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# CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE FOLKS

Patricia A. Turner, *I Heard It Through The Grapevine*  
(University of California Press, 1993)

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## **CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE FOLKS**

### **BOOK REVIEW**

#### **PATRICIA A. TURNER, *I HEARD IT THROUGH THE GRAPE VINE***

Bennet Schaber

Patricia A. Turner, *I Heard It Through The Grapevine* (University of California Press, 1993)

Patricia A. Turner's *I Heard It Through The Grapevine* represents the culmination of seven years of research and field work on contemporary African-American folklore -- what the subtitle of the book names simply as "rumor in African-American culture." While the origins of rumors are, by definition one would think, impossible to pin down -- that is, they are almost but never quite attributable, precisely because constituted as an infinitely regressive series of attributions, a literal heteronomy -- Professor Turner does remember "the exact day and time that [she] began writing [her] book." Teaching an Introduction to Black Literature course at UMASS, Boston in February 1986, she recounted to her class the well known story of the "Kentucky Fried Rat." (If you do not know this one, you should. Ask around.) In response, a student offered another tale of franchised fried chicken: Church's Chicken is apparently owned by the KKK, and a special ingredient in the chicken causes black men to become sterile. But, the student continued, in contrast to the legend of the Kentucky Fried Rat, the Church's story is absolutely true -- a friend had seen it on "60 Minutes," the popular and trusted TV news program. And so Professor Turner went off in search of the source of the rumor, a trek that leads her back to the nineteenth century and across the Atlantic to Western Africa before returning her once again to the USA.

As it turns out, and you might have expected this, Church's does not in fact serve up genocidal legs and wings and no story to that effect ever aired on CBS. But what is at stake here for a folklorist like Turner is why a story like this would circulate among the "folk," and she hopes to get to the bottom of things through the comparative study of about a dozen contemporary

rumors. This field research is preceded and supplemented by a brief history of rumor among communities of the African diaspora from the early days of the middle passage to the Second World War. Indeed, Turner is so set on noting the similarities between contemporary rumors and what she takes to be their early instantiations that she misses a number of important differences. But before I note these and my differences with this book, I would like to give some sense of what is best about this book, that is, its presentation of the material itself.

Most of the rumors recorded by Turner revolve around conspiracies (this is the USA, remember?). The Ku Klux Klan pursues its genocidal policies of sterilizing black men through fast food chicken franchises, or through fruit-flavored soft drinks, or through beer, or through cigarettes. The KKK or white South Africans sell athletic wear to unsuspecting black Americans and use the profits to support their anti-black activities. The U. S. government, specifically the F.B.I. or the Center for Disease Control, are responsible for AIDS as well as the deaths of black children in Atlanta and perhaps elsewhere. And there are more, all gathered through interviews with students, friends, family as well as officials and executives of the corporations, agencies and groups targeted by the rumors as the sources of anti-black violence. And violence is very much what is at issue here: "In any event, this study is less about rumor and legend analysis than it is about the pervasiveness of metaphors linking the fate of the black race to the fates of black bodies, metaphors in use since the very first contact between whites and blacks."(3)

The first and earliest of these metaphors is "cannibalism." Turner documents what seem to have been widespread rumors in both white and black communities, each accusing the other of cannibalism. This is the ur-rumor, the archetype of all those that will follow. Turner is convincing insofar as she shows that these rumors did exist, that they constituted important parts of the conceptual and rhetorical repertory of both Africans and Europeans. And she adds a nice conceptual/rhetorical touch of her own by naming these joined-at-the-hip rumors "Topsy/Eva Cycles." Inspired by the two characters from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (or perhaps their inspiration? another rumor?), Topsy/Eva was a folk doll. When held one way, she appeared as the white, darling Little Eva; turned upside down, black and unkempt Topsy emerges. [1] The cannibal and Topsy/Eva, then, are the book's inaugural figures. Sadly, they are never really put to work. They simply stand for the "strained" relation between the races. And this is the major problem of the book -- its simplistic understanding of metaphor itself. Rumors are understood here to be essentially metaphors, social metaphors. These metaphors simply represent a, in this case, racial group's state of mind. But the book never convinced me that rumors are essentially metaphors (at least in Turner's sense) at all. Indeed, by addressing rumor as metaphor rather than what I would call the fact of rumor as circulation, transmission, specifically and historically placed, Turner's book turns out to be a rather pedestrian piece of textual criticism. For example:

The contamination motifs that link Church's chicken, Tropical Fantasy [fruit drink], the Atlanta child killer, and the AIDS epidemic in African-American folk belief are metaphorically the same. The bodies of the individuals purportedly defiled by the chicken, the soft drink, the interferon experiment, or the disease stand as symbols of perceived animosity against the race. (163)

and

These motifs will be rendered in items of discourse that can be easily shared by members of the minority group. Rumors, legends and other unstructured forms of speech will circulate within the group, providing an outlet for frustration as well as a means for fostering in-group solidarity. (164)

No doubt these interpretations are correct; but they suffer from their obviousness. So, although the information is interesting, the rumor-narratives often complex, their treatment by Turner is bound to seem facile to any audience familiar with recent developments in cultural studies, anthropology, literary criticism or critical philosophy.

Perhaps what bothers me most about this book, then, is that it simply lets an opportunity to say something serious and important about racial life in the USA just slip by. A metaphor does not simply represent, take the place of... something. Metaphors, quite literally, take place, constitute themselves as happening -- as events -- in the world. In that sense they do a social work of placing: emplacing, replacing, displacing and even spacing, etc. For example, most of the contemporary rumors adduced by Turner attach themselves to specific commodities: foods, beverages, cigarettes, drugs, athletic shoes. But rather than think through the dialectics of commodity exchange and rumor transmission/exchange -- the ways in which racial knowledge and identities emerge as rumors mediated by corporate capital -- Turner provides what she calls her "formula of Price + Risk > Utility = Rumor." This simply means that if the cost and/or risk of using a specific product are perceived to be greater than its actual utility, a rumor will begin in order to explain that product's very existence. But what the formula deftly avoids is saying anything about rumor as intimately caught in the dialectical net of exchange (price + risk) and use (utility) values.

Now the analysis of cost, risk and their relation to utility as generative of rumor may be useful to corporations and their advertising agencies, but it has not very much to say to the African-American community about the conditions of its oppression (or liberation, for that matter). The rumors in this book bear witness to that oppression. But they also bear witness to the

difficulties -- the social and political difficulties -- of forging an identity in the modern world. As representations-in-exchange (what folklorists seem to call "items in transmission") rumors enact as well as supply testimony of social formation and emergence. The fact that these rumors trace and shadow commodity exchange names their political wager and their modern difference. (Here Turner's rumors meet, for example, Rap videos, which have progressively come to occupy -- politically -- the site of media-information-commodity- exchange. This is what is called their violence. Congruently, the Church's Chicken rumor invokes "60 Minutes," precisely the televisual site at which the commodity is exposed to its own truth.)

On the other hand, the cannibalism rumors of the 18th and 19th centuries do not take place within the spectacle of commodity exchange -- hence they phrase group identity precisely at the level of social exchanges capable of direct articulation with the rules governing, for example, endogamy and exogamy, left- and right-handedness, incest (the so-called 'primitive' names for difference itself). All of these considerations are absent from Turner's work. But not irrevocably, I think. She often demonstrates in her interpretations a real sensitivity to the signifier (a word she might profitably add to her vocabulary) -- the letter 'k' in Kool cigarettes, the resonances in the name 'Church's', etc. Her work would be deeper and more politically realistic if it could articulate these 'folk' signifiers-in-exchange with the commodities that displace them and that they in turn displace.

The book, then, suffers most from the isolation of the collected rumors from the various constellations of social facts to which they might belong. Turner makes nearly no mention of gender distinction as decisive for the interpretation of rumor; yet, the majority of the texts she has collected phrase not "black bodies" in general as being at risk, but specifically male black bodies. Although in her epilogue she does record a rumor about Norplant and the enforcing of birth control in black communities, for the most part Turner's rumors connect genocide with some version of emasculation.

If rumors belong to the fundamental, ontological diaspora of communal identity ('it is said of us...', 'We are told...', 'I have heard...'), it will be an important task to articulate them with the material diaspora of African peoples and the economic and social diaspora of commodity capitalism. No doubt we owe a debt to Prof. Turner for making available to us her "encounters with the folk" (203). And no doubt too she owes it to us and to the 'folk' to make conceptual encounters commensurate with the real complexity of modern folks and their stories. As it stands, Prof. Turner's book fails to do them justice.

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[\[1\]](#)For an extended reading of Topsy, who "jes grew," see Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, where the Topsy figure extends into the realms of music, Voodoo, and the tangled nexus of race and capitalism.