

Introduction

It seems from rumors I just can't get away
I'll bet there will be rumors floating around
on Judgment Day

Timex Social Club

When the Timex Social Club, a popular young singing group, lamented the pervasiveness of rumors in the mid-1980s, they meant those rumors that caused personal conflict within their own peer group: *Hear that one about Michael / some say he must be gay / I try to argue but they say / if he was straight he wouldn't move that way.* But these were not the only unverified orally transmitted stories circulating in African-American communities. In another type of rumor known primarily to African-Americans, the topic was not in-group discord, but rather conflict between the races.

In this century, only those stories that emerged during times of domestic or international crisis garnered serious interest. During World War II, rumor clinics were established in an effort to prevent potentially adverse hearsay of all sorts from gaining credibility. Many of the most widespread rumors reflected racial discord. While African-Americans heard that black soldiers were being singled out for particularly hazardous and even suicidal war assignments, whites heard that in the communities near armed forces training camps hundreds of white women were pregnant with black men's children. Racially based rumors did not vanish following the war, of course; in the absence of crisis, however, official concern with

them diminished. Only in the 1960s, when racial unrest escalated precipitously, did municipal and federal authorities again sit up and take notice. Rumor clinics and hotlines were reestablished to combat the proverbial grapevine, on which stories about acts of violence, both incidental and conspiratorial, abounded.¹

After the crises of the sixties subsided, the clinics and hotlines closed down. Yet unconfirmed stories alleging bitter racial animosity still circulated within black communities. The following is a representative sampling of rumors known to many African-Americans from all over the United States during this era:

Text #1: Church's [fast food chicken franchise] is owned by the Ku Klux Klan [KKK], and they put something in it to make black men sterile.

Text #2: I remember hearing that the killings [of twenty-eight African-Americans] in Atlanta were related to genocide of the black race. The FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] was responsible and using the bodies for interferon research.

Text #3: I have heard that U.S. scientists created AIDS in a laboratory (possibly as a weapon to use against enemy in the event of war), and they needed to test the virus, so they go to Africa, as they [Africans] are expendable, introduce the disease, and then are unable to control its spread to Europeans and Americans.

Text #4: Troop [a popular brand of athletic wear] is owned by the Ku Klux Klan. They are using the money they make from the products to finance the lawsuit that they lost to the black woman whose son was killed by the Klan.

Text #5: Reebok is made in South Africa. All of the money they make off of those shoes goes to support whites in South Africa.

Text #6: The production and mass distribution of drugs is an attempt by the white man to keep blacks who are striving to better themselves from making it in the world. So many blacks take drugs in order to find release and escape from the problems they face in life. By taking drugs, blacks are killing themselves, and by selling them they are bringing about the imminent destruction of their race. Overall, the white man has conspired to wipe out the black population by using them [blacks] to destroy themselves.

Text #7: Tropical Fantasy [a fruit-flavored soft drink] is made by the KKK. There is a special ingredient in it that makes black men sterile.²

Many obvious and some not-so-obvious themes link these seven texts, of which I collected multiple versions from blacks—whites, for the most part, not being privy to them—during the mid-1980s and early 1990s. The overall theme is that organized anti-black conspiracies threaten the communal well-being and, in particular, the individual bodies of blacks. This concern predates the twentieth century. Indeed, a long list of similar sentiments can be compiled starting with the earliest contact between white Europeans and black Africans.

Before connecting these contemporary texts to possible historical antecedents, I need to issue a qualification. Tracing a rumor, legend, or indeed any primarily oral genre back to its earliest manifestations is always problematic. There is an obvious dilemma in trying to determine and, especially, document that certain information or misinformation was first circulated in the form of rumor or legend. In the first two chapters of this book, therefore, attention will be given to folk ideas that *most probably* circulated as rumor or legend, regardless of their precise mode of presentation. 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. It just so happens that, at least in this century, most of these metaphors have been rendered in the rumor/legend form; moreover, theory regarding this genre sheds light on the pre-twentieth-century material as well. Consequently, even the older material will be treated and referred to as rumor or legend.

Clarifying the often murky distinction between rumor and legend is equally problematic. Like other scholars engaged in textual analysis, folklorists frequently argue about how best to classify the material they collect. In the case of rumor and legend, the subtle nuances that distinguish one from the other are myriad. Yet in my research, both formats were clearly used

to express a fairly specific body of African-American folk belief. As folklorist Patrick B. Mullen points out, the matter is further complicated by the fact that rumor has traditionally been studied by social scientists, while legend has fallen squarely within the disciplinary territory of folklorists.³

In their seminal book *The Psychology of Rumor*, Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman define rumor as “a specific proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present.”⁴ For example, one of my informants claimed to have heard “something about AIDS being a product of a conspiracy.” Such a comment fits the recognized criteria for rumor: it is a brief, oral, nonnarrative statement based on hearsay. Then consider the claim quoted above (text #3) that American scientists created AIDS in a laboratory and, to test the virus, introduced the disease in Africa, since Africans are “expendable”; in the end, however, they were unable to control its spread to Europeans and Americans. This comment does not quite conform to the definition of rumor. Containing several “propositions for belief,” it has a strong narrative component; in fact, it falls into the often-problematic genre of legend or contemporary legend.

The standard, though often debated, folklore definition of legend is a narrative account set in the recent past and containing traditional motifs that is told as true. “Urban legend” is a more recent designation, referring to accounts incorporating modern motifs. The “urban” qualifier has occasionally caused misunderstanding, for it does not necessarily refer to nonrural events. Many people, for instance, know the notorious Kentucky Fried Rat story, an urban legend superficially similar to the Church’s Chicken text. In most versions, a friend or relative of the narrator stops by a branch of the fast food franchise at night and orders a bucket of chicken to go. Taking a bite in the dark, the individual is disturbed to taste hair; when the lights are turned on in the car, a deep-fried rat is revealed. With its focus on a modern-day institution, this text is a classic “urban legend,” even though many versions have been recorded in rural settings.⁵ Taking this difficulty into consideration, most folklorists and social scientists now

use the term *contemporary legend* to describe unsubstantiated narratives with traditional themes and modern motifs that circulate orally (and sometimes in print) in multiple versions and that are told as if they are true or at least plausible.

A brief examination of the AIDS text (#3) may help to illuminate the rumor/contemporary legend distinction. This informant's account contains some specifics, such as the involvement of U.S. scientists, a laboratory, and Africa. She tells it as a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The content and form clearly fit the contemporary legend designation. When I asked another informant what she had heard about the origin of AIDS, she responded, "I heard it was all some kind of conspiracy to kill black folk." Even after I questioned her for specifics, she could offer none of the concrete details that the informant for text #3 did. Yet I would argue that both sets of comments were influenced by the same concerns; thus the formal differences between the utterances are mitigated.

Allport and Postman, in fact, make the case that legends are often little more than solidified rumors.⁶ This may well be true of many items in the African-American rumor/legend tradition. As we shall see, some racial conflicts have generated rumors, others have generated legends, and still others, the AIDS controversy being a good example, have generated both. Thus, in the course of my research I have found that theories about rumor formation and transmission usually help to explain contemporary legends, and theories about contemporary legend development lend themselves nicely to an understanding of rumor. As Mullen points out, "Since legends exhibit characteristics which are of interest to both rumor theorists and folklorists, the study of items in transmission should not be limited by terminology. The folklorist and social scientist should be aware of each other's work when they are dealing with similar phenomena."⁷ In the remainder of this book, therefore, I will use the term *rumor* to refer to short, nonnarrative expressions of belief, *legend* to refer to the more traditionally grounded narratives of belief, and *contemporary legend* to refer to items containing particularly modern motifs.

In writing *I Heard It through the Grapevine*, I have struggled to make it a book that would be of interest to a wide range of scholars—those who earn their livings pondering the issues I discuss; at the same time, I want the book to be accessible to the informants who shared their texts with me—those who live these lives. I have thus tried to minimize attention to the theoretical underpinnings of my argument, such as psychoanalytic theory and reader-response criticism, which I trust scholars will recognize. My goal was a more rhetorical one: to uncover what determined the persuasiveness of these folklore cycles, what in the texts themselves or in the circumstances surrounding their dissemination gave them life and made African-Americans willing to incorporate them into their repertoires. Moreover, I wanted to know what value to place on the texts in terms of what they reveal about black worldview.

Some readers may be dismayed by the lack of solid statistical evidence I offer to support my claims that conspiracy and contamination motifs have been and continue to be strong in African-American folklore. Anyone wanting to know what proportion of the black population believes that John F. Kennedy was assassinated by the KKK or how many adolescents abandoned their Reeboks to support their brethren in South Africa will be disappointed. I possessed neither the training, time, nor resources to undertake a fully empirical study of these issues. In any event, I am not sure that valid answers to these kinds of questions are attainable.

Since I heard my first Church's text in 1986 I have been an almost-round-the-clock field-worker. At family and faculty parties, in university lecture halls and senior citizen centers, in correspondence with ministers and prisoners, while getting my hair cut or taking prepared childbirth classes, I have posed open-ended questions to those with whom I have had contact—for example, "Have you ever heard anything unusual about the ownership of any of these fast food places?" or "Do you think they'll ever really find out who killed Martin Luther King?" After establishing that an individual is willing to talk, I always identify myself and the scope of my project.

For the material quoted in this book, I used data forms or tape-recorded interviews accompanied by an informant's release.

During the past seven years I have held faculty positions at both an East Coast and a West Coast university. I have traveled extensively, and many colleagues in folklore have shared data from their own environs with me. Although most of my informants are African-American, I have conducted dozens of interviews with members of other ethnic groups as well. In order to maximize age, class, and occupational variety, I have also endeavored to collect beyond my students. The strongest insights, I believe, have come from sessions with informants I was able to interview repeatedly, though one-time sessions have also proved revealing, both of the contexts in which rumor flourishes and of the texts themselves. *I Heard It through The Grapevine* is built upon both kinds of interaction.

The writing of this book has spanned shifts in the accepted name not only for the texts under consideration here, but also for the folk who use the discourse. When I began conducting fieldwork in the mid-1980s, most informants identified themselves as black. By the early 1990s that label had shifted to African-American. However, Afro-American, West Indian, mixed race, and even Negro were terms offered by informants to identify their ethnicity. In my descriptions of specific informants, I use the label they use to describe themselves. In generalizations about Americans of African descent, I use African-American and black interchangeably.

Like most African-Americans, I am dismayed by essentialist generalizations that state, "African-Americans think . . ." or "Blacks in American society feel. . . ." Often I find that my own thoughts and feelings do not match such comments. I would thus not want the reader to assume that anything in this book represents "typical African-American thinking." Rather, the book takes seriously an under-studied folk tradition shared by many black Americans, a pattern of thought extant in African-American culture.