-election of a Klan-supportive senator that she had brought about a "victory of gossip", and that she could spread "any gossip across the state in twelve hours" (115)³⁵.

Less dramatically but equally effective, gossip was also the main channel by which women maintained the coercive power of the Klan. Circles of gossip ensured the success of economic boycotts of business that were regarded as sympathetic to African-Americans, or owned by Catholics or Jews. While the initiative for the boycotts were comparatively overt (lists of suspect businesses would be read off at one klavern's meetings, for example [147]), the information itself was disseminated through the community widely, and informally. Operating not through the newsletter of the Klan (which itself would be a suspect source) but through informal conversations, women would persuade their friends to alter their shopping allegiances to accord with the women's Klan's preset agenda (148-149). At the time, the pattern of business failure or success was obscure to the wider community; it is only through Blee's

³⁵Unsurprisingly, such immoderate boasting from a woman could not go unchallenged; fellow committeemen demanded Wheatcraft's removal from her position of power (ibid.).

interpretation that the community manipulation becomes apparent (149). All of the sources interviewed by Blee failed to see a political theme running through the series of business failues; business failures or sudden dramatic increases were discounted as inevitable, or owing to larger market forces -- even as a family member's Klan status was simultaneously acknowledged (150). In short, people's willingness to attribute face value to events, be they business changes or apparently innocuous activities on the part of the evidently disempowered, itself becomes an important legitimizing tool for all sorts of communities. It is a lesson hard learned by communities in and out of power.

Gossip and rumor in these three previous examples are used to revise popular accounts of history -- if we look at the gossip, these historians tell us, we find vastly different, more feasible explanations for political change than standard theories give us. Mickey Hellyer's (1988) accounting of Benjamin Franklin as adult educator, while also revisionist history, is somewhat different in focus -- his message is simply that we should notice the existence of the gossip itself, for that is the surprise within popular accounts of Franklin. Unfortunately, while Hellyer is admirably successful at debunking popular accounts of Franklin as a paragon of virtue and seriousness, he achieves this aim only through a trivializing of gossip. Gossip's

value as an archaeological tool comes about only through its continued trivial status.

Hellyer begins by reminding us that the adult education movement takes Benjamin Franklin as its founder and paragon - Franklin exemplifies the virtues that any adult educator should have of virtuous love of education for its own sake, massive drive towards learning of any sort, self-starter interested not only in self-benefits but the good of others, etc. (12-13). It is Hellyer's contention that this notion of adult education, this notion of Benjamin Franklin, originates in a vacuous conception of history that takes documents at their own words and fails to examine the socioeconomic contexts in which they appear (9). Hellyer's Franklin is a far different character than that portrayed by the Autobiography -- for example, instead of Franklin being solely or chiefly responsible for a number of civic improvements to the city of Philadelphia (starting the first library, fire department, Penn State University, the Junto discussion group, a hospital, advancing public safety [15-17]), as the Autobiography attests, Franklin was one of smaller and larger groups involved in these different projects; and Franklin's role was often simply fundraising, or some public speaking, or mere member participation (148-152). Hellyer's Philadelphia is also a far different Philadelphia than what many other American historians portray. Franklin's placing of himself in the "middling

sort" amounts to a freezing of eighteenth-century Philadelphia into relatively static socioeconomic classes, which Hellyer argues was clearly not the case (17). Philadelphia at that point in time, Hellyer argues, was filled with poor farmers, laborers, artisans, many of whom were illiterate, many of whom were attempting to acquire more profitable occupations (19, 32). Hellyer notes that Franklin **was** quite distinctly part of this group; and in fact, that Franklin's love for learning and knowledge had much more to do with Franklin's desire to acquire wealth and status in Philadelphia than a generic seeking of knowledge (32). In particular, Hellyer notes that wealthy merchants were idolized by Franklin as paragons of educated men, precisely because much of what they self-evidently knew was practical (128).

Franklin's own practicality, while clearly in evidence in the Autobiography, is also humorously highlighted by Hellyer. Under several pen names, Franklin criticized American women sharply for gossiping and scandalmongering, among other things (146). Yet when it came to reaping the benefits of scandal for his own profit, Franklin was anything but timid. His ability to print his own Almanac was a direct result of his running his competitor out of

town based on a series of anonymous attacks to his rival's credibility in another paper (192-193).³⁶

The bulk of Hellyer's analysis that repaints Franklin comes when he analyzes the Junto, the "Franklin-originated" discussion group that met from 1717-1732. Hellyer notes that the idyllic reputation the Junto has as the original adult education group is based mainly on Franklin's Autobiography, given that no formal minutes exist for the Junto. Given the dubious accuracy the Autobiography has already established for many of Franklin's activities, the Junto deserves closer examination. Upon examining the member rolls (the initial 12, expanded to more), Hellyer discovers that the Juntoites were a series of small businessmen, farmers and artisans, attempting to work up the economic ladder, with no particular talent for or interest in the arts or sciences (194-206). Indeed, the stories Hellyer turns up about the Juntoites stress their joviality and fondness for drinking more than anything else (ibid.).

The few written proceedings of the Junto that do exist only underscore this impression. Early meetings of the

³⁶In brief, the rival (Samuel Keimer) printed an article about abortion (taken from an encyclopedia) in his paper (he was moving through the encyclopedia, one article a day); Franklin and a friend wrote an enraged response as two modest, offended females. This article, along with Franklin's continual publication of the anonymous "Busybody Papers" attacking Keimer, threatened his financing to the point where he had to flee town under cover of darkness, at which point his shop and pressworks were sold (cheaply) to Franklin (192-193).

Junto, Hellyer notes, were held at the Conestoga Waggon [sic] Tavern (237); and one of the procedures for initiation into the Junto consisted of asking candidates to answer four questions, each question and answer followed by a glass of wine. This procedure was followed by a new rule to continue the four queries the next night, if they all couldn't be finished in one (236). The other procedure that gets significant attention from Hellyer is the list of 24 queries meetings were opened with. Only one of the 24 (the first) has anything to do with the general knowledge topics that are typically supposed to be the foundations of adult education ("history, morality, poetry, physic, travel, mechanic or other parts of knowledge" [237]); of the remaining 23, 16 are distinctly gossipy in nature ("what new story have you lately heard agreeable for telling in conversation?" "what unhappy effects of intemperance have you lately observed or heard? of imprudence? of passion? or any other vice or folly?" "Have you lately heard any member's character attacked, and how have you defended it?" [237-239])). While Hellyer and I clearly disagree on the extent of gossip at Junto meetings that the questions invited (he only regards 4 of the 24 questions as gossipy in nature [240]), we agree on the general frivolity of the Junto -- he notes that singing became a main activity of Junto meetings, particularly near their ending (243), and

that the penalty for missing meetings became buying a pint of wine for each fellow Juntoite (255).

Hellyer points out that Franklin wrote the Autobiography over several years; beginning it well before the American Revolution and not finishing it until after the Revolution (37). Given that, Hellyer argues, it's plausible (and many scholars agree with him) that Franklin wrote (and more importantly, rewrote -- significant revisions and deletions are in evidence in the manuscript over its 20-year composition) the Autobiography to be used as a piece of political propaganda - in other words, explicitly aware of the need for new ideological and political foundations for the new society, and creating an "American persona" that would satisfy those needs (137). Those scholars contend that Franklin, in trying to promote popular support for the U.S. cause against Britain and continuing emigration to the States, portrays the U.S. "as a Utopia for common folks, a virtual Mecca of opportunity and freedom" (138). What's ultimately interesting to me about Hellyer's dissertation is that he doesn't seem to think that these facts about Franklin should in any way dim the luster of his genuine contributions towards knowledge and politics - his activities as ambassador to France, his discovery of electricity. Quite explicitly, he points out at several times that he doesn't think we should regard as internally inconsistent or morally outrageous Franklin's clearly

dominant drive for success or his ambitious rewriting of his past to drum up support for the fledgling Republic. For Hellyer, the more complete portrait of Franklin (as the gossipy boozier trying to get an advantage on his business rivals, as the cranky Teutonophobe defying the Western Pennsylvanians' claim on the state's resources, as the aging propagandist resentful of his friends of youth's potential to disrupt his advertising efforts on behalf of himself and the U.S.) is simply the truer Franklin. He points out that most people take on goals for selfish interests as well as selfless (19), and, more to the point, that we lose sight of the ability to appropriately characterize our own age if we always are casting ourselves in impossibly inferior positions to ridiculously rose-colored previous ages.

Regrettably, Hellyer undercuts his own argument. Hellyer's argument that the warts-and-all Franklin is the truer Franklin shows rather starkly against his own rather rose-hued final remarks about the Franklin of the Junto. After pointing out that Franklin lost interest in the Junto after the initial five or six years, and that Franklin rewrote its proceedings and minutes to try to give it more legitimacy (253-254), Hellyer closes by noting that "the Junto appears to have been somewhat less of a factor in the lives of its members than previously assumed. Membership did not necessarily bring success, for many who belonged never achieved it. Those like Franklin, who made their

mark, went on to gain social and economic prominence in other areas and by other means" (271). In a backhanded way, this passage attempts to restore prominence to Franklin, by suggesting that his participation in the Junto was simple frivolity, and shouldn't be taken seriously as a real part of his character. Franklin saw through the nonsubstance of the Junto, runs Hellyer's subterranean argument, he rewrote the Junto for posterity, and then he really settled down and did the work for which we revere him. More subtly, what I see as a stronger subliminal thread through Hellyer's closing here is a fundamental restoration of primacy to categories of earnestness, diligence and gravity to education -- while you can learn for selfish goals, you can only be learning if you are actually talking directly and didactically about "history, morality, poetry, physic, travel, mechanic" knowledge; these are the only inquiries Hellyer finally slots in as about "adult education" (238). Defenders would argue this is a true strong reading - for doesn't Hellyer himself say that adult education can be about anything at all, that it is the process, that it defines itself, when he introduces the topic in his first chapter? Doubtless this is the case -- my point in raising this issue is only that Hellyer's concluding by dismissing the Junto as a significant impact on Franklin's life (no doubt with the credible intentions of freeing adult education up from its canonical restraints), I think, does

the historical disservice of exactly restoring canonical priorities to what we should be doing. If we are still to hold Franklin in some esteem, as Hellyer explicitly argues, then clearly part of the reason is **because** the Junto is dissociated from Franklin's **real** accomplishments.

Conclusion

In what sense are the lessons these humanists teach us any different from those within the previous chapter? In many ways, they have the same message to convey -- gossip and rumor are negative contagions that can strike otherwise epistemically peaceful communities at will, spreading falsehoods and damaging feuds wildly in their wake. Gossip and rumor encourage division, obscure facts, and undermine rationality. These sound like the same ills witnessed before, in reading Bergmann, Haviland et al. But what is new here? I would argue that first, the theorists in this chapter generally represent an advance over the theories and methods within the last chapter. Remember that overwhelmingly, the constraint within the last chapter was that social scientists would apply overly rigid and reductive methods to what is inherently complicated, hard to appreciate (or even distinguish) phenomenon. The result, save for the few exceptions I noted, was predictable: social science analyses of gossip overwhelmingly do little more than confirm the prejudicial definition with which it

is historically encumbered (it is trivial, negative chatter about personal lives -- it wastes time). While it is certainly clear that for many of the writers I document in this chapter, gossip and rumor still have a substandard status (they are still less than truthful, less than ideal, less than positive means of conveying information); it is important to note that the freedom of method by which humanists work generally enables them to grant somewhat more autonomy to gossip.

What do I mean by this? Several things. First, I think it's worth noticing that none of the theorists writing here are so clearly advocating morality thinly disguised as science as does Jörg Bergmann in the previous chapter. That in itself represents an advance of sorts -- the agendas, whatever they may be, are simultaneously more openly presented and less antagonistic. Secondly and more generally, I also think that the humanists in this chapter (even the tropesters of the first section) attribute some kind of content to gossip -- even if they think it is merely a passive phenomenon that represents, the representations the theorists document carry with them some weight. Even the most pedantic of the writers on gossip here (Spacks and Bok) allow that gossip provides uniquely available information, information that can be relevant to our understanding of other people. Indeed, I think of the methodological divide between the writers of the last

chapter and those of this one as representable by two opposed trajectories. Most of the social scientists I reviewed start with their highly rational methodology, determined to uncover the truth about gossip. Their orderliness and methodological reductiveness reveal only the most stereotypical facets of gossip. In somewhat of a contrast are the humanists of this chapter, who generally start with less orderly methods, and frequently openly cite the randomness of gossip and rumor as being defining features of their study (cf. Code, Turner, Spacks). Consequently, their studies are generally less trivializing of gossip, because they at least get at some feature of why we do in fact gossip -- because it matters to us, it has impact for us.

Humanists can discern some impact to gossip in part I would say to their training. Notice that when the theorists of the last chapter referred to gossip as narrative (Haviland, Bergmann principally), it was always with a very reduced notion of what constitutes narrative -- I tell you a story, you politely listen. Quite to the contrary, the writers in this chapter who invoke notions of narrative to ground their analyses of gossip almost universally have a more collective understanding of narrative -- we tell stories together, we each contribute information, analysis, interpretation, speculation. The story the group produces is not only quite different from that any one of its members

would produce, but definitely **not** reducible to the totality of facts that the individuals possess. The group dynamic itself is responsible for the production of the story. Only Miller, Latour and Woolgar, and Gluckman (1963) from the last chapter seem to possess any substantial notion of how collective minds can exist and operate in fashions significantly different from individuals.

This is not to say, of course, that our analysis of gossip can rest with the job done by the humanists. While it is true that they are **less** judgmental and trivializing in their approaches to gossip than the social scientists, there still appears in their work the stain of dismissal. Perhaps the downside to the humanists' acute approach to gossip as narrative is their ultimate inability to regard gossip and rumor as anything else other than entertaining stories. By this I mean that while the humanists generally are willing to admit some kind of relevance and content to the stories of gossip and rumor, it is so in a diminished sense -- while our gossip may have some kind of truth value, its subjects are never too central or very risky. We don't gossip about what fundamentally matters to us; our gossip is always of an intimate nature (that is to say, personal, subjective, derivative from Serious Truth). I see my project in the final chapter then, as constructing a new approach to gossip -- demonstrating that telling stories is not just entertaining campfire work but a very serious way we have of

making truth. The archaeological talents writers in the previous chapters have demonstrated (Miller, Latour and Woolgar, Gluckman [1963], Turner, Scott, Guha, Blee, Hellyer) will gain resonance and relevance with a new understanding of what gossip is: how gossip is not simply a social artifact to be measured, an oral historical document to be uncovered, an alternative narrative to combine with our authorities. My hope is to show how much of our "rational" work, our methodical behavior, our "serious" thought is nothing more than gossip, and that gossip in its turn is thinking at its most engaged, its most active, its most challenging. Gossip, in short, is necessarily and ineluctably intertwined with our mental functions -- it is one resource among many, all of which we rely upon simultaneously. If I can realize this project successfully, my rather backbiting analyses of previous gossipists will be productive.

CHAPTER 3

WHY GOSSIP IS ALMOST ALWAYS RIGHT; TOWARDS

A GOSSIPY EPISTEMOLOGY

Theories of gossip are always, no matter with what intentions their composers begin, zero-sum equations. That is to say, no matter how sincerely social scientists and humanists tackle the concepts of gossip and rumor with the goal of eradicating particular dichotomies we use in our lives (e.g., for social science, gossip is a way of undermining social rankings previously thought rigid -- society becomes both more knowable and more intimate; for humanists gossip is a means by which obscure human emotions can be expressed, a channel for otherwise impermissible authorial meaning), they only achieve their marks of lifting gossip's status in one or another arena by lowering it, correlatively, in another. My first two chapters lay this move out clearly, curious though it is. Most gossip theorists I cite enthusiastically embrace and defend the study of gossip on their pages xx and xxii, only to shamefacedly confess, by the time they get to their page 200s, that they really are of course only studying something that is indicative of social dynamics or interaction, that has little to do with knowledge.

Notice that the emphasis of where gossip departs from knowledge possibility is different depending upon the discipline; for the social scientists, gossip is powerful

but ultimately irrational, an expression of individual social hostility or anxiety, or a titration of complicated social rules (thou shalt not...). For the humanists, gossip can have a kind of coherence (their emphasis on narrative means that gossip can make a lot of sense on its face, doesn't have to be explained purely in terms of what it represents), but ultimately has little relevance outside a very narrow situation or group, and often has significance only for an individual gossipier.

This state of affairs means that ultimately, instead of working to undermine social categories, gossip in academic work serves to underscore them (to return to our examples, ethnographic gossip research, rather than strictly undermining the notion of social rank, describes it rather as an infinitely divisible yet still all-important function; humanist gossip writing, by placing gossip's narrative content in stereotypically emotional gossip categories [gossip is always about personal jealousy, anger, cattiness] renders gossip simply another, not-that-different literary trope). More broadly, the net result of these analyses of gossip is that we learn nothing about gossip that we couldn't already have easily guessed about ourselves -- these analyses teach us nothing about gossip that isn't formulaically true. In particular, none of these explanations can really offer a substantial explanation for the occurrence of gossip as a unique social phenomenon. In

other words, if gossip really is nothing more than just another form of social ranking, or alternatively a further opportunity to express personal emotions, why would humans gossip as we so enthusiastically and perennially do? Why bother to gossip, if there are more straightforward ways of measuring social rank, or expressing personal emotions, and if (as so many gossipists still believe) the act carries with it irremediable social stigma? (And of course, why bother to write academic study after study of gossip, if it is so apparently uninformative?) In attempting to answer these questions, to ascertain more clearly what gossip is and why we do it (and why gossip can be of philosophic import), I seek here to dig beneath the stereotype and to capture more of the instructive flavor of gossip.

Let me make this critique more particular, by iterating the various dichotomies I have observed academic writers on gossip and rumor, from all disciplinary backgrounds, endlessly repeating. Gossip is either entirely individual in its motivation, or entirely social; gossip bonds, or gossip attacks; gossip is either entirely idle or fully purposive; controlling or uncontrollable; public or private; inventing truth or distorting it (if it is not an outright lie). This entire set of dichotomies itself seems false to me: a contrived collection of fictions designed to make us fit gossip with a totalizing **value** -- either it is good or evil. What I want to explore here are the ways in which

gossip can genuinely be on both sides of these dichotomies; in short, how these dichotomies ultimately must fail to capture the character of gossip¹.

These dichotomies fail, of course, because the truth of the matter is that we never live within dichotomies -- they are simply convenient constructs that allow us momentary identification-points when the complicated character of life threatens to overwhelm us. It seems to me that gossip is one of the more straightforward examples of how it is we do not in fact live by categories while simultaneously pretending that we do. I have spent the last two chapters debunking the illusion of categories in academic writing, and how the strict maintenance of epistemic and social categories capsizes academic writing on gossip; here I must trace out some of the ways in which gossip reveals our between-category status, and the philosophic implications this revelation entails. To get this analysis off the

¹Paul Hirst and Penny Woolley (1982) suggest mechanisms by which similar dichotomies might be straddled in their novel, and under-appreciated work on Social Relations and Human Attributes. They begin by noting that they will not be using the word "society" throughout their book, as they consider it a misnomer: it inappropriately suggests a totalizing, unifying character to social relations and behaviors that cannot be described or aetiologized from any one particular tradition (vii-viii). Analogously, my purpose here is to suggest how both "gossip" and "epistemology" fill similar categories -- gossip does not have consistent functions and markers, nor does the work of epistemology present itself equally clearly and straightforwardly for our divination.

ground, however, we must begin very truly at the beginning:
with a new understanding of gossip.

3.1 Its Definition

As the preceding two chapters have made overwhelmingly clear, central to my discomfort with the extant academic literature on gossip is its inability to define gossip in such a way as to allow for a reasonably complicated discussion of its presence and effects. At its worst, gossip is definitionally and metaphorically the conversational equivalent of napalm: vindictive and pointed, gossip and rumor carelessly or with deadly purpose destroy lives, institutions, careers, marriages, families. At its best, gossip is a harmless addiction of which we cannot rid ourselves: necessarily idle talk, implicitly purposeless and vacuous, but entertaining. These definitional strands which have previously limited any lively understanding of gossip (it is always personal talk about the absent; it is either entirely idle or else it is malicious and/or sordid), I believe, force the analyses which follow them along similarly warped and distorted paths.

The academics who consider gossip regularly acknowledge that gossip's etymology is rather far removed from its more recent, notorious reputation; but both how this removal occurred and whether or not it accurately reflects the practice of gossip is far less regularly remarked upon. The word "gossip" derives from old English's "god sibb" or "god-related," a relative or close friend of the family, someone

who could act in a parental or guiding role, should the parents die (there is a similar Old Norse origin). In short, originally, to be a gossip was simply to be a confidant, someone who was a trusted close companion². This usage of the word lasted at least into the fourteenth century; Boccaccio's Decameron several times invokes the "gossip" as simply a close family friend, who acts as a parent or relative. While the inscription of gossip into a word with vicious and idle did not officially occur until the eighteenth century (Johnson's dictionary), even one or two centuries before the dictionary definition gossip had acquired a sufficiently questionable reputation to be satisfactory evidence to convict someone of witchcraft. But notice that while this transvaluation of gossip is regularly noticed, not one academic has offered an explanation for its occurrence³. More pointedly, without being able to explain **why** it is that gossip rather suddenly and completely

²It is true that even at this point "rumor" did not enjoy quite so sterling a reputation; in the Aeniad Virgil writes of rumor powerfully destroying both Dido and Aenias. However, even there rumor is hardly malicious or pointed, simply naturally destructive. My thanks to Bill Hills for alerting me to this allusion.

³Happily, some academics are making inroads towards explaining the transvaluation. Susie Phillips (1996) argues that medieval male novelists and ministers use the tactics of gossip both to undermine gossip as an immoral activity and to fix it as primarily the work of women. Phillips supplies evidence that medieval women used gossip explicitly to undermine male sexual confidence. While this explanation is not fully persuasive to me (I still wonder why it is that the transvaluation occurred when it did), Phillips has moved the debate significantly forward.

acquires a reputation of viciousness, academics still hold rather tightly to this newer conception of gossip. As I have exhaustively demonstrated in the previous chapters, even those academics who claim to "rescue" gossip from the clutches of condemnation (Spacks' phrase) themselves only slightly more subtly condemn it on similar terms.

What I suggest here is not my own explanation for why the transvaluation occurred when it did, but simply a challenge to its legitimacy. Let me offer an example to demonstrate the feasibility of alternative views in this debate. In On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche presents us with a simple lesson: in presocratic times, we operated by different value tables, those of good and bad (e.g. noble/beautiful/productive vs. lowly/ugly/useless) rather than the contemporary, Judeo-Christian good and evil (e.g. humble/other-serving/unselfish vs. arrogant/self-serving/selfish). While initially these more modern values may have had revolutionary status, Nietzsche argues that there is no logical reason for us still to be compelled by these values with which we currently live; indeed, all these values serve to do is to constrain us from acting on what might otherwise be enormously creative and invigorating impulses. Why **not** reverse the value tables, Nietzsche asks his readers; why not believe and live by an older notion of good and bad, instead of a newer, more limiting theory of good and evil? Nietzsche, rather than propounding logical arguments

criticizing modern morality, challenges his readers to come up with an alternative morality that is superior.

Such, on a dramatically reduced scale, would be my goal in this section. Gossip's very character, intent and effect has been inverted and distorted by centuries of writers and moralists. In so doing, they have taken what was surely not once simply good and pure (for who can say that any social manifestation is all goodness?), but rather complicated, and reduced it to sheer vindictiveness, a venial sin to be avoided at all costs. While I have certainly attempted to exhaustively demonstrate the comparative weakness of most standard writing on gossip, I would similarly challenge readers to come up with superior theories of gossip, theories that explain more of social and intellectual interaction. Why not return gossip to its original roots and meanings; why not reconceive gossip in terms of what it can do, rather than what some people consider it as failing to do?

What, then, would an etymologically truer definition of gossip look like? First, let us consider the origin of the word -- simply, a person in an intimate relation to another. That vague definition is far from the conditional, precise definition philosophers so enjoy; however, I think that that kind of vague definitional work might be more appropriate to a concept that is so social in nature. One of the main problems I have with the tidy definitions that the social

scientists and humanists use is that they reduce gossip to a series of conditions. If A and B and C, then gossip (or testimony or hearsay or rumor or...). These conditions, because they themselves are overwhelmingly static and restrictive (e.g. an easily identifiable **category** of talk, occurring between **kinds** or **numbers** of people, with particular emphasis on the content of the talk), don't really capture what I think is the fundamentally amorphous quality of gossip. Max Gluckman astutely notes that it is often difficult to discern when a conversation is and is not gossip; the arena of gossip is difficult to circumnavigate. Social scientists and humanists, by making the border mechanistically easy to identify, have succeeded only in dramatically reducing the domain of gossip. There are really only a very few kind of conversations those gossip researchers will even hear or think of as gossip. More particularly, they'll miss the flavor of how gossip happens. Conversely, I seek to expand the field of gossip.

I find Gluckman's argument for gossip's fluid nature far more persuasive than most gossip research because I think it captures what I see as the three essential, and essentially vague, tendencies or characteristics of gossip: It is informal, comparatively intimate, and evaluative (or speculative/investigative) conversation.

Let me give a brief initial explanation of each characteristic. First, by calling gossip "informal" I mean

to suggest that gossip conversations aren't highly patterned or regulated -- we can't identify gossip conversations by the conversational path they take (contra Bergmann, who argues for a specific conversational path to gossip; who similarly only sees gossip as occurring when one person tells a nasty story to one or more essentially passive auditors). So "informal" first means something like not governable, chaotic, unruly. But secondly, and more importantly, by "informal" we might easily assume that gossip, "real" gossip, cannot be written down -- it can only be oral. I do not think that that is necessarily so. The second and third characteristics will flesh out more clearly where I draw my vague distinctions between what written chatter is gossip and what is not, but it is certainly true that we can converse informally with others through writing (letters, email, "chat" rooms on the internet). However, by this definition, "gossip" magazines and television shows (People, National Enquirer, The Gossip Show, Walter Winchell's television and radio broadcasts) are not necessarily gossip.

In what ways can gossip be intimate? Bergmann, and many other gossipists, would place an extreme value on intimacy -- because they attribute a high degree of social suspicion towards gossip, they assume that only pretty close friends would gossip with each other, and then only in relative secret, or while doing various "disguising"

activities (e.g. pretending to work). I think that this emphasis is overexaggerated, but nonetheless, I do think that gossip is intimate to the extent that we do not gossip with complete strangers. We may gossip with people we do not know very well (new coworkers, new neighbors, or new friends can ask for and receive the "dirt" on the workplace, neighborhood, or social circle), but we do have some established social relationship with those with whom we choose to gossip.

Perhaps the most significant of those conditions for me is the last: gossip is investigative, evaluative or speculative. I use these words both as another way of suggesting purpose (for I directly wish to challenge most gossipists' habit of considering gossip necessarily idle conversation), and as a more particular way of discussing purpose. It seems to me that "purpose" often gets reduced to something like "agenda". While these two words seem on the face of it pretty similar, I think they have different connotations; "purpose" can be used more loosely than "agenda". Meetings have agendas that can be written down in numbered items and either followed or ignored; but a purpose can be so loose (my purpose in going to school is to get an education) that it permits an infinite number of particular consequences (for how many different kinds of "educations" do students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members get around and outside of UMASS?).

This is the sense of "purpose" that I think gossipists so often ignore. In other words, if gossip conversations can have purposes, in the gossipology they can typically be nothing more than very particular, and destructive (e.g., destroying some one person's reputation). It seems to me, though, that gossip, because it is necessarily intimate and informal, can have a wider range of purposes than are ever offered it. Further, those purposes can be both conscious and unconscious, multiple for one conversation, personal and impersonal. An example that might make this clearer: central to the debate in the pages of Man over the function of gossip was determining its exact function/origin: individualistic, purely social, performative. Obviously, a perspective that went unnoticed by the theorists is that gossip can be all of those things at once, and none of them necessarily or essentially.

To spell this out more concretely: I might discuss the possible nomination (and eventual ascension) of William Bulger to the presidency of the University of Massachusetts with friends for personal reasons (we are affiliated with the University; we may speculate on possible changes in our jobs, pay levels, student enrollment as a result), for social reasons (we are trying to measure or take account of the University's status in the public -- how prestigious or degrading might it be if William Bulger will be president? How relevant is this for non-UMASS people?), and of course

for performative reasons (for surely the appointment inspires sarcastic speculation on follow-up appointments -- Whitey Bulger as Vice-Chancellor for Administration and Finance?). More to the point, in each of these capacities of gossip we can see crossover and interstices -- Whitey Bulger jokes are not simply performative, but themselves measures of social status and commentary on political situations, just as analysis of the Bulger appointment and its repercussions is both personal and social ("how will my job change" is clearly both a personal and social question). In short, what we think of as "purpose" cannot be reduced to the narrower "agenda," for in so doing we dramatically reduce the context and nuance implicit within conversation - - this reduction produces similarly straitened analysis.

Correlatively, I reject definitions of gossip as necessarily idle, which many gossip theorists favor, because they are both too strong, and too universal in their characterization. Look: no doubt some talk we might think of as gossip is idle in a loose sense, in the sense that it might not be guided by a well-defined agenda. Think of John Beard Haviland "fishing" for gossip on town luminaries in his Gossip, Reputation, and Knowledge: he simply asked people to tell him stories about particular people, with no clue as to what he might hear. Further, it might be easy for us to hear some gossip as particularly idle, because we are outsiders to the conversation; we cannot imagine a

purpose to this storytelling. Recall Sarah Miller's descriptions of women telling pointed fables to each other in her dissertation; to the stranger, these stories might have no purpose other than entertainment or humor (the only purpose usually ascribed to "idle" gossip), but as Miller deftly demonstrates, those stories were indirect arguments for or against particular marital matches -- negotiating sessions in addition to and through entertainment.

The problem with calling gossip necessarily "idle" is that it rules out any significant motive or direction behind the talk -- it a priori renders the gossip trivial and uninteresting. Exactly why I like the looser categories of investigative, speculative, and evaluative is that I think they both allow for the breadth of motives one might encounter, and more importantly, they invite the auditor to dig into the context and layers of the conversation, rather than to reduce it to simplistic readings. Finally, they do not prohibit the necessary degree of casualness and fun that I think is generally intrinsic to gossip, while not robbing gossip of possible functions and purposes. Think again of the introduction to Sarah Miller's dissertation, where she confesses herself unwilling to "commit violence" to the conversations she overhears by assigning them narrow content-categories, as that would reduce complicated and lengthy conversations to simplistic and inaccurate narratives. The thick-descriptiveness that Geertzian social

science aims for, to my mind, demands these more adaptive, less directive, kinds of definitions.

If we reject reductive definitions of gossip, then, I must be able to defend **my** particular broad definition of gossip as informal, intimate, and evaluative/speculative/investigative conversation. What these three conditions capture to me is the essence of gossip: gossip is the conversation of friendship. Friendships are informal; we don't need to stand on ceremony with those we know well and who know us. Similarly, because we are with people with whom we are comfortable, we can venture out of familiar conversational territory -- we can investigate ideas we might not believe in, discuss people or events we are curious about but might otherwise be unwilling to reveal those curiosities, explore riskier lines of thought and belief⁴. Friendship is not universal -- we're not friends with everyone we encounter -- but by the same token it's not necessarily prohibitive or exclusive. We don't always, or even often settle ourselves into snug corners or Cones of Silence to trade scandalous stories -- we run into colleagues or casual friends or neighbors, and **as** we talk about filing papers or town developments or lawn-mowing, we also weave in and out of gossip (and the gossip, let me make

⁴I am hardly the first person to suggest this; but most explicitly, Susan Hutson points out that "informality in behaviour implies equality, familiarity with and knowledge of the other person" (in Bailey, Gifts and Poison 44).

clear, may overtly or covertly be about the filing papers or town developments or lawn-mowing, or anything else). The gossip is intrinsically connected to, springs from, and is related to, the general conversations we have within and between communities. Also, the combination of "intimate" and "informal" suggests the playful, not entirely serious tenor that conversations between friends can take on (which acts as a nice counterweight to the condition of purpose). When talking to a familiar, trusted intimate, I am free to be playful **even as** I explore potentially threatening, depressing or frightening possibilities (might I be fired? might my new neighbor be a harassingly loud bore with a vigilante attitude towards street pets?).

Now obviously, "the conversation of friendship" is an enormous conversational category, and could rightly be called too hopelessly vague and enormous to be of any philosophic merit. But hear me out; more importantly, reflect for a moment on the kinds of conversations you have with your friends. Depending on how you know your friends (from childhood, school, work, politics, hobbies, neighborhood), how long you've known your friends, how well you know them, you can talk about a wide or narrow variety of topics with them. More particularly, there are no doubt some topics you can discuss with some friends but not others.

The point of all of this is not to suggest the high categorizability of friendships, but ultimately how impossible friendships themselves are to categorize or to order (for example, for each of these categories I have just listed, surely it is not too difficult to think of friends who have breached the categories; friendships that have been enduring but shallow, friendships that once involved much conversational territory but now are limited to a narrow range, workplace friends with whom you can discuss anything **but** work-related topics, etc.). In short, friendship itself cannot be reduced to a series of content-conditions; less so can the conversations that mark it. It seems to me that if anything marks a friendship it is the comparative lack of boundaries. Within a friendship, one can discuss topics that one cannot discuss elsewhere (or perhaps, cannot discuss in the same informal manner), true; but that does not mean that **only** those conversations mark friendship, or only those conversations are relevant. Those idiosyncratic and intimate conversations happen in the midst of banal conversations, may stem from hostile conversations, or relate to other conversations. It is the very fact that friendships are both intimate and informal that they can carry with them such wildly varying conversational themes, contents, styles, manners. "Conversations" have many themes, many topics, and many threads. To isolate the stereotypically gossipy moments out of the conversations

within a friendship and say that these and these alone mark the friendship is absurd.

Now that I have established some of the reach of gossip (what it includes), let me at least preliminarily draw some limits to gossip. First, and most importantly, where do (or don't) rumor and gossip overlap? As I have suggested in earlier chapters, some theorists (most notably Brison) use the terms so loosely that they are clearly interchangeable; still others (most clearly Scott) arrive at arbitrary distinctions between gossip and rumor (gossip is about people; rumors are about events). I would like to position myself between these extremes; while I think that in general, rumor and gossip are roughly coexistent (both are unruly social formations, both are evaluative/investigative/speculative), I think that rumors tend to display these characteristics more weakly. Rumors can be very informally passed (I could spread a rumor to a virtual stranger -- "did you hear 50% of the student body is sick with the flu?" relatively unknown TAs have said to me, and I have to them, standing in line for the xerox machine). As this example shows, rumors can be more general-interest than gossip; we can spread rumors to comparative strangers because their topics can be less located, less tied to a community (someone might not need to have too much local knowledge to understand or be interested in a rumor).

More importantly, rumors are less necessarily tied to conversations, and conditions of conversation. We can easily imagine spreading a rumor to another person quickly, without a surrounding conversation (the flu example above is a clear demonstration); however, it is harder to imagine just stopping and gossiping with someone without surrounding layers of communication. This is so because gossip, while not more dangerous than rumor, is more intimate; we gossip with people because we know or suspect that they might be interested or have a perspective we want to hear. While I have general reservations about the social transactive analysis so many writers wish to ascribe to gossip (where gossip simply becomes an item of social currency to be exchanged), rumors come closer to fitting that analysis than gossip. It is easier for me to imagine passing that flu rumor, without too much discussion, to all sorts of audiences (undergraduates, graduates, staff, faculty, townspeople); whereas in a gossip situation an initial "item" might begin an entirely different frame of discussion that travels a variety of topics and evaluative paths, depending on the group, their interests, their backgrounds, their intentions.

A second limitation, which I only briefly addressed above, is the distinction between printed and spoken gossip. As I said earlier, some written forms of gossip such as email and Internet chat rooms are clearly no different from

verbal gossip conversations other than in their inscriptiveness, and therefore should be treated similarly. The fact that the conversation is printed on screens rather than directly oral changes little about the flavor of the conversation⁵. But more troubling are gossip magazines and television shows, where no apparent community of friendship exists. It is true that in all of these other situations, a kind of intimacy is being presumed -- many gossip commentators have observed the "insider" assumption gossip magazines make about their readers, that of course readers know background information about the story at hand.

However, what does distinguish gossip magazines, television shows and columns in particular from these other forms of gossip is their one-sidedness; here the more general definition of gossip as conversation becomes paramount. Conversations are necessarily social -- at least two people must talk **with** each other. While Bergmann regards gossip as little else than one person telling a tale to at least one intrinsically passive listener, if we consider gossip genuine conversations, then we must allow for genuine back-and-forth contribution between

⁵Certainly, written conversation is absent the facial contortions and vocal intonations that mark conversations (hence Bergmann's energetic attempt to capture all the extra-linguistic qualities of his taped gossip-conversations). But, as any email habitué will attest, capitalizing letters, creative punctuation, and those annoying typographical facial expressions [e.g. ;-)] can contribute much, if still artificially, towards a simulated conversation.

participants. Contribution is more possible in electronic fora, than in essentially fixed gossip media (columns, magazines, television shows). While, as I have argued earlier, audiences can (and do) interpret the material in a variety of fashions with a variety of attitudes, their intimate connection to the material is more selective. In short, of the 20 or so articles in a recent issue of People, only one may be of real interest to me (say, the speculative piece about Jodie Foster's sexual orientation). The piece interests me because it resonates with the immediate world around me; as such, it becomes material for my interpretation of myself and my surroundings (I am trying to establish my own beliefs about the propriety of "outing"). Because of the context of my set of background beliefs, my current interest in the topic, I will read this article differently than I will read others in that issue -- I will be more attentive. As such, I will be in a position to "talk back" to the article -- I will use the article one way or another in the life I lead. Because I see the article as having bearing on me, even though I do not really know any of the principals in the piece or its author, and have no way of determining whether or not the article has any claim to veracity, I will use it as gossip in a way I would not use the other pieces in the magazine⁶. Further, others I

⁶Let me note that even this mild example of readers thinking about gossip critically seems beyond even the most advanced work on gossip magazines and their readership. In

know may have read or will read this article, and we might share our differing or overlapping perspectives. In this sense, while my individual reaction may have no resonance with the principals or the author, I as a member of a community will affect and determine the reception of this kind of material⁷. So, items in gossip columns and magazines, and on gossip television shows, may indeed function as gossip, but they are audience-specific (and audience-dependent) in a way that makes them even harder to distinguish as gossip than conversational gossip, and which for our purposes makes them difficult as research resources.

Let us return to the objective of this section: challenging the current orthodoxy of gossip conceptualization. Even after all of these defenses and

her Reading Women's Magazines (1995), Joke Hermes does differentiate between those who read gossip mags "seriously" and "campily" (121), but not only is her differentiation a bifurcation (serious and camp readings may never interpenetrate), her use of "serious" is a misnomer, self-consciously borrowed from Patricia Meyer Spacks. Hermes' readers' seriousness seems limited to pleasure, and "an **imaginary** sense of power" (123-124, emphasis mine). In short, we can't do much with gossip other than distract ourselves from the outside world, and delusionally. The idea of a gossip reader using gossip critically, even as s/he enjoys herself gossiping, escapes Hermes' ken.

⁷Perhaps a more orthodox philosophical defense of this position would be to invoke Derrida's attack of the artificial division (and privileging) of speech over the written word, which hypothesizes not only an absolute and essential difference between the two, but to each an absolutely referential relationship to an always-existent, always outside Truth. See his Dissemination, especially 164-168.

explications of my definition, some readers might still challenge my attempt to contradict the bulk of the literature on gossip. To return to the etymological argument for a moment, I would ask readers to examine how "gossip" gets expressed in different languages. In his dissertation, Ori Bet Or presents definitions of gossip in 12 different languages (Arabic, English, French, Filipino, German, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Polish, Russian, Spanish [314-322]); in her research, Miller discusses the word's Nepalese meaning (345). In general, there are no strictly positive words for gossip (in many languages there is no direct cognate), in many languages all the words for gossip are more and less negative in connotation, and often, there is no one word for gossip (i.e., several of the Romance languages have two or three words for gossip, in a sliding scale of moral severity, including variations on 'defamation' and 'calumny'). What strikes me as Bergmannesque about other gossipists' caving in to linguistic tyranny is that there's this assumption again that the vox populi is both easily readable, and a mandate.

Now before this simply sounds confused (i.e., I'm writing about gossip, and how gossip makes truth, and yet I want to say that what people actually say doesn't have anything to do with truth), I think that words people use to express concepts are simply necessarily loose, and don't fit

particularly well the ideas or things we are trying to describe. Simply looking at the evidence I just quickly presented will demonstrate this fact. As I have shown, many writers on gossip and rumor use those words interchangeably; more particularly, "gossip" doesn't have one meaning across the world -- indeed, in most non-English languages, people more directly describe their talk according to its tone than to the simple constructions of how many people are there and whether or not it has truth (the standard gossip evaluators use to identify gossip's presence). Consider as an analogue the fact that our modern 'wimp' derives originally from 'wimple'. At this point, "wimp" has its own independent connotations; we don't think about nunnish headdresses when we contemplate someone's alleged wimpiness. But at least one point to etymology can be to show that words are not necessarily good fits to what they describe. Similarly, I would argue that our "official" understanding of gossip doesn't match what many people colloquially understand by the term; I think it is time to bring the academic literature up to date. Depending on the language you examine, what we may consider to be "gossip" has many linguistic origins - ties of friendship or kinship, spying, chat, slander. If there are origins both good and bad, connotations both womanly and manly (i.e. god sibbs weren't a particular gender, but as of the 18th century gossip became identified as a woman's activity), why do we hold

narrowly to some of the definitions or linguistic genealogies rather than others? More to the point, why do gossip writers in English tend to combine all of the derogatory analyses of gossip in their understandings of what it is and how it functions, collapsing away many of the fine distinctions non-English definitions of gossip observe?

It is clear that gossip, the English word has until relatively recently had both positive and negative connotations, but that the emphasis since the eighteenth century, in the academic writing, has become simply negative. That doesn't mean that we must stay slave to linguistic tradition and order (hermeneutic delay on a linguistic level). Again, as the evidence of many cultures' evident comfort with and reliance upon gossip for social sustenance and vital information makes clear (cf. the conversations reported in Brison, Miller, Haviland), for academics to invert the gossip definition away from this punitive trend would not be a rebellion against the common tongue, but rather a realignment of analysis to current informal linguistic and social practice.

In other words, "the conversations of friendship," while being minimally qualified (again, conversations that are comparatively intimate, informal, and investigative, speculative or evaluative), should necessarily remain our amorphous boundary of gossip, and is adequate as it stands -
- to construct a more rigid boundary is to suggest an

artificial changing of tone, attitude and purpose to conversations where we cannot necessarily mark one, and ultimately, to suggest a legitimacy and a historical necessity to an arbitrary moral agenda.

3.2 Why (and How) Epistemology Might Be Informal

Why ought we reconceive gossip; why might it be important to throw out conventional definitions of gossip for a newer, vaguer notion? Most pertinently, reconceiving gossip is a lens by which we can come to a thicker description of conversation; conversations should not be as typified as theorists so generally wish⁸. Rethinking conversation, of course, has resonance within the field of epistemology; if how we behave when we chat with each other is not so easily recognizable as truthful or false, serious or idle, than how it is we come to "know" something through conversation may be more complicated than theorists of knowledge might have us believe.

Throughout this dissertation, I have repeatedly suggested what I consider to be the simple fact that contemporary epistemology has no means with which to

⁸Even advanced conversation theorists such as Erving Goffman, in his distinction between "front-stage" and "back-stage" performance in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959), can only conceive of two possibilities for social behavior (though these may be inter-mediated, and differently received by audiences, as the theatrical metaphor suggests). In short, conversation is still too conventionally considered dialectically (and a closed dialectic at that).

evaluate or even recognize informal knowledge, such as that reached through casual conversation, chatter, gossip. That knowledge -- understandings we reach about people, institutions, objects, events, via series of casual conversations and investigations -- informs to a much greater degree our real-world behaviors, mores, and principles than do the carefully-deliberated philosophic axioms and definitions so prevalent in today's technical journals. It is in part because no academic contemplates the very real possibility that we come to know things informally that so much of the ethnographic and humanist gossip research is so limited in scope; researchers can only come up with trivializing explanations for gossip simply because they cannot imagine more substantive alternatives. To expand the possibilities for social science and humanistic research, epistemology itself must broaden in scope. Informal knowledge, conversational knowledge, must be reckoned with; it cannot be ignored, as if North American philosophers were actually a cluster of socialites at a cocktail party, and gossip the polyester-clad intruder with severe halitosis and attenuated social skills.

Of course, to make such a claim is to beg the philosophic response. Certainly, we get **some sort** of information from gossip, rumor and other informal channels, my elite interlocutor might say; and indeed, many people might even go so far as to **call** it knowledge (as his nose

turns up). But surely we professionals shouldn't actually confuse such addled, scattershot, illogical, petty, or mean-spirited doggerel that is gossip with Actual, Authoritative Truth. Theatrical asides we exchange over coffee cannot be the same as Justified True Belief. As Aristotle argues in the Politics, even though we know there's moral goodness to be had in both the political and the contemplative life, the reason why we must figure out which has priority is so that we can choose the one true life, the best life. Similarly, even though there might be claims to knowledge in gossip and rumor, we still must determine which is closer to truth, chatter or rigorous philosophic argument. And that choice, my hypothetical interlocutor would say, is of course no choice at all -- the answer is clear, only rigorous argument can have any **substantive** connection to truth. Only rigorous argument can actually meaningfully consider possibilities, rationally evaluate them, and (as Aristotle would so admire) calmly select the best among them. Gossip simply consists in random speculation, or vengeful agenda-promoting.

This isn't simply a thought-exercise on my part (although it is of course that first; I am nothing if not a product of my training). My point here is to illustrate what I think is the overwhelming, hard to ignore reaction to any comparison of gossip and (real) knowledge. Whenever I have discussed the topic of gossip with friends or acquaintances, and its relation to knowledge, even those

people most sympathetic to such a project are inclined to voice their sympathy in a very noncommittal way. It is as if gossip can occasionally be coincidentally related to knowledge (you just happen to uncover a juicy, true, personal or institutional scandal; you just happen to evaluate someone's motivations for doing something inexplicable correctly; you just happen to be able to forecast what might happen next in a particular situation); but that only the rational pursuit of knowledge can systematically, reliably produce truth. Even gossip's most empathetic advocates (e.g. Code) are guilty of this assumption. Gossip is at best the accidental cause of knowledge, philosophy its essential cause.

I think that this particular fact points to a more general failing (and perhaps, an inevitable one) within epistemology, one that has been tidily expressed by Jacques Rancière in The Ignorant Schoolmaster (1991). In short, when we are trying to determine something, we are still caught up in the Enlightenment mindset of seeing only the goal of truth -- both while we progress towards that goal and afterwards as we rewrite the story of our progress, we regard the goal as the defining object that characterizes and organizes our endeavors -- errors along the way are simply wiped from the slape of group memory, as if they never occurred. Hence it becomes easy to speak in retrospect of rigorous (not to say rigid) philosophical

thinking as the "essential" cause of truth. Rancière's modest observation⁹ is that this linear, narrativizing approach isn't what's happening when the process of knowledge-seeking is occurring (it can't be). We don't know **what** it is we'll find where we're looking to figure out something -- enquiries into the nature of existence may lead one to a scrupulous study of calculus -- and that we're not wholeheartedly dismissing our searching as it continues. Just because I spend two years of my life in an extensive study of much of the literature on gossip and rumor only to decide that it's deeply flawed doesn't mean that I should say that I wasted my time, or that I learned nothing (neither of which, of course, I would say anyway). And yet that is, on balance, how we treat our attempts. We look only for certitude, or ambiguity that is provocative because we just **know** that somewhere in its nest certitude is resting, passively awaiting our acute detection.

The error I'm seeing professional knowledge-gatherers make is simply ordering (and re-ordering) what we do and think and believe and try according to a straightforward (not to say reductive) test of "does/did it hold true?"¹⁰

⁹One that is echoed by Bob Ackermann in his "On Hermeneutic Delay" (1989).

¹⁰Fervent defenders of the integrity of contemporary analytic epistemology (none of whom, perhaps, sit on this dissertation committee) would disagree with this formulation. I would direct their attention toward Harvey Siegel (1995), who in his defense of "traditional" epistemology against Quine's argument for "naturalized" epistemology replaces that

This is **not** to say that we need to become (equally reductively) warm embracers of "errors" of all sorts, that since a little truth is in everything we should just do as we please and believe what we will. Such an attitude is naive and delusive (as well as frankly impractical). The point is simply that we do ourselves no favors when we pretend that errors have no point in figuring out truth, and that those things that are portentous of truth are somehow easy to determine in advance. Indeed, by sharply discounting the value of half the dichotomy we are trying to live with we show that we can't even handle dichotomies (we can't see or acknowledge a relation between truth and falsity, yet rely on the existence of the second to buttress our belief in the first). Surely this should suggest that at least some of our convictions in knowledge are misplaced and inappropriate.

To hypothesize as to why this deep antipathy towards gossip (and more particularly towards that which is not easily ascertainable as true) exists, I would begin by observing the more general discomfort philosophers have expressed towards conversation as a productive channel of knowledge. On the face of it, this might seem a surprising

standard "justified true belief" chestnut with only slightly vaguer conditions: "epistemic justification, criteria of justification...and the possibility of knowledge" (49). Even traditional epistemology's allies only reformulate confirmational attitudes towards truth; they do not reconceive them.

claim: after all, philosophy has at least part of its origin in Plato's dialogue (conversational) form, and indeed dialogues and conversation remain a fecund topic for more contemporary philosophers. And certainly, some philosophers present themselves as defenders of conversation as the road to truth. However, I would contend that philosophers are only comfortable with the notion of oral knowledge to the extent that they minutely parse up conversation into the important versus the trivial; the purposive contra the idle; and needless to say, men's important discussions against women's nonsensical nattering.

This suspicion is borne out in the philosophic literature on knowledge through conversation. Martin Heidegger, who in Being and Time (1962) presents an extensive argument for the existential, not essential, character of speech [**Sprache**] (203), must still make a distinction between speech that can more perfectly reveal Being (difficult speech, struggling, speech, rational speech), and "fallen" or "thrown" speech, which can only reveal Being by presenting an (always-receding) possibility of its existence (214). Importantly, Heidegger has three illustrations of fallen or thrown speech: idle talk [**Gerede**, later synonymous with gossip], curiosity, and ambiguity. Even more importantly, idle talk is clearly privileged among the three examples. Heidegger sees the need to begin only the section on idle talk with a

disclaimer as to his intentions ("The expression 'idle talk' is not to be used here in a 'disparaging' signification" [211]), suggesting that only here are his intentions harder to ascertain by his prose. Further, when Heidegger sums up the three examples, it is clear that only idle talk has an effective claim upon the other two channels that far surpasses those the other two have on him ("idle talk controls even the ways in which one may be curious" [216]). And sure enough, it would be difficult to read his arguments in this section as anything other than disparaging. For even though he repeats the importance of "fallen" or "thrown" speech for revealing "everyday" Dasein (i.e. Dasein as we experience it in our non-contemplative lives), surely he ascribes little value to that Dasein. Witness this remark:

...The average understanding of the reader will never be able to decide what has been drawn from primordial sources with a struggle and how much is just (sic) gossip. The average understanding, moreover, will not want any such distinction, and does not need it, because, of course, it understands everything. [212]

Heidegger demonstrates that the "average" understanding works only "superficially" and "approximately" (ibid). So while Heidegger apparently thinks that certainly, idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity are of use to the everyday understanding, the everyday understanding itself is to be as deprivileged as possible. Heidegger describes the general

atmosphere created when we operate with idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity as one in which

...everyone is acquainted with what is up for discussion and what occurs, and everyone discusses it; but everyone also knows already how to talk about what has to happen first -- about what is not yet up for discussion but 'really' must be done. Already everyone has surmised and scented out in advance what Others have also surmised and scented out. This Being-on-the-Scent is of course based upon hearsay, for if anyone is genuinely 'on the scent' of anything, he does not speak about it. [217]

Gossip flavors everyday understanding, and a thin, weak flavor it is; those in search of genuine understanding had better avoid those natterers and focus on deep internal reverie. All of this, of course, is within the domain of not being "disparaging".

Heidegger's dismissal of language generally, and gossip most particularly, as uninformative of anything more than "everyday" Dasein is extreme, but linked to the more general dismissals of gossip found throughout the philosophic literature. Kierkegaard, in his The Present Age, describes talkativeness as "the doing away with the vital distinction between talking and keeping silent," and that "mere gossip anticipates real talk, and to express what is still in thought weakens action by forestalling it" (49). Talkativeness and gossip, in short, are conversation about nothing; they perpetuate themselves incessantly because

silence reveals only the emptiness of the surrounding chatter (50)¹¹.

Friedrich Nietzsche alludes to some sort of power to gossip when he writes in The Gay Science that

What we know about ourselves and remember is not so decisive for the happiness of our life as people suppose. One day that which others know about us (or think they know) assaults us -- and then we realize that this is more powerful. It is easier to cope with a bad conscience than to cope with a bad reputation. [115]

While this comment might at first seem at least a bit supportive of gossip (remembering Nietzsche's sustained argument against a notion of an absolute, removed truth, one might infer that he could actually be praising gossip as as good a route as any towards individual subversion of constricting social mores), a closer reading makes it clear that Nietzsche is contemptuous of idle chatter. First, Nietzsche's comment that others "think they know" about us is at least partly a clear reference to his own anguish at his writings being misrepresented and ignored throughout his lifetime. Nietzsche believes quite clearly that some people (free spirits) can never be properly understood by the mass of herd folk; Thus Spoke Zarathustra is nothing if not a

¹¹Of course, the enormous irony throughout Kierkegaard's writings that bear directly or indirectly on gossip is the striking contrast they present with his own life. It is a commonplace of his biography that he did most of his philosophic writing late at night, preferring to spend his days strolling around the town or sitting in cafés, gossiping away with friends and people-watching. Kirmmse's Encounters with Kierkegaard (1996) provides plentiful evidence in this regard (see especially 89-98).

long jeremiad against such perpetual confusion. Therefore, Nietzsche's evaluation of reputation-talk as perpetually incorrect must be read as corrosively disdainful. Further, the terms of the fragment demonstrate that in this passage he is not making a value distinction between a good conscience and a good reputation; Nietzsche dismisses both (he is describing how one might "cope" with both a bad conscience and a bad reputation; clearly, the "us" Nietzsche wants to be writing for -- *Urbarmenschen* -- would have no need for "coping")¹². I bring up this triad of popular Continental writers¹³ in large part because they are chiefly

¹²Skeptics should consult Nietzsche's Human All Too Human, fragment 562, which makes it quite clear that gossip about others is in fact not even about its ostensive objects, let alone accurately attacking those others.

¹³The fact remains that even the original promoter of conversation as the road to truth, Plato, clearly has qualifications about what kinds of conversation produce genuine versus unjustified knowledge. In the Gorgias, Socrates challenges the sophist Gorgias both to define his profession, and to justify it (why should we practice rhetoric). After much bantering, Gorgias challenges Socrates' elaborate argumentation by irritatingly pointing out that in short, Socrates' abstractions prevent him from achieving a meaningful understanding of the world and others around him (544). Socrates admires Gorgias' frankness but energetically disavows the rebuke, and continues on the rest of the dialogue defending the just pursuit of rhetoric as a path to true knowledge. Indeed, towards the close of the dialogue Socrates and Callicles are debating how best the truth may be ascertain in disputes, and how worldly reputation affects us. Socrates recounts a long fable about the ancient gods' predilection for judging humans according to the wordly (and implicitly false) reputations; gods and humans can only see others with worldly "clothes", Socrates repeats. Rhetoric can be useful, Socrates argues, because when done with an eye towards justice it helps us sift through layers of worldly and inaccurate reputation, and see each other as "naked souls" (583-585). Since the notion of "gossip" did not exist in Greece at this point, this discussion and condemnation of "reputaton" is as close as we can get to the Platonic attitude towards gossip, but it is nonetheless telling. Conversation, for this most canonical of philosophers, is only occasionally and when strictly regulated productive of truth.

responsible for so much of the shifting in our attitudes towards truth; each of these three philosophers has differently and complementarily challenged a notion of fixed, and absolute truth. More particularly, each writer influences contemporary intellectual trends such as deconstruction in part by promoting (more and less directly) an agenda of perpetual interpretation; if absolute truth does not exist and what is left is merely eternal signification, it is in our interests as philosophers to promote more and more challenging signification (e.g. "God is dead"). In addition, each writer differently challenges the predominant philosophic privileging of rationality as the absolute tool to knowledge. Taken together, these are powerful challenges to the ways in which we do philosophy, and indeed, the effects of these thinkers are still being played out in myriad ways both inside and outside the philosophical canon. If we cannot have an eternal truth, we must at least have creativity.

The problem with this seductive argumentation is that, just as we have seen in the first two chapters, eternal interpretation is only possible when some interpretations are a little more equal than others, and that equality is predetermined. To flesh this out: it is a truism that subjects make decisions between competing interpretations of almost any event (both consciously and unconsciously), and that of course we constantly reject interpretations either completely or partially. The difficulty with these three Eurochallenges to how we do or don't choose to believe ideas is that the ground is fixed -- if we think some thing because we heard it from someone else than of course it must be idle, vicious and no doubt false, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard would whisper conspiratorily in our ears. The implication is that we can only choose some freedoms in interpretation; parameters of plausibility and reasonability still exist¹⁴.

¹⁴Granted, there has been at least one recent attempt to challenge this kind of reading of at least Kierkegaard as straightforwardly anti-chatter. Peter Fenves, in his remarkably sophisticated and complicated analysis of Kierkegaard that is Chatter (1993), presents himself as a defender of idle talk, arguing that "chatter 'itself' can be clarified only if emptiness and idleness command respect, if they are treated as traits of language..." (4), and arguing approvingly for a loosening of language that allows epistemic merits to concepts like rumor and hearsay (14). Incidentally, it's important to note here that chatter and gossip are **not** synonymous concepts for Fenves; in a footnote, he points out that gossip can have a purpose (social control or resistance) that chatter cannot (253-254). As the bulk of his analysis makes clear, Fenves' Kierkegaard grants import to chatter, failure, idleness because of their function as caesura -- they undercut the whole notion of seriousness by seriously failing

The philosophic literature on conversation, then, mirrors the larger tendency within epistemology that I would like to challenge. Given that, the purpose of my analysis and definition of gossip, is to demonstrate one of the ways in which our knowledge-gathering may be both less orderly than we might otherwise have supposed, but still no less reliable; correlatively, if we acknowledge the great extent to which people colloquially rely on gossip, hearsay, rumor and testimony when developing beliefs and conceptions, my challenge to the formality of existing theories of knowledge is further underscored.

Let me return briefly to those authors whose work on gossip and rumor I surveyed in my previous two chapters. The vast majority of writers attribute no meaningful epistemic content or function to gossip -- either it is strictly false or so distorted as to be epistemically

to make failures, idleness, chat, significant. We can only think of talk as teleological, Fenves asserts; but this teleology is not a reasoned move of criticism, but language talking about itself. In short, Fenves values idleness and chatter for their very frivolity, and somehow the reemphasis of one half of the seriousness-idleness dialectic fundamentally undermines the notion of the dialectic itself, and both its terms. This reading, it seems clear to me, does nothing if not further (albeit indirectly) reify the importance of seriousness (and indeed displace a notion of seriousness onto an ethereal plane -- if language is always a site of failure of seriousness, it can only be so because there does indeed exist a more distant seriousness not humanly attainable). Because chatter can never be more than the stepping-stone to seriousness (chatter **signifies** the break, the failure of communication, chatter opens up the way for silence, which is what is truly communicative), chatter itself cannot be serious -- only the absence of all conversation (44).

useless, or else the knowledge it could convey is of so subjective a nature that it doesn't relevantly challenge "major" epistemic issues, and writers don't portray it in a truth context. While some authors attribute a social constructivist power to gossip, it is clearly power of a very secondary nature; "real", purer knowledge that is less assailable by common opinion still exists in the world, and gossip is simply the (not entirely satisfactory) substitute.

It is relevant to reintroduce this line of thinking here because the philosophers, sadly, fall into that last category -- both Code and Coady from the last chapter can only lend an attenuated epistemic power to gossip. Code insists that gossip can only be productive of knowledge to the extent that it is chaotic and therefore defiant of rationality; Coady allows knowledge power towards testimony, but only with the proviso that it is strictly regulated, to cull out the questionable third-party information. The qualifications to their theories undermine the central discomfort philosophers have with a notion of gossip as influential of knowledge: that gossip can be unruly, difficult to control or predict.

Of course, if we pause for a moment and reflect upon that characteristic, it should immediately become clear that while it can certainly be true of gossip and rumor, it is no less true of conversation in general, and still more generally scientific experiments, political elections,

academic conferences, "straight" news reporting, and other standard social constructs we now regularly attribute as creative of knowledge. Theories of knowledge grow ever unrulier (at least, most theories of knowledge); however, as with the Continental triad, modest unruliness is permissible only because some boundaries of knowledge remain (at least tacitly) impermeable. Epistemic brinksmanship remains the order of the day, even within social constructivism. Analyzing gossip and assessing its epistemic merit challenges our notions of orderly knowledge on a more fundamental level.

One example might demonstrate this more concretely. Both analytic and Continental philosophers of knowledge spend much of their professional time arguing about what it is that knowledge is, and presenting and defeating wildly various conditions or lack thereof for knowledge. What gossip fundamentally demonstrates is the ways in which people individually and anarcho-collectively can choose to read words differently than the professionals. Return to Harvey Siegel's claim for what it is that epistemology accomplishes: ascertaining epistemic justification, through criteria of justification and ratification, and determining the possibility of knowledge. This seems little more than a straightforward definition of epistemology. But when we combine it with Siegel's other contention, that epistemology

can be independent of the particular framework from which it seeks to comment on, analytic slippage occurs.

Here is where an example (albeit a slightly nutty one) becomes relevant. An epistemologist commenting on popular acceptance of the thesis that Lee Harvey Oswald worked with others in his assassination of John F. Kennedy might argue that belief in this thesis is misplaced, given the alternative hypothesis produced by the Warren Commission and the murky evidentiary waters that surround this historical tessara. Hypotheses might be infinite but certainty in this area is infinitesimal. Of course, while such an argument might persuade fellow epistemologists, it would have no purchase with the not insubstantial number of Americans who believe some version of a conspiracy theory. The problem here, which I think it would be fair to say that Siegel would not regard as a problem, is that "knowledge," "certitude," and "justification" themselves are community-dependent. Theories about the JFK assassination do indeed abound, and the "evidence" produced to support them is similarly variant. But the point is that "knowledge" here is cumulative, not propositional. Many people believe some form of conspiracy theory in part because they disbelieve the evidence presented them to justify the lone-killer theory. Their knowledge might not so much be the accumulation of positive, direct proof (say, interviews with those involved, physical or forensic evidence, to say

nothing of the veritable smoking gun) but rather the aggregate of indirect nonproof of alternatives, the seriously suspicious nature of official denials (the blatantly silly "magic bullet" theory), and indeed the entire social context during and since the assassination (secret and not-so-secret wars thinly justified as the defeat of communism, lying and dissembling government officials, martial interferences in local communities and on college campuses). I think it's fair to say that at the very least, if this kind of evidence doesn't establish one or another particular conspiracy theory as reasonable, it certainly suggests the viability of maintaining a strict skepticism regarding the lone-gunman theory.

As a professional, Siegel could (and no doubt would) simply stand aside, independence personified, and aver that we might have belief here but justification is nonexistent. But exactly what an example like the JFK assassination mess shows is that popular conceptions of belief and knowledge do not follow professional standards, and that professional standards are a hopelessly wrong fit in any knowledge decision that is less than straightforward (in other words, in most knowledge decisions we care about making). The fit is wrong because the professional assessment of this sort of situation (which no doubt would ride on the fact that so much of the "information" people use in their assessments would be unverified, perhaps unverifiable, and not coming

from transparently "reliable" sources, and hence -- quasi-juridically -- inadmissible) simply disregards the vast majority of information that has vast significance for many citizens, and from which they may draw a wide of variety of conclusions. Siegel (like Coady before him), in his quest for relative certainty, simply asserts the continuing validity of professional standards, without allowing for the possibility that the standards themselves may evolve, transform, or that communities outgrow different standards or languages. In short, Siegel fails to raise the possibility here that epistemological definitions themselves (what "knowledge", "belief", "ratification", "criteria for justification" could mean) might not be static, independent of their grounding framework, or fallible¹⁵.

In his attack on the sense-data distinction, J.L. Austin's Sense and Sensibility offers a linguistic analysis for such a community-dependent theory. While Austin, in his attack on Ayer and sense-data theory, still holds to

¹⁵Ed Gettier's (1963) refutation of the justified true belief theory of knowledge fits this analysis perfectly. In his first counterexample, Gettier argues that A does not in fact know that B is getting a raise, even though he heard from C that someone in the room was getting a raise (and hence is justified in believing that B was getting a raise, since A and B are in the room together), and even though C's statement is true (as A in fact gets a raise). Gettier's argument (which rests upon a necessary vagueness with what we think we know and what we conclude from what we know) only presents a knowledge mistake if how we operate in knowledge is to make very precise knowledge conclusions from very vague information, and ignores all other less particular examples (or more blatantly, the idea that we might come to accurate -- if vague -- conclusions from accurately vague information).

analytic biases that in fact seem to directly contradict Nietzschean irrationalism (e.g., Austin thinks we clearly couldn't accept that waking thought and experience can be dreamlike [49], and he wants to hold to the notion that there are things to be empirically described by science [4]), at the base of Austin's provocative book are the clear notions that there is no one conception of reality, that ordinary language makes the subtlest distinctions in observing and recording experience, and hence, that ordinary language in all its subtlety is far more appropriate for reality-pondering than philosophy-talk with all its dichotomies. Austin argues that fans of sense-data pose sense-data and material things as an absolute dichotomy, which simply isn't supportable. "Why shouldn't we say that material things are much spryer than we've been giving them credit for -- constantly busy, from moment to moment, in changing their real shapes, colours, temperatures, sizes, and everything else?" Austin argues (58). His point here is that the dichotomy isn't justified; that there's no reason to bifurcate sharply everything into apparent versus real, and that our ordinary terms suggest much more complexity and continuity in our perceptions that such a dichotomy can ever convey. Therefore, why should we move from a more complex to a less complex system, if in particular the less complex system doesn't bring us any additional understanding? Austin makes this point plainly:

...there will sometimes be no one **right** way of saying what is seen, for the additional reason that there may be no one right way of seeing it.
[101]

For Austin, this kind of epistemological pluralism is as close as we can get to foundationalism. Ordinary language is quite capable of articulating the fine distinctions between concepts, subjects, beliefs; creating conceptual dichotomies or triads merely obfuscates what was formerly clear.

This variety of arguments against epistemic brinksmanship, of course, sets us up for a serious challenge. If we accept that distinctions between knowledge and belief are community-dependent, that certitude, justification, and truth are such hopelessly murky and abstract concepts that they can have no bearing on knowledge claims outside a particular context, then we are left with the significant difficulty of explaining how it is we do come to make knowledge decisions, and more importantly, how we can defend those decisions from community to community. In short, how do we escape absolute epistemic relativism? I am hardly the first to make the critique of epistemic brinksmanship that precedes this difficulty -- Coady's careful treatment of testimony is simply the fullest analytic treatment of this issue. The problem, and this again is why I consider so many of these criticisms to be simple brinksmanship, is that the majority of the critics I

have read here¹⁶ simply sidestep the clearly unsettling issue of epistemic relativism, uncertainty, or aporia by reendorsing a removed notion of absoluteness, certitude, infallibility.

Let me begin to address this issue by asserting, no doubt troublingly to some readers, that in fact I do not think that this is a "problem" to be "solved." By this I mean that if we genuinely accept that argument that notions of knowledge, certitude, and justification are community-dependent (which I think several of the anthropological works discussed in Chapter One have persuasively established), we must resign ourselves to a necessarily looser theory of knowledge, and a certain amount of "give" in our differing opinions on what it is that we know (whomever "we" might be). Community-dependent knowledge means that to some extent our knowledge(s) is(are) pluralistic; there can be many truths to one situation¹⁷.

¹⁶To get specific, I would include Coady, Code, Fenves, Siegel, and Cherniak in this group.

¹⁷At this point some readers might accuse me of brinksmanship; in other words, am I not simply further displacing the notion of certitude by affirming a removed certitude (many certitudes, community certitudes)? My response to this criticism would be that I think epistemological pluralism changes our notion of certitude itself; since "community" itself is such a provisional and loose term (how many communities would any one person claim membership in? local, professional, familial, ethnic, religious, gender, etc., etc.; and how stable are any of these communities in turn?), the notion of certitude, I think, becomes such a localized and temporalized idea that in fact new language is needed, because community certitude can no longer itself be so certain.

The job of epistemology, then, becomes in my mind more ethnographic in nature -- ascertaining who believes what under what sort of social, psychological, political, and economic conditions -- and determining what sorts of forces are more knowledge-influential in different sorts of situations. The goal of this analysis can hardly be to establish new "standards" of knowledge, for clearly this ethnography can be of limited predictive use. In contrast, I think the goal of looser epistemology is simply to establish frames of reference and comparison for new knowledge situations.

This might sound like a simple Foucauldian genealogical approach to knowledge; in other words, that all "truths" are equally externally constructed (in other words, even those things we think of as so straightforwardly abstract ideas -- "truth," say, or less controversially, "triangle") are determined for us by external forces that serve, to greater and lesser extent, to constrain us (we accept categorization). Indeed, I accept the bulk of this analysis, and think that Foucault's genealogical approach is a necessary counterweight to orthodox, "great man" theories of history. Foucault demonstrates both with his practical analyses (see Discipline and Punish [1977]) and his more theoretical works (The Archaeology of Knowledge [1972] and The Order of Things [1970]) that an intellectual's job is in

part to ascertain the history of concepts -- how they arise, achieve discursive power and become naturalized.

But it is central to the thesis of this section that Foucault ultimately stands with his more analytic compatriots, in that the sources he relies upon for his genealogical work are strictly authoritative, and his analysis is too individuated. In short, Foucault commits the same error of analysis I find peppering the history of epistemology -- an assumption that knowledge-construction is defined more by positive, documented steps than by the casual misstep, the offchance, the unattributed remark. Foucault's very power and competency as a historian (exhaustively researching and documenting our changing attitudes towards punishment, sexuality, madness) end up, in their aggregate, suggesting that already-empowered communities (consciously and subconsciously) construct or define social norms; that the people who don't make the papers, in short, don't utilize, conform, or modify terms for their own usage (or do not do so "meaningfully"); that the "audience" of social construction is composed of generally passive receptors of structural wisdom¹⁸.

¹⁸This analysis resonates with Jacques Rancière's critique of current trends in history in his The Names of History (1994). Rancière astutely notes that the modern fashion of writing history in the name of the voiceless ("the people"), is simply another means of writing standard narrative history; we cannot escape the narratization, fictionalization of history, and that that indeed is both its allure and its disciplinary strength (36-38). I agree with this, and see my analysis of gossip as an application of this thesis. Gossip

Gossip, I think, is an explicit and concrete means for us to understand the chaotic, social acquisition of knowledge, the ways in which knowledge is constructed not simply by transparently "empowered" communities but by the disempowered, both individually and organizationally; it provides us with a(nother), critically important tool to do this sort of ethnographic work. Without gossip, we risk either a uselessly abstract conception of gossip (the range of analytic epistemology) or a one-sidedly materialist notion (social constructivism as it currently stands). It seems to me that no philosopher working today has yet to give a satisfactory account of what knowledge-gathering really operates like: in short, accounting for both its social aspects, its chaotic aspects, and yet describing the ways in which we do in fact produce knowledges that we assess as more and less secure, that we do not simply wallow in a linguistic/semiotic swamp.

3.3 How Informal Epistemology is Inherently Gossipy

What is gossipy about informal epistemology? Gossip is fundamentally an investigative activity. No matter what its topic, its setting, or its external or additional motivations (psychological, financial, political,

shows us that we can tell all sorts of stories; history, philosophy, and science, should be written in a variety of voices, rather than simply the omnipresent tone of rationality.

interpersonal, professional, several of the above), what to me seems clear is that we undertake the activity of gossip because we are trying to make sense out of something. What that "thing" might be is not (yet) relevant - but what I think is relevant is that this impulse to understand doesn't come out of nowhere. Gossip originates from dissonance. We need to gossip because facts we're getting, or perceptions we're having, aren't making sense - we can't tell a story from the world. Gossip is quite literally us telling stories about the world.

Obviously, and as Rancière's analysis of history suggests, we tell stories through and as particular communities -- a group, no matter how big or small, how loosely or tightly constructed, wants to make sense of what it sees as a particular string of events, causes, effects, problems, goals. If we grant the epistemology is more informal, in the sense that it is more community-dependent than otherwise analyzed, the tactics of community should be more foregrounded in our understanding of knowledge. Gossip, as an essentially communitarian activity (for what is the conversation of friendship if not at least a community-maintainer [as well as occasionally a community-dissolver]?), is a critically important part of how communities tell their stories about the world.

What's surprising about this locution, of course, is how close it comes to the humanists' usage of gossip I so

decry. But what makes this phrasing to me more powerful is simply the emphasis I'm placing on the stories themselves. Gossipists of all stripes paint those stories as necessarily false (or at best only accidentally true) -- distorted, malicious, fanciful, outright invented. They're sharply opposed from the truth, which is sought in an objective, rational fashion. Exactly what I'm trying to say is that those processes are one and the same - when we gossip we are simply more concretely, more particularly (and sometimes **less** concretely and particularly) trying to come up with a cohesive explanation for the world. If informal epistemology grants us some freedom in sourcing and evaluating our knowledge, it is only reasonable to conclude that folk knowledge like gossip, rumor, hearsay and folklore would each be relevant contributors to community and individual knowledge explanations.

A comparison I think is worth setting up -- what is the distinction between gossip at the knowledge point and gossip that gets left behind? In other words, if we take as a starting point that gossip can create knowledge instead of being an aberration from it, and we further assume that not everything that is said as gossip just gets swallowed up as knowledge (a not unreasonable claim), how do we tell the difference? I would (imperfectly) phrase it this way - the difference is in the appellation itself. When gossip attains the status of knowledge, we don't refer to it as

gossip anymore -- it's simply a fact. (Naturally, I'm stealing from Laboratory Life here¹⁹.) Correlatively, and much more interestingly to me, I think that gossip that has yet to, or definitely will not attain the status of knowledge is precisely that which is forcefully referred to as "gossip"²⁰. Since gossip is still a perjorative term (for Americans at least), it's clear that one way of discounting something as a truth claim is to call it gossip: "it's just gossip," we say and hear, as a means of comforting someone (this can't be true), or de-emphasizing something (no one can take this seriously, this idea isn't going anywhere).

Gossip, because it is both public and private, because it is cementing and critiquing of social relations, because

¹⁹And, of course, from Shibutani (1966), who points out that "when an unverified report turns out to be true, no one notices its obscure source. When subsequent events reveal a report to have been unfounded, the item is dismissed as having been 'only a rumor'" (3).

²⁰While it should be obvious, let me make it clear that these distinctions only apply to the American usage of the term. Clearly, as much of the anthropological work I'm citing demonstrates, much of the world takes gossip far more seriously, and already lends it knowledge status, than Americans. If it's not transparent at this point, I'm writing for an American audience - for it seems to me that only Americans at this point are still so Puritanically obsessed with propriety and virtue in speech (while happily violating it all the while), and that only Americans are similarly so obsessed with empirical, verifiable definitions of truth and falsehood. While most of my anthropological sources are in Latin America or Asia, anyone who wonders if the Europeans are as Puritanical about speech or knowledge need only refer to the acceptance and mainstreaming of gossip magazines in Spain, France, Italy and England (Meiser).

it is both idle and purposive shows the ways in which our knowledge doesn't come "either" from external sense perception or internal abstract ideas, the ways in which gossip is neither simply descriptive or normative. Gossip is all these things at once (I sound like an advertisement), because knowledge is all of these things at once. We always turn around on our knowledge-constructions after they have already been made, and try to sort out the different components of them (ok, here's where the evaluative mistake was made -- if we can just not do that the next time we'll have a much more rigorous equation of ethical euthanasia). But gossip to me is a marker of the ways in which our knowledge-gathering is hopelessly chaotic, and how that's **not a bad thing**, it's an inevitable thing. The bad thing is not so much when we try to make rational, teleological order out of the disorder (for that seems to be the inevitable philosophic, if not human impulse), but when we in turn try to inscribe inevitability to the teleological order we've just put forth.

How does gossip straddle these categories: how does gossip show our knowledge-gathering to be chaotically purposive? Gossip's functions are twofold: first, to select (fast-track to decide what avenues to pursue, and which to discard), second, to synthesize (in gossiping we can make connections, draw conclusions more freely than we can in other arenas, we can put facts and possibilities

together that we might otherwise not think about). Gossip, in short, is a kind of playing field for the mind -- many bets are off, and we can act with whimsy. But if gossip is a kind of playing field, it is only so not because so much of other knowledge-work is so distinctly opposite, but because other knowledge-work is so related -- in short, more "orthodox" knowledge is a playground: more organized and rigid than the kind of play that might take place on a big field, but nonetheless, pretty sloppy and unpredictable. I think the problem is that we think of easy opposites; it's initially alluring to imagine gossip as some sort of daring subversive agent to oppressive aboveground, controlling, dictatorial, disciplinary information, but I think the fact is that control and dictatorship are neither so straightforward nor so defined. Surely, if that were the case, they'd be much easier to detect and resist.

Gossip, then, fulfills these two particular functions that are essential in knowledge-gathering, but not uniquely -- for surely we select hypotheses for knowledge in a variety of social behaviors, to say nothing of synthesizing ideas. The point is that we do so differently when we gossip, we do so (even) more freely in gossip than when we, for example, theorize in seminars, debate opponents, or argue with colleagues or employers. Gossip is a community tool for exploration and evaluation; a not-

directly traceable one, to be sure, but one whose resonances can be inferred from even "authoritative" texts.

Nota Bene: I now proceed, both in this section and in the following one, to give examples of how gossip works concretely. I very deliberately choose two examples that are contrary to each other; one very traditional accounting of gossip (in science, using documented sources), one very nontraditional accounting (a very authentic oral gossip item, very authentically undocumented). Even though the first example consists in textual readings, it is important to observe at the outset that both of these examples cannot be considered "proof" in the typically philosophically rigorous fashion; for after all, what defines gossip is nothing if not its untraceableness, its unruliness, its inherently oral character. In neither example could we say that we "know" the gossip; that the "knowledge" of gossip has been definitively proven. I would say, perhaps paradoxically, that this lack of traditional rigor cannot be considered a failure of proof but rather its evidence. For indeed, gossipy conclusions and inferences in even authoritative texts demonstrate alternate readings and theses; further, as the second section demonstrates, gossipy anecdotes demonstrate the inadequacy of traditional narrative to supply complete, sensible accounts of beliefs and their justifications. With that, let me dish some dirt.

3.4 How Gossip Selects

"Consciousness, from our natal day, is of a teeming multiplicity of objects and relations, and what we call simple sensations are results of discriminative attention, pushed often to a very high degree" (Vol. 1:224). William James' statement, here from The Principles of Psychology (1918) is a conviction that we shape the world; that our perceptions are more than simple passive receptors of data (sense-data enthusiasts aside). Indeed, a little further James writes that "what are our very senses themselves but organs of selection" (Vol. 1:284). James' thesis, adapted in turn from David Hume, is that the phenomenal world as such does not really exist in any knowable sense; that human agents shape the world according to their individual perceptions, which are determined by categories. Gossip, I think, is a more particular, more field-specific means of this selection.

In The Double Helix (1969), James Watson briefly and clearly tells the story of his discovery, along with Francis Crick, of the structure of DNA. Watson, to his credit, attempts nothing less than an entirely honest depiction of the events of 1951-1953; not only does he present very complicated genetic and biochemical theory simply for the lay person, he freely admits to professional and personal vice. Not only does Watson almost eagerly attest to frequent bouts of laziness and distraction from work with

some of the more lurid attractions of London, but more seriously, he acknowledges his sexist and condescending attitude towards Rosalind Franklin, a crystallographer in another laboratory. In part due to this (näive) unselfconsciousness from Watson, considerable controversy has arisen over The Double Helix, and more significantly the discovery of the structure of DNA itself. Several authors (Lwoff, Sayre) have charged that Watson and Crick underattributed the contributions of others (namely Maurice Wilkins and Rosalind Franklin) to their discovery. Correlatively, others have responded (Bernstein, Olby) that the credit of DNA rests appropriately with Watson and Crick.

While the detail of this spat is interesting to me, what is more relevant to us here is the methodology these various sources reveal about the creation of science. Watson opens his book by quickly describing the morass of genetic theory in 1951 -- how widely different hypotheses and methods of study were proposed as paths to the discovery of the structure of DNA (22-23). More particularly, Watson describes the ways in which particular rumors in the scientific community -- casual chat passed between different lab workers -- served to focus attention on one particular method or another. One key rumor was that Linus Pauling had discovered the structure of proteins -- the alpha-helix (30). While Pauling's structure could not be directly applied to DNA structures, his model influenced the path DNA

research took (Pauling used a helical structure, DNA researchers focused on possible helical structures for DNA).

More generally, the environment of scientific research in the immediately postwar Western world was highly competitive. The scientific community is a small one, and one that contains a lot of interdiscussion about each other's professional and personal behavior. Labs in the U.S. and the U.K. competed against each other for national credit, and lab credit, for making significant discoveries. Pauling's son Peter came to work for Watson and Crick's lab at Cavendish during this struggle, and Watson details a letter Pauling sent to his son making mention of DNA discoveries he was on the verge of, but giving no details (93). Similarly, when Watson and Crick are on the verge of unraveling the DNA structure (in point of fact they are pursuing an incorrect model, but one that is closely related to the correct model), Watson writes a long letter to his friend Delbrück bragging about his impending success, and similarly -- and no doubt frustratingly -- avoiding detail (insert 10-15). (Of course, as Watson himself notes, in retrospect it is fortunate he did that, saving himself embarrassment.)

When Watson and Crick are in the thick of unraveling DNA structure, they make a point of pumping Peter Pauling for dirt on the goings-on in his father's lab (101); frustratingly, they again get vague ideas from Peter but no

detailed information (ibid, 99). But at each moment of this stage, what is clear is that Watson and Crick are using their casual relationship with Peter (for Watson's book does nothing if not exhaustively demonstrate his extensive and attentive socializing with his coworkers, Peter Pauling especially [99, 111, 114]), for insight and direction into further research on DNA -- Watson and Crick look to the world-reknowned "expert" for correlation or correction to their hypotheses, they count on reputation leading to accurate scientific process.

More precisely, informal chatter is the necessary channel by which they can get the confirmation or disconfirmation they want. Formal professional encounters with Pauling senior are pretty much limited to conference papers and publications; they rely on their back-channel of Peter Pauling to find out the direction of future research, rather than what has already been done. In addition, as Watson's frequent allusions to rumors in the science world attest, the speed of scientific publication and conference paper delivery cannot hope to keep up with the actual research trajectories in laboratories. Following the gossip is crucial towards doing accurate (read community-accepted research); even though Watson and Crick think they are headed in the right direction, gossip on alternative approaches is enough to throw them off onto another scent.

This analysis should recall my précis of Laboratory Life; I certainly see a parallel between these different accountings of how science is done. Latour and Woolgar demonstrate definitively that a virtually accurate thesis of the composition of TRF(H) can only be accepted when it is presented by an "expert"; in short, someone with the right disciplinary qualifications, who has self-consciously redefined the field and conditions of research, who has established a reputation as the authority. Reputations' informal negotiation help determine which hypotheses get pursued and which are left behind. Correlatively, we can speculate that at least part of the reason Watson and Crick ignore Rosalind Franklin's (again, virtually accurate) thesis about the structure of DNA is due not simply to sexism (though that certainly plays a role), but to her lack of an established reputation in this field (she, **like** Watson if not Crick, is a comparative newcomer to gene research), and her failure to negotiate actively a reputation with colleagues (her outsider, loner status -- which of course must be also partly due to her position as a woman researcher in a virtually all-male field). As Latour and Woolgar themselves say in Laboratory Life, this analysis does not delegitimize the status of fact that the structure of DNA or TRF(H) have, it contextualizes them -- looking back at the gossip, we can tell **why** information became viable as knowledge when it did. More particularly, the

gossip was the channel by which information was **able** to become foregrounded to the point where it could more widely be accepted. In these ways, gossip selects.

3.5 How Gossip Synthesizes

I see gossip's functions as synthesizing and selecting knowledge to be highly complementary of each other. Earlier, I used the example of a playground versus a large field when talking about how gossip works to synthesize knowledge. The gloss is simple: when we are trying to figure something out, we typically follow preordained routes of analysis and deduction, depending on the kind of operation we are carrying out. If I am a historian, trying to ascertain what Indianans thought of the Treaty of Versailles, my discipline and training will lead me down a reduced number of paths. I might look at national newspapers and magazines for some national context (looking only at the articles on the treaty), and then dig more deeply into the locality, examining not only local publications but private writings (letters, diaries) that might discuss the Treaty. I no doubt will explore ethnographic data (the population, their ethnic, religious, national, economic backgrounds). More pointedly, I will **not** probably look at entries and accounts of events other than the treaty for analysis of the treaty itself; while I might consider a contemporaneous event for "context," I would not

for the text itself. In other words, I might look at the rise of the second Klu Klux Klan in Indiana to compare awareness of the respective events (for example, the number of articles devoted to the treaty versus the number of articles devoted to local elections where Klan influence was widely suspected or assumed), but I most probably would not look to reporting on the Klan to explain the reception of the treaty, or vice versa. The rules of the game of doing history, where connections must be easily established and where artifactual, documentary evidence is mandatory for credibility, prohibit otherwise.

This is the sense in which doing history, as with most investigative activities, is like playing on a playground. There are particular apparati you may choose to use, and there are definitely modest ways in which you can adapt the apparatus in question to your own ends. For example, a child might stand facing inward at the top of a slide and run in place against the slant of the slide, trying to maintain balance for as long as possible and not fall down the slide (painfully), instead of simply sliding down according to the design of the equipment²¹. Similarly, more daring historians might invoke some non-textual speculation to make theoretical inroads in the game of history; Kathleen Blee's history of the development of the women's Klan discusses "whispering campaigns," which she

²¹Thanks to Kimberly Adkins for demonstrating this point.

can only partly document, to explain the Klan's power. But just as a child on play equipment may not be too free in her adaptations of the equipment without violating the tacit rules of acceptable playground behavior (for example, if a child is using the slide in this way, another child cannot simultaneously try to walk up the slide bottom-end first, which might unlodge the first child from her precarious balance), there are only so many professional rules one can bend, break or adapt at any one time. Contorting or ignoring too many at once causes one to be drummed out of one's professional ranks; one is no longer "doing history," but writing a novel, or interpreting a social theory²².

By contrast, when we play on a large field, rules of play may still develop, but much more randomly, and more negotiably. For instance, we may begin by deciding to play a simple game of Tag, but quickly adapt it to Freeze Tag, or invent new rules all our own (Calvin and Hobbes' elaborate and constantly evolving games amuse us precisely because they are so remindful of how children do play with each other). The play is not entirely anarchic, but the set of rules governing it cannot be totally iterable; neither will it remain the same nor evolve in predictable ways. This is

²²While this last year has brought with it a spate of genre-bending theoretical works (Callaso's Ruin of Kasch, Demos' The Unredeemed Captive), which have indeed received favorable reviews, the reviews themselves are marked by a decided unwillingness to categorize. Historians are not fully interested (yet) in taking these hybrid works in as history per se.

how we gossip because this is how we come to know things; this is the way in which gossip synthesizes. Depending on the "terrain" of the field (in short, everything we may be talking about in the conversation), we may adapt our conversation one particular way or another, may make some connections rather than others, but importantly, the connections we make aren't strictly bound by rules of investigation or operation -- credibility does not prohibit us from considering particular kind of information or speculating in different directions. Similarly, gossip's synthetic power is important here precisely because it allows us to make connections we might be forbidden to otherwise. If professional courtesy, or the burden of proof prohibits us from speculating on a peculiar combination of events or behaviors, gossip permits us to indulge the speculation, with others, and quite possibly to further it in meaningful ways.

I present this lengthy analysis and illustration so that my example of gossip synthesizing information might have more resonance. Michael Hooker (himself a Ph.D. from the Five Colleges in philosophy) was named to the presidency of the University of Massachusetts system in 1994. Hooker was effusive about his excitement at returning to his alma mater, and spoke grandly about big plans for transforming the budget-bedraggled University into a "Harvard with a subsidy." About six months after his ascension, while I was

chatting with a friend of mine, he mentioned that he had heard from a friend of his that Michael Hooker was interviewing for a job as president of some other university. Needless to say, we were both surprised. I started circulating this item in the gossip hopper -- passing it along to numerous friends of mine, one of whom happened to work as a lobbyist for one of campus constituencies.

While we (and others, no doubt) serially discussed the possibility that this might be true, we did so by evaluating what we knew of Michael Hooker. Each person had different information or impressions of Hooker to offer -- one person reminded me that Hooker's sole achievement during his short tenure at Bennington had been to sell the campus buildings off to rich alumni; others discussed his George Bush-like history of multiple two- or three-year terms at universities; one friend recounted Hooker's aggressive behavior towards his dissertation committee while a doctoral condidate in philosophy; still another recalled Hooker's self-description in the campus newspaper of his career as a faculty member at Harvard, hands behind his head and feet atop desk, yet still feeling dissatisfied with his achievements. Different events and impressions were compared and analyzed, with the purpose being to discover what kinds of actions would be believable. More than anything else, what emerged from these discussions was that

Michael Hooker was profoundly motivated by ambition, and willing to disregard quite a few social conventions in the process of getting where he thought he might like to be, and that clearly, a land-grant university like UMASS, with its perennially controversial national reputation and uncertain state funding, could not be Hooker's ultimate aim.

Two years later (early spring of 1995), shortly after Hooker released a ten-year plan for the university, gossip about Michael Hooker's imminent departure from the UMASS presidency again began to circulate. This time, it was borne out by the facts -- Michael Hooker left to assume the chancellorship of the more prestigious University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The point here, á la Turner, is that we do not know if in fact Michael Hooker had interviewed for that other job so shortly after his arrival. The belief that he certainly **would** do so, however, had a wide variety of reasonable evidence to justify it, and indeed, his later actions exactly proved the accuracy of those initial suppositions. Does this make the earlier gossip untrue? This point is impossible to resolve -- the history simply doesn't exist on this issue. What it does demonstrate is the ability of gossip to construe plausible and viable theses where other, more traditionally reliable channels might fail²³.

²³A relevant historical note here: when the new Hooker information began to circulate, I noticed that of the people I talked to, those with whom I hadn't been gossiping about

Why did it make sense for those of us who had heard the earlier rumor to believe that Hooker was indeed not long for the UMASS presidency? An initial hot rumor sparked lengthier, more drawn-out, more reflective analyses of Hooker, from a wide variety of perspectives. Analytic philosophers would say that at no point did we gossipers know that Hooker would leave UMASS; we could not, because the knowledge could not be usefully verified, or because our justifications were pathetically unrelated to the matter at hand (who **cares** if Hooker sold off Bennington buildings to alumni? Harvey Siegel might say). But the point is that these stories of gossip, the bulk of which were largely unavailable through standard media (newspaper accounts of Hooker did not reflect on his erratic administrative career; the earlier rumor of outside interviewing appeared nowhere), were the sole channel by which a plausible account of Hooker could be constructed, a story that resonated with both past and future events.

In other words, gossip's synthetic function works in part to link analytic categories of justification and belief together -- they are importantly psychological states, and

this earlier leave-taking possibility were floored (albeit relieved) by the hearsay, unlike those of us who had previously considered the likelihood of this occurrence. To be precise, when I took part along with other student leaders in an interview with a prospective administrator, and I mentioned Hooker's announcement of his leaving UMASS (as it had been on the radio earlier that morning), one student in particular, whom I knew to be very actively involved with campus politics, was shocked (delightedly so) by the news.

not simply philosophical conditions. But the point is that they each, separately and together, can contribute to us having positions we would consider to be knowledge that simple issues of truth and falsity could never cover (to say nothing of logical analyses of conjunctions or disjunctions). Gossip, by selecting from fields of possibilities and allowing freer combinations of ideas and speculations, shows the ways in which we construct knowledge in unorthodox, community-dependent, provisional ways.

3.6 Applications of Analysis and Conclusion

What would be my practical recommendations for gossip? I don't think, á la Gluckman, that we ought have schools for scandal, nor do I think we should loosen up libel laws, or recreate Centers for Rumor Control (or create correlates for gossip, CGCs). The problem with these suggestions (even if the first is [at least partly] tongue-in-cheek) is that they all suggest that gossip can somehow be reduced, eliminated, defused or controlled by public confrontation. In short, they all follow Felix Frankfurter's dictum that "sunlight is the best disinfectant." "Disinfectant" is indeed the appropriate image here, for again gossip retains its tainted character under these various prescriptions. (How do we disempower gossip?)

Rather, if we look at examples like those Turner invokes, where she suggests that companies facing rumors

try to analyze them according to their possible structural causes and remedy for those (e.g., hire more minorities in positions of authority, market products in a less racially targeted fashion, lower the prices of some products), the purpose here -- well, is exactly to make gossip less powerful. Her intuition is that the rumor is grounded structurally, and if you change the structural conditions, the rumor will simply fade away -- no one will have anything at stake in spreading it anymore. That may be true for particular rumors (even allowing for the fact that those with ostensive power in these situations are interested in changing structural conditions, which as Turner's exegesis shows is generally not the case), but it cannot be true for **rumor** itself. (The same is true for gossip.) We can attempt to attack particular rumors or particular gossip items that we think unfair, or unwanted (regardless of their truth value!), but we cannot control the channel itself - it is a necessity, and a valuable one. If gossip is a fundamentally community tool, a bottom-up tool that serves at least locally to challenge orthodox readings and theories, then no amount of structural alteration can eliminate the tool, simply because communities, while always shifting and realigning, will always exist.

Turner's other recommendation is more useful for my concluding purposes. She suggests that it is important for historians to take into account less orthodox sources of

information, like rumor, folklore and myth, when they construct historical accounts of events and time periods. I have a correlative suggestion for knowledge workers. Taking seriously gossip, considering it as a valid source of knowledge, means simply that we recognize that how we go about deciding we know something is more complicated than professional epistemologists would have us believe. While analytic argumentation about knowledge is certainly sound and valid, it is not at all the means by which most of us go about deciding whether or not we believe something. Nor does it inspire me to change the ways by which I make my epistemic decisions.

And ultimately, this is my goal here. While most directly I would like it if social scientists began to approach the concept and definition of gossip with more sophistication and more opened ears, ultimately it seems to me that there are popular applications for this analysis. One way in which someone could attack this line of thinking is by arguing (as has been frequently and enthusiastically proposed -- see the Harper's forum [1986]) that there are only a surfeit of gossip and rumor when people have no faith in institutional channels. Gossip and rumor have been increasing linearly over the years because of a deepening cynicism over trust and honesty from institutions (e.g. post-Watergate "malaise"); their increasing presence doesn't

mean they're true or truer, or that this is something to permit or applaud.

But of course, as the various historical work (notably Hellyer) shows, it's not the gossip and rumor **themselves** that are increasing, it's our notice of them. Gossip and rumor are persistent and omnipresent features of society; they are some of our tools of communication and understanding. More to the point, the very construction of the above argument suggests that it is proper and sensible for people to have faith in institutional channels, that gossip and rumor are unnecessary and detrimental sidetracks by nature. There are two avenues for exploration here -- first, that people's faith in institutional channels is declining for a reason, because institutional channels are less trustworthy, people do have (rational) reasons to trust non-institutional channels. The second possibility (eminently less shocking, I think) is that people have never had absolute or total (or even simply 'high levels of') faith in institutional channels; information is always pluralistically attained and critically evaluated from a diverse and divers collection of sources. Or, as Shibutani more succinctly suggests, the very existence of institutional channels necessarily suggests an important augmentation of subterranean grapevines.

Gossip and rumor aren't necessarily superfluous, self-indulgent, reductive, transparent, or wrong - we just choose

to read them that way. In 1963, Max Gluckman, with tongue not fully in cheek, advocated the establishment of "schools for scandal," where youths would be taught how to gossip (which, by his analysis of gossip, meant teaching people awareness of social distinctions and how they are made). I'd take this argument further -- we need to learn to read our gossip and rumor, in all of their (seemingly serious and frivolous, benign and malicious) forms, not simply to figure out social orderings but more basically to understand ourselves -- what do (the different) we(s) know and believe? What makes us think we know something instead of merely believing it? (These basic issues of epistemology are simply phrased, but I do believe gossip and rumor have purchase on the answers of these questions.)

If epistemology needs to take a more ethnographic turn, part of that turn I think must be to acknowledge the more subterranean channels by which knowledge develops. This means, as I have tried to suggest in the last few sections, letting go of more transparently documentarian impulses in hard and soft science; but doing so does not leave us in a freefall of epistemic relativism. If we supplement (not substitute) "harder" information with the "softer" information of gossip (for surely, as the Hooker anecdote reveals, that is exactly what gossip consists in) then we can arrive at more complete stories of why it is things happen. More particularly, taking gossip seriously means

taking communities seriously, taking individuals seriously, and taking non-seriousness seriously. If we accept that different groups might have different understandings of why it is something happened, we open ourselves up for gossip-stories -- for gossip can be frank, humorous, strident, and even acidically critical in ways in which traditional soft science cannot. To take an obvious example, charts of surveys' results of a group's opinions on some subject may demonstrate a range from Strongly Disagreeing to Strongly Agreeing, but even if the range leans heavily towards one side, the content (and even the range) of those categories will be unclear without more microscopic, more informal analysis. And more particularly, a respondent to a survey might be more self-conscious, more judicious, more strategic in filling out her Scantron than if she is freely evaluating the survey's topics with friends.

All this is not to say that the knowledge of social science, or hard science, or even philosophy is completely irrelevant. At a minimum, however, it is incomplete; it tells partial stories only. The stories of gossip, though they might seem wildly divergent from "conventional" understandings, and wildly unjustified, if unpacked, can demonstrate plentiful justification and import, and indeed,

contradictions for "aboveground," more authoritative knowledge.

APPENDIX
A MODEL GOSSIP²⁴

²⁴The material contained in the appendix was judged too scandalous by the dissertation committee for its inclusion in the library copy; those interested in this archival material and commentary should make application to the author.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abrahams, Roger D. 1970. A Performance-centred Approach to Gossip. Man (NS), 5(2), 290-301.
- Ackermann, Bob. 1989. On Hermeneutic Delay. Lecture, University of Massachusetts at Amherst.
- Adkins, Karen. 1996. Poison Pens: Gossip's Viral Knowledge. Dirt: An Interdisciplinary Conference. Center for Literary and Cultural Studies, Harvard University.
- Agassi, Joseph. 1977. The Zeitgeist and Professor Feuer. Philosophy of Social Science, 7, 251-253.
- Alexander, Doris. 1990. Dickens and the Fake True Story. The Dickensian, 86(2), 88-92.
- Allport, Gordon W. and Leo Postman. 1947. The Psychology of Rumor. New York: Henry Holt.
- Andrews, W.L. 1972. Gossip About Book Collecting. New York: Gordon Press Publishers.
- Aristides, Nikolai. 1990. Entre Nous. American Spectator 59, 7-16.
- Ashton, John. 1968. Gossip in the First Decade of Victoria's Reign. London: Omnigraphics.
- Austin, J.L. 1962a. Sense and Sensibilia. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- _____. 1962b How to Do Things with Words. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ayim, Maryann. 1994. Knowledge through the Grapevine: Gossip as Inquiry. In Goodman and Ben-Ze'ev, eds. Good Gossip.
- Baier, Annette. 1986. Trust and Antitrust. Ethics 96(2): 231-260.
- Bailey, F.G. 1971. Gifts and Poison: Politics of Reputation. New York: Schocken.
- _____. 1977. Morality and Expediency. London: Basil Blackwell.
- Barris, Jeremy. 1991. Idle Chatter -- The Prerequisite to Any Philosophy Whatsoever. Unpublished paper.

- Beaton, M.C. 1988. Death of a Gossip. New York: Ivy Books.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1978. Reflections. Tr. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken.
- Benn, S.I. and G.F. Gaus, eds. 1983. Public and Private in Social Life. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Bennett, Gillian, and Paul Smith, eds. 1988. Monsters with Iron Teeth. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic. pp.239-240.
- Beresford, John D. 1968. Gossip of the Seventeenth & Eighteenth Centuries. Ayer Company Publishers.
- Bergmann, Jorg R. 1993. Discreet Indiscretions: The Social Organization of Gossip. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Bernstein, Jeremy. 1978. Experiencing Science. New York: Basic Books.
- Bet Or, Ori. 1989. Gossip in a Small Kibbutz Community. Doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania State University.
- Biale, David. 1986. Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History. New York: Schocken Books.
- Binder, David F. 1991. Hearsay Handbook, 2nd ed. Shepard's McGraw-Hill, Inc.
- Bird, S. Elizabeth. 1992. For Enquiring Minds: A Cultural Study of Supermarket Tabloids. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Blau, P.M. 1964. Exchange and Power in Social Life. New York: John Wiley.
- Blee, Kathleen. 1991. Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Blumenthal, Albert. 1932. Small-Town Stuff. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____. 1937. The Nature of Gossip. Sociology & Social Research, 22, 31-37.
- Boccaccio, Giovanni. 1931. The Decameron. Tr. John Payne. New York: The Modern Library.

- Bok, Sissela. 1983. Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation. New York: Vintage.
- Borch-Jacobsen, Mikkell. 1991. Lacan: The Absolute Master. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Boyer, Paul and Stephen Nissenbaum. 1974. Salem Possessed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Boyles, Denis. 1989. African Lives: White Lies, Tropical Truth, Darkest Gossip and Rumblings of Rumor - from Chinese Gordon to Beryl Markham and Beyond. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Brandt, Allan M. 1991. AIDS and Metaphor: Toward the Social Meaning of Epidemic Disease. In Mack, In Time of Plague.
- Brenneis, Donald, 1988. Telling Troubles: Narrative, Conflict and Experience. Anthropological Linguistics, 30(34), 279-291.
- Brison, Karen J. 1992. Just Talk: Gossip, Meetings and Power in a Papua New Guinea Village. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- _____. 1988. Gossip, Innuendo, and Sorcery: Village Politics Among the Kwanga, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. Dissertation, University of California - San Diego.
- Brown, Homer. 1977. "". Genre 10.
- Brown, Mary Ellen, ed. 1990. Television and Women's Culture: The Politics of the Popular. London: Sage. 183-98.
- Canetti, Elias. 1984. Crowds and Power. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Cavendish, Margaret. 1994. A Blazing World and Other Writings. New York: Penguin.
- Cherniak, Christopher. 1982. Minimal Rationality. Boston: MIT Press.
- Christensen, Jerome. 1990. From Rhetoric to Corporate Populism: A Romantic Critique of the Academy in an Age of High Gossip. Critical Inquiry 16(2), 438-465.

- Coady, C.A.J. 1992. Testimony: A Philosophical Study.
Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Coombe, Rosemary J. 1993. Tactics of Appropriation and the
Politics of Recognition in Late Modern
Democracies. Political Theory 21(3): 411-433.
- Cooper, Jeff. 1989. The Gargantuan Gunsite Gossip.
Gunsite Press.
- Davis, T.J. 1990. A Rumor of Revolt: The 'Great Negro
Plot' in Colonial New York. Amherst: University
of Massachusetts Press.
- DeBenedittis, Peter. 1993. Guam's Trial of the Century:
News, Hegemony and Rumor in an American Colony.
Westport, CT: Praeger.
- deBord, Guy. 1983. Society of the Spectacle. Detroit:
Black & Red Press.
- DeLanda, Manuel. 1992. Nonorganic Life. In Zone 6:
Incorporations. New York: Zone.
- DeMaria, Robert. 1986. Johnson's Dictionary and the
Language of Learning. Chapel Hill: University
of North Carolina Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1991. Cinders. Tr. Ned Lukacher.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- _____. 1973. Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on
Husserl's Theory of Signs. Evanston: Northwestern
University Press.
- _____. 1982. Margins of Philosophy. Tr. Alan Bass.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____. 1981. Dissemination. Tr. Barbara Johnson.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Diamond, Edwin. 1978. Good News, Bad News. Cambridge:
MIT Press.
- Dickinson, Charles. 1991. Rumor Has It. New York: William
Morrow.
- Dijk, Teun A. Van, ed. 1985. Discourse and Dialogue.
London: Academic.

- Doubt, Keith. 1990. A Theoretical Note on Simmel's Concept of Acquaintance. Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior, 263-276.
- Dougherty, Richard. Goodbye, Mr. Christian; a Personal Account of McGovern's Rise and Fall.
- Downing, Kenneth L. 1993. Holy Gossip. Distinctive Publishing Corp.
- Ellmann, Richard. 1976. The New Oxford Book of American Verse. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Farber, Seth. 1993. Madness, Heresy, and the Rumor of Angels: The Revolt Against the Mental Health System. London: Open Court Publishing Company.
- Farge, Arlette. 1993. Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumor & Politics Before the French Revolution. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Faris, L. Anthropologica (NS) 8: 235-248.
- Federman, Raymond. 1976. Rumor Transmissible Ad Infinitum in Either Direction. Assembling Press.
- Fenves, Peter. 1993. Chatter: Language and History in Kierkegaard. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Feyerabend, Paul. 1975. Against Method. London: Verso.
- _____. 1984. Mach's Theory of Research and Its Relation to Einstein. Studies in the History of the Philosophy of Science 15:1-22.
- Finch, Casey and Peter Bowen. 1990. 'The Tittle-Tattle of Highbury': Gossip and the Free Indirect Style in Emma. Representations 31:1-18.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 1977. Social Components of Children's Gossip. Journal of Communication 27:181-185.
- Fiske, John. 1987. Television Culture. New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel. 1972. The Archaeology of Knowledge. New York: Pantheon.
- _____. 1970. The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences. New York: Vintage.

- _____. 1977. Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. New York: Vintage.
- Francis, Huw W.S. 1982. Of Gossips, Eavesdroppers, and Peeping Toms. Journal of Medical Ethics, 8:134-143.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1960. Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. New York: Norton.
- Fuller, George. 1980. Gossip. Toronto: Playwrights Canada.
- Gabler, Neal. 1994. Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Garrett, Laurie. 1994. The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World out of Balance. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Gaventa, John. 1980. Power and Powerlessness. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books.
- Gelles, Edith B. 1989. Gossip: an Eighteenth-Century Case. Journal of Social History 22(4):667-83.
- Gerber, Alain. 1987. A Rumor of an Elephant. New York: Mercury House.
- Gilbert, Margaret. 1989. On Social Facts. New York: Routledge.
- Gluckman, Max. 1968. Psychological, Sociological, and Anthropological Explanations of Witchcraft and Gossip: A Clarification. Man 3(1): 20-35.
- _____, ed. 1964. Closed systems and Open Minds. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co.
- _____. 1963. Gossip and Scandal. Man 4(3):307-316.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. New York: Anchor.
- _____. 1961. Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates. New York: Anchor.
- Goodman, Robert and Aaron Ben Ze'ev, eds. 1994. Good Gossip. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.

- Goodwin, Marjorie Harness. 1980. He-said-she-said: Formal Cultural Procedures for the Construction of a Gossip Dispute Activity. American Ethnologist. 7(4):674-696.
- Gordon, Jan B. 1988. A-filiative Families and Subversive Reproductions: Gossip in Jane Austen. Genre 21(1):5-46.
- _____. 1984. Gossip, Diary, Letter, Text: Anne Bronte's Narrative Tenant and the Problematic of the Gothic Sequel. English Literary History, 51(4): 719-745.
- Gosse, Edmund W. 1991. Gossip in a Library. New York: Scholarly Press.
- Greimas, Algirdas J. and Fontanille, Jacques. 1993. The Semiotics of Passion: From States of Affairs to States of Feelings. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Grice, Paul. 1989. Studies in the Way of Words. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gross, Larry. 1993. Contested Closets: The Politics and Ethics of Outing. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1971. Knowledge and Human Interests. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hafen, Susan and Ram, Anjali 1995. Unbraiding Women's Gossip: A Feminist Justification for "Idle Talk." Unpublished manuscript, Ohio University.
- Hannerz, Ulf. 1967. Gossip, Networks, and Culture in a Black American Ghetto. Ethnos 32:35-60.
- Hardwig, John. 1991. The Role of Trust in Knowledge. Journal of Philosophy 88(12):693-708.
- _____. 1985. Epistemic Dependence. Journal of Philosophy 82(7):335-349.
- Haviland, John Beard. 1977. Gossip, Reputation and Knowledge in Zinacantan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hegel, Georg Friedrich Wilhelm. 1967. The Philosophy of Right. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Heidegger, Martin. 1962. Being and Time. Tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row.
- Hellyer, Mickey R. 1988. A Marxist Analysis of the Contributions of Benjamin Franklin and the Junto to Adult Education: A Dialectical Approach. Doctoral dissertation, Northern Illinois University.
- Heppenstall, M.A. 1971. Reputation, Criticism and Information in an Austrian Village. In Bailey, Gifts and Poison.
- Hermes, Joke. 1995. Reading Women's Magazines. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Heywood, Eliza. 1929 The Famel Spectator; Being Selections from Mrs. Eliza Heywood's Periodical (1744-1746). Ed. Mary Priestley. London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, Ltd.
- Hinde, Thomas. 1988. Tales from the Pump Room: Nine Hundred Years of Bath: The Place, Its People, and Its Gossip. Gollancz, England: Trafalgar Square.
- Hirst, Paul and Woolley, Penny. 1982. Social Relations and Human Attributes. London: Tavistock.
- Hughes, Geoffrey. 1991. Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Hutson, Susan. 1971. Social Ranking in a French Alpine Community. In Bailey, Gifts and Poison.
- Isaacson, Walter. 1992. Kissinger. New York: Random House.
- Jain, Ravindra K. 1979. Sociology of Corruption in the Developing Societies: Morality in Theory and Practice. Philosophy of Social Activity 5:33-48.
- Johnson, Mason P. 1983. History and Gossip in Mother Goose Rhymes. New York: Harlo Press.
- Johnson, R.M. 1977. Social Structure and Process in Friendship Choice" in C.F. Fischer, et al. Networks and Places: Social Relations in the Urban Setting. New York: Free Press.

- Jones, Walter B. 1993. The Other Side of Congress. Washington: Washington Publications.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1974. Anthropology from a Pragmatic View. Tr. Mary J. Gregor. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Kapferer, Jean-Noel. 1990. Rumors: Uses, Interpretations, and Images. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Keller, Wayne H. 1982. Fighting Those Rumors. Christian Ministry 13:34.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. 1940. The Present Age. Tr. Walter Lowrie. London: Oxford University Press.
- Kirmmse, Bruce H., ed. 1996. Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life As Seen by His Contemporaries. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kodish, Debora G. 1980. Moving Towards the Everyday: Some Thoughts on Gossip and Visiting as Secular Procession. Folklore Papers of University Folklore Association 9: 93-104.
- Koenig, Frederick. 1985. Rumor in the Marketplace: the Social Psychology of Commercial Hearsay. Dover, MA: Auburn House Publishing Co.
- Knopf, Terry Ann. 1975. Rumors, Race and Riots. New Brunswick: Transaction Books.
- Laclau, Ernest. 1985. Hegemony & Socialist Strategy. London: Verso.
- Latour, Bruno. 1993. We Have Never Been Modern. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, Bruno and Steve Woolgar. 1986. Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Levin, Jack and Arnold Arluke. 1987. Gossip: the Inside Scoop. New York: Plenum Press.
- Levin, Jack and Allan J. Krimel. 1977. Gossip Columns: Media Small Talk. Journal of Communication 27:169-175.
- Levin, Jack, Anita Mody-Desbureau and Arnold Arluke. 1985. The Gossip Tabloid as Agent of Social Control. Journalism Quarterly 65:514-517.

- Lewontin, R.C., Steven Rose, and Leon J. Kamin. 1985. Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology, and Human Nature. New York: Pantheon.
- Lwoff, André. 1968. Scientific American 219(1):133.
- Mack, Arlen, ed. 1991. In Time of Plague: The History of Social Consequences of Lethal Epidemic Disease. New York: NYU Press.
- Martin, Michael M. 1988. Basic Problems of Evidence, 6th ed. American Law Institute & American Bar Association Committee on Professional Education. New York: American Bar Association.
- Meiser, Stanley 1990. Lives of Rich, Famous Keep Spain Enthralled. Los Angeles Times. November 6: H2.
- Miller, Sarah Elizabeth. 1992. Twice-Born Tales from Kathmandu: Stories that Tell People. Doctoral dissertation, Cornell University.
- Montaigne, Michel de. 1993. The Essays: A Selection. New York: Penguin.
- Morgan, Hal and Kerry Tucker. 1988. More Rumor! New York: Penguin.
- _____. 1984. Rumor! New York: Penguin.
- Morin, Edgar, with Bernard Paillard. 1971. Rumor in Orleans. Tr. Peter Green. New York: Pantheon.
- Morrissey, L.J. 1988. 'Mending Wall': The Structure of Gossip. English Language Notes, 25(3):58-63.
- Munroe, Robert L. and Ruth H. Munroe. 1976. Altruistic Ethics. Zygon 11(3): 212-214.
- Narvaez, Peter, and Martin Laba, eds. 1986. Media Sense: The Folklore Popular Culture Continuum. Bowling Green, OH: Popular. pp.19-30.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1974. The Gay Science. Tr. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.
- _____. 1984. Human, All Too Human. Tr. Marion Faber. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

- Norris, Christopher. 1992. Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals, and the Gulf War. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Norton, 1987. William and Mary Quarterly 44:3-39.
- Olden, Marc. 1979. Gossip. New York: Fawcett Book Group.
- Paine, Robert. 1967. What is Gossip About? Man (NS)2:278-285.
- Pauling, Peter. 1973. DNA - The Race That Never Was. New Scientist: May 31.
- Pavel, Thomas. 1978. Literary Criticism and Methodology. Dispositio 3.
- Pepinsky, Harold E. 1991. The Geometry of Violence and Democracy. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Philadelphia Institute for Research in Human Relations. 1958. The Effect of a Threatening Rumor on a Disaster-Stricken Community. Washington, D.C.: NAS-NRC.
- Phillips, Susie. 1996. Blabbing and Gabbing, or, a Brief (Pre-) History of Gossip. Dirt: an Interdisciplinary Conference. Center for Literary and Cultural Studies, Harvard University.
- Pitt-Rivers, Julian. 1977. People of the Sierra. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Plato. 1920. The Dialogues of Plato, Volume 1. Tr. B. Jowett. New York: Random House.
- Porter, Jack Nusan. 1990. Business and Professional Ethics: An Oxymoron? Bridges 107-112.
- Ramsay, Clay. 1992. The Ideology of the Great Fear: The Soissonais in 1789. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Rancière, Jacques. 1994. The Names of History. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- _____. 1991. The Ignorant Schoolmaster. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Rosaldo, Michelle Zimbalist and Louise Lamphere, eds. 1974. Women, Culture and Society. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Rosenbaum, Jean B. and Mayer Subrin. 1963. The Psychology of Gossip. Journal of the American Psychological Association 11(4):817-831.
- Rosenthal, Tom. 1993. Strange Bedfellows: How Television and the Presidential Candidates Changed Politics, 1992. New York: Hyperion.
- Ross, Andrew. 1989. No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture. New York: Routledge.
- Rosnow, Ralph L. 1977. Gossip and Marketplace Psychology. Journal of Communication 27:158-163.
- Rosnow, Ralph and Fine, Gary. 1976. Rumor and Gossip: the Social Psychology of Hearsay. New York: Elsevier.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1953. Confessions. New York: Viking Penguin.
- Rushkoff, Douglas. 1994. Media Virus! Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture. New York: Ballantine.
- Rysman, Alexander, 1977. How the 'Gossip' Becomes a Woman. Journal of Communication 27:176-180.
- Sabini, John and Maury Silver. 1982. Moralities of Everyday Life. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sayre, Anne. 1975. Rosalind Franklin and DNA. New York: Norton.
- Schachter and Burdick. 1955. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology 50:363-371.
- Scott, James C. 1990. Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Shibutani, Tamotsu. 1966. Improvised News; a Sociological Study of Rumor. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Siegel, Harvey. 1995. Naturalized Epistemology and 'First' Philosophy. Metaphilosophy 26(1-2).
- Signorile, Michelangelo. 1993. Queer in America. New York: Anchor Doubleday.

- Skousgaard, Stephen. 1974. Genuine Speech vs. Chatter: A Socratic Problematic. Kinesis 6:87-94.
- Slack, Paul. 1991. Responses to Plague in Early Modern Europe: The Implications of Public Health. In Mack, In Time of Plague.
- Sontag, Susan. 1978. Illness as Metaphor. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. 1985. Gossip. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Spielberg, Peter. 1992. Hearsay. New York: Fiction Collective Two, Inc.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics. New York: Routledge.
- Stirling. 1956. Social Forces 34:262-267.
- Suls, Jerry M. 1977. Gossip as Social Comparison. Journal of Communication 27:164-168.
- Szwed, John F. 1966. Gossip, Drinking and Social Control: Consensus and Communication in a Newfoundland Parish. Ethnology 5(4):434-441.
- Tamarkin, Bob. 1993. Rumor Has It: A Curio of Lies, Hoaxes, and Hearsay. Prentice Hall General Reference & Travel.
- Tannen, Deborah. 1990. You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Tang, Truong Nhu. 1986. Vietcong Memoir. New York: Vintage.
- Telushkin, Joseph. 1996. Words That Hurt, Words That Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well. New York: William Morrow.
- Thomas, Sari, ed. 1990. Studies in Communication: Communication and Culture: Language Performance, Technology, and Media. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. 225-235.
- Turner, Patricia A. 1993. I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Watson, James D. 1969. The Double Helix. New York: Penguin.
- West, James. 1945. Plainville USA. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Whicher, George Frisbie. 1915. The Life and Romances of Mrs. Eliza Heywood. New York: Columbia University Press.
- White, Theodore H. 1973. The Making of the President, 1972. New York: Atheneum Publishers.
- Wilson, Peter J. 1974. Filcher of Good Names: an Enquiry into Anthropology and Gossip. Man (NS) 9(1):93-102.
- Wyllen, Stephen M. 1993. Gossip: The Power of the Tongue, Jewish Wisdom for Human Relations. Ktav Publishing House.
- Yerkovich, Sally. 1977. Gossiping as a Way of Speaking. Journal of Communication 27:192-196.
- Yngvesson, Barbara. 1993. Virtuous Citizens, Disruptive Subjects: Order and Complaint in a New England Court. New York: Routledge.
- Zaner, Marie Friestad. 1991. The Development and Testing of a Model for Introducing Organization-Wide Administrative Change. Doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University.

