

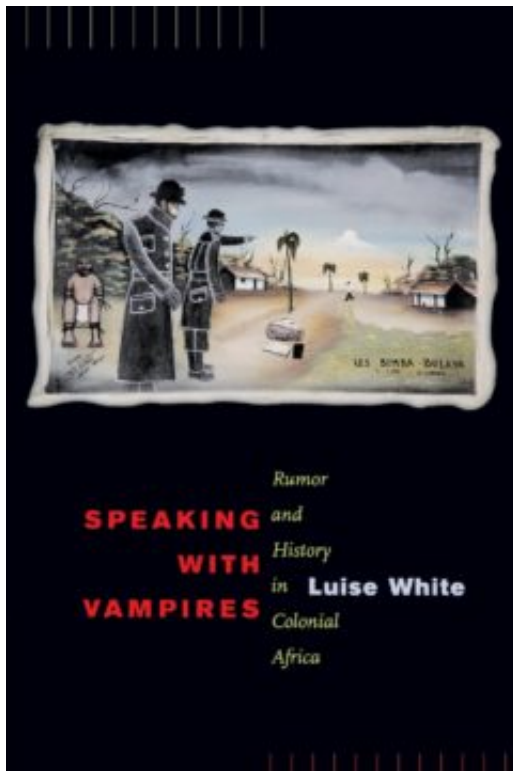
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Vampires, Cannibals, and Sorcerers on the Loose

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By Warwick Anderson

*On February 8, 2019, a symposium organized by Nancy Rose Hunt on the scholarship and career of Luise White was held at the University of Florida. In the nearly twenty years since the publication of White's *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (University of California, 2000), her thinking at the intersection of anthropology and history continues to inspire.*



In the 1990s, as a neophyte historian of medicine and anthropologically-inclined critic of science, I read Luise White's studies of colonial vampires and cannibals, blood-sucking firemen, and traffickers in heads, with a growing sense of wonder and amusement and discomfort. In retelling the stories confided to her, she repopulated eastern and central Africa with an incredible collection—a corps, perhaps—of specters, ghouls, apparitions, fantasies, and shadows, black and white and shades between. She deployed these ambiguous figures to create a strange

tableau of colonial assertion and anxiety, where African patients, healers, and sorcerers mingled uneasily with missionaries, bureaucrats and medical officers. “This article is about medical history and historical methodology,” White wrote in 1995.^[i] But it was unlike any medical history, or indeed any method, that I had imagined.

At the time I asked myself: is this what medical history looks like from the standpoint of an African historian? I knew little about African historiography, but it seemed to me that historians of the southern parts of the continent were, like Pacific historians, necessarily more ethnographically minded than most of the profession. In reading the work of Terence Ranger and Megan Vaughan on colonial medicine, I already had observed an unusual reliance on oral history, which might even serve, in my mind at least, as synecdoche for ethnography.^[ii] There was a widespread concern to understand what took place in what we were beginning to call “contact zones,” the sites of encounter between locals and outsiders or strangers.^[iii] What Greg Dening in his anthro-history of the Pacific would term “beaches.”^[iv] Like Ann Laura Stoler in her concurrent studies of race and colonialism in Southeast Asia, White evidently was trying to shake up the “hierarchies of credibility” generated in these sites of encounter.^[v] Commonly, there was a perceived need to approach a sort of postcolonial symmetry in the analysis of such interactions—to recover, if you like, some of the prose of insurgency and counterinsurgency.^[vi] “It is my goal,” White wrote, “to listen to these voices as different kinds of storytelling, to get them to speak about each other in order to tell their stories about colonialism.”^[vii] And, I might add, their stories about bodies and medicines.

But White differed from many other Africanists in that she did not simply want to establish “the authority and authenticity of the voice of the colonized.”^[viii] Instead, she would feature the uncanny qualities of the stories she heard. Perhaps oral history is richer and more complicated than we assume? Thus, White tried to conjure up through her oral histories a “social imaginary about who thinks what and what constitutes credibility.”^[ix] As she claimed: “Experience was true, but not as reliable as hearsay.”^[x] Or, as she announced in 1993, “This essay is about things that never happened.”^[xi] She was interested in the “social construction of lying”—and of secrets, rumor, and gossip.^[xii] What was withheld from circulation and what circulated promiscuously might reveal what was valued and feared: deception and evasion, as much as chitchat and hearsay, could “disclose the concerns and anxieties of people at a specific time and place,” she wrote.^[xiii] White clearly was tired of the way conventional oral historians read stories as testimony, holding their “informants” hostage to European criteria of evidence and truth. “I suggest that it is possible to read the fictive,” she wrote, “as a source for cultural history in the same way that we can read scientific texts.”^[xiv] It

was as though Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology had finally "gone native."[\[xv\]](#) I now understand that White was arguing not only for postcolonial symmetry in the history of science, but emphatically for *uncanny* (perhaps even more than "quirky") postcolonial histories of subjugated knowledges and conjugated subjects in the dispersed spaces of medicine and science. She wanted to make it all strange and weird, to unsettle us. How remiss of me, then, not to have recognized her priority in the various manifestos for the postcolonial analysis of technoscience that I was writing at the time.[\[xvi\]](#) Instead, I favored the usual family romance.

White insists on telling us about "the mosaic of colonial beliefs, African and European, the supposedly superstitious and the supposedly scientific," as she puts it. She continues: "These beliefs, like so many tiles, can be placed alongside each other."[\[xvii\]](#) Seeing the word "mosaic" suddenly pulls me up. In the early-twentieth century William James described his "mosaic philosophy," which discarded universals and concentrated on the relations between particulars. "It is as if the pieces cling together by their edges," he wrote, "the transitions experienced between them forming their cement." Interesting stuff happens on the borders and in the interstices, between the tiles: "Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected," James mused. "Often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing-line of the battle, were like the thin line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field which the farmer proceeds to burn."[\[xviii\]](#) Now, White is no votary of radical empiricism, but like James, she shares a fascination with edge effects, with what happens in boundary habitats, places of exceptional diversity and complexity—the conceptual range margins, as it were. In other words, "the traffic in heads ... reveals little about heads, but much more about the world in which such traffics take place."[\[xix\]](#) Accordingly, White meticulously and even-handedly draws us into what sociologist of science Thomas F. Gieryn once called "boundary work."[\[xx\]](#) She treats heads, blood, pills, injections, and chloroform as "boundary objects." In 1989, science studies scholars Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer imagined boundaries as possible points of communication, as interfaces that included "boundary objects" bearing significance in multiple social worlds. Such boundary objects are "both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use."[\[xxi\]](#) According to Star and Griesemer, boundary objects might be things, organizational forms, concepts, protocols, or procedures—whatever permits communication across the boundaries of social worlds. Thus, in directing our attention to what Charles E. Rosenberg refers to as the "ecology of knowledge," White has elaborated on a multivalent and interoperable and playful model—a postcolonial model—for science studies more

generally.[\[xxii\]](#)

Much of this weighed on my mind in the early years of this century, when I was spending time with the Fore people in the eastern highlands of New Guinea, trying to work out the hermeneutics of kuru, the fatal affliction that once threatened to wipe them out. In the 1950s, when the region first was “opened up”—the Australian colonial authority’s term—it soon became apparent that Fore women and children were dying from a terrible, relentless brain disease, a condition that people attributed to a particularly malign form of sorcery. The most charismatic and intractable of the medical investigators, American D. Carleton Gajdusek eventually determined that a transmissible, indolent “slow virus” was spreading kuru, for which he received the 1976 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. In the mid-1960s, Shirley Lindenbaum and other anthropologists and epidemiologists figured out that endo-cannibalism, the ritual consumption of loved ones after death, had been responsible for this plague upon the Fore.[\[xxiii\]](#) Since cannibalism ceased around 1960, the incidence of kuru slowly declined; the last person to die from the disease was autopsied in the bush just before I arrived in 2003. Primed by Luise White, I collected stories from Gajdusek’s—Kaoten’s—former medical assistants or *dokta bois*, by then old men determined to natter on about derring-do, and to demand compensation. When I asked what sort of white man, or stranger, he was, they told me he initially gave well in exchange, but later became greedy. He was lean and skinny, but then got fat, very fat. When I showed them a picture of the table that served for his typing, census taking, dining, and the cutting up of the kuru dead, I suggested they must have thought him a cannibal too. I knew that Kaoten, briefly, had tried to imagine himself as an exo-cannibal, eating his others, his enemies, indulging in a fantasy of absolute consumption when exchange relations went awry. This puzzled my interlocutors, who had consumed only loved ones. “Why would he eat these people?” an old man queried. “He scarcely knew them.” I then insisted they had regarded him as a sorcerer, taking body parts and fluids and subjecting them to machinations and skulduggery in his bush laboratory, trying illegitimately to gain power over people. No, they responded, where could he have learned the techniques of sorcery? But I knew then they were lying. I’d heard the rumors. He was a sorcerer for sure, though unlike any they’d seen before.



Let me close, in the fashion of my erstwhile compatriot J. M. Coetzee, with another story. As I was writing *The Collectors of Lost Souls* (2008), I frequently visited Carleton during his exile in Amsterdam. He could talk at me for hours, slightly manic, sometimes shouting, gesticulating, poking me in the chest, grabbing my thighs, shaking me. In his eighties, the scientist was unreliable and digressive; he lived in a fantasy world; he seemed crazed in an indefinable and idiosyncratic way. On my third visit, he began having seizures—and so, with great difficulty, I got him to a nearby hospital. Carleton proved a fierce and unreasonable patient. The convulsions continued through the day, but the medical staff stepped back and largely ignored him, perhaps understandably. The nurses were frightened around him. Eventually, Carleton fixed his gaze on me, telling me he was convinced that I caused a convulsion every time I mentioned the word “kuru.” That night, he discharged himself without a diagnosis. A few days later, reflecting on that miserable day in hospital, I realized Carleton had been accusing me of sorcery. I could see the logic of it. Believing I was writing his biography, he regarded me as illicitly appropriating some part of him and conjuring with it in order to hold sway over him and to increase my own status, just as Fore sorcerers do. Perhaps that’s what collecting life stories really is: an incompetent form of sorcery, or magical thinking, at times an immoral act. I tell this anecdote now because I’ve come to believe that Fore, too, must have wondered whether I was yet another inadequate sorcerer, trying to take their malefic knowledge and use it for some novel purpose. Indeed, they have since admitted as much. Rather than accuse me, they tried to control me through lies, innuendo, hearsay, and rumor.

So, now I must ask: who was Luise White, then, in such situations?

Notes

I am particularly grateful to Charles Rosenberg and Hans Pols for comments on earlier drafts; and to Nancy Rose Hunt for making sure I continue to engage with Luise White's work.

[i] Luise White, "They Could Make their Victims Dull': Genders and Genres, Fantasies and Cures in Colonial Southern Uganda," *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 1379-402, p. 1379.

[ii] Terence O. Ranger, "Godly Medicine: The Ambiguities of Medical Mission in Southeast Tanzania, 1900–1945," *Social Science & Medicine. Part B: Medical Anthropology* 15 (1981): 261-277; and Megan Vaughan, *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), and "Healing and Curing: Issues in the Social History and Anthropology of Medicine in Africa," *Social History of Medicine* 7 (1994): 283-295. See also Shula Marks, "What is Colonial about Colonial Medicine? And What has Happened to Imperialism and Health?" *Social History of Medicine* 10 (1997): 205-219.

[iii] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992). See also Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* 9 (1991): 33-40.

[iv] Greg Dening, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land. Marquesas, 1774-1880* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1980).

[v] Ann Laura Stoler, "In Cold Blood': Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives," *Representations* 37 (1992): 15-89.

[vi] Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 45-86. It seems to me that the impact on White of British social history, especially the work of E. P. Thompson, and subaltern studies was particularly strong.

[vii] White, "They Could Make their Victims Dull,'" p. 1383.

[viii] Luise White, "Cars out of Place: Vampires, Technology, and Labor in East and Central Africa," *Representations* 43 (1993): 27-50, p. 29.

[ix] Luise White, "Telling More: Lies, Secrets and Histories," *History and*

Theory 39 (2000): 11-22, p. 11.

[x] Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 31. The influence of Joan Wallach Scott is obvious: see "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 1773-97.

[xi] White, "Cars out of Place," p. 27.

[xii] White, "Telling More," p. 20.

[xiii] White, "Cars out of Place," p. 27.

[xiv] Luise White, "Tsetse Visions: Narratives of Blood and Bugs in Colonial Northern Rhodesia, 1931-9," *Journal of African History* 36 (1995): 219-45, p. 222.

[xv] Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967). White's later accounts of colonial archives, the "world of disregarded protocols and slapdash paperwork," is especially suggestive (Luise White, "Hodgepodge Historiography: Documents, Itineraries and the Absence of Archives," *History in Africa* 42 [2015]: 309-18, p. 314).

[xvi] Warwick Anderson, "Where is the Postcolonial History of Medicine?" *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 72 (1998): 522-30; "Postcolonial technoscience," *Social Studies of Science* 32 (2002): 643-58; and "From Subjugated Knowledge to Conjugated Subjects: Science and Globalisation, or Postcolonial Studies of Science?" *Postcolonial Studies* 12 (2009): 389-400.

[xvii] White, "Tsetse Visions," p. 222.

[xviii] William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (New York: Longman, Green and Co., 1912), pp. 42, 87. See Warwick Anderson, "Edge Effects in Science and Medicine," *Western Humanities Review* 69 (2015): 373-84.

[xix] Luise White, "The Traffic in Heads: Bodies, Borders, and the Articulation of Regional Histories," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 23 (1997): 325-38, p. 226.

[xx] Thomas F. Gieryn, "Boundary Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists," *American Sociological Review* 48 (1983): 781-95.

[xxi] Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer, "Institutional Ecology,

'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-09," *Social Studies of Science* 19 (1989): 387-420, p. 393. See also Ilana Löwy, "The Strength of Loose Concepts: Boundary Objects, Federative Experimental Strategies and Disciplinary Growth: The Case of Immunology," *History of Science* 30 (1992): 371-439.

[xxii] Charles E. Rosenberg, "Toward an Ecology of Knowledge: On Discipline, Context, and History," in *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America*, eds. Alexandra Oleson and John Voss (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 440-55.

[xxiii] Warwick Anderson, *The Collectors of Lost Souls: Turning Kuru Scientists into Whitemen* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), and "Epidemiology, Social History, and the Beginnings of Medical Anthropology in the Highlands of New Guinea," *Medicine Anthropology Theory* 5 (2018): DOI 10.17157/mat.5.1.591

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