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a fickle populace comes and goes,
and, mingling truth randomly with fiction,
a thousand rumours wander,
and confused words circulate.
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 12.50-53

- ¹ In Ovid's narrative poem *Metamorphoses*, first published in the original Latin in 8 AD, the House of Rumor is a haunted place. In this heterotopian edifice, located in the no-man's land between earth, sky and high heavens, "some fill idle ears with chatter, others carry tales, and the author adds something new to what is heard," while in its halls "[h]ere is Credulity, here is rash Error, empty Delight, and alarming Fear."¹ To most professional historians, who are interested in details and plausible renditions of the past, the lack of reliability and the meandering stories in that particular setting may sound like a nightmare, as most discussions in the discipline evolve around truthful representations of the past. The "evidence paradigm" lies at the heart of the historian's craft—the idea of rumors that, at best, give vague subjective impressions and whose content often remains ambiguous, is counterproductive to the mission of creating a reliable and provable narrative of the past.² This is not to create a boogeyman image of the old-fashioned historian who clings to the idea of historical truth and objectivity being the discipline's gold standard. For a long time, rumors have been a well-established and well-regarded object of historical research, especially among cultural historians and historians of everyday-life.³ However, beyond its usability, the handling of rumor materials has taught me, as a historian, a number of valuable lessons for my research practice. Rumors and their sibling "gossip" are historical events that push the boundaries of doing history in ways which I will, in the following, tackle from three different angles. First, I will consider the archival condition of rumors and the terminology we use to describe them. Second, I will focus

on the ramifications which uncertainty as a research topic has on the process of historiography and how we can understand them as performative events. Finally, I will concentrate on the ways the different voices in historical materials render us speechless, as our own categories fail us when we attempt to find appropriate terms to describe to past or as we get unsettled by these voices.

1. Categories

- 2 Although rumor and gossip are often based on oral communication, historians most commonly encounter them in written form through archival materials. Yet, when I started doing research on rumors as a historical phenomenon, I learned an important lesson about the power of archives and the uncertainty of our discipline. While I flipped through the finding aids of the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond, I requested everything labeled “rumor”—the topic I had taken an interest in. However, when the boxes with documents began arriving at my desk, excitement slowly turned into confusion. Although all of the incidents the letters and diaries reported on met the criteria of what is commonly understood as “rumor”—namely uncertainty, obscure and anonymous origin—, the word itself was barely mentioned in the source materials. Take, for instance, a piece from the archive’s manuscript collection that was described in the online finding aid as “Letter, 1845 Nov 20 Elizabeth Wood ... to her friend Louisa P. Baxter ... About the false rumor that Elizabeth is still interested in marrying Prof. R.” The author herself, however, had used very different language:

You spoke of the report about Professor R. + myself. I assure you I have not the least idea of marrying any one + least of all him. There have been many stories told about that matter, one of which is that after discarding him repeatedly I am trying hard to get him to return—a report as untrue as it is unfounded.

- 3 Instead of describing whispers about her supposed romantic involvement as “rumor,” a derogatory term in this period also, she had spoken more carefully of “reports” and “stories.”⁴ Yet the detached, almost neutral tone Baxter had tried to maintain in her letter was lost in the finding aid’s description. An archivist—to whom I am, of course, greatly indebted—had interpreted and categorized it according to his or her personal standards or what he or she thought would be most interesting for the user of the archive. At the same time, the archivist had already categorized or pre-interpreted the documents in a certain fashion that assumed a very specific meaning. “Rumor” exceeds the label of the merely descriptive, it already carries the connotation of a dubious piece of information that is potentially untrue—as it did in 1845. This short anecdote exemplifies two different aspects of dealing with rumor and gossip as source material.
- 4 First, archives cannot be regarded as mere depositories of historical documents, because they are already interpretations of the past. Although I never got a chance to follow up on Elizabeth Wood’s juicy piece of gossip, this disparity between the logic of the archival filing system and the messier historical nomenclature was a humbling reminder of how archival source materials that we gather for our research are never either untouched, nor similar to a natural resource that can be discovered and mined. During the process of archiving, these documents had already undergone various processes of selection, preservation, and categorization. The case of rumor demonstrates how archives do not simply serve as a material reservoir of the past—they are conglomerates of voices that include material traces from the past but

that are also manifestations of current interests, questions, concepts. As such, they are therefore deeply rooted in the power struggles of the past and the present. While historians, on top of that, bring their own questions to the archive, they encounter the past through source materials that have been curated and carefully arranged and that have been inscribed with the logics of preservation and selection as well as with their social, political and cultural settings. As patrons, historians must remain critical users—not only of the source materials that we are trained to regard with professional skepticism, but also of the setting in which they find these materials in archives, whichever form they take: as, with Elizabeth Wood's letter, an official repository of documents or, in other cases, as private collections, photo albums or flea markets. They are all archival settings powerfully shaped by the discourses of the present furnishing the remnants of the past.⁵ The archival body is not just sitting there, but it is we who assign historical meaning and relevance to artifacts, traces, and findings from the past. Thus, it becomes imperative that we make the archive part of our writing.

- 5 Secondly, and at the same time, I should be eternally grateful to that archivist who produced that dissonance between the finding aid and the materials it described, because it pointed out the history and the loaded connotations of the term "rumor" itself. It made me aware of the time-bound character of this analytical concept. The fact that Baxter had rather used the terms "stories" or "reports" instead of "rumor" brings to our attention the archival dissonances that exist between our understanding of the documents and possible intentions its authors held. This discrepancy confront us with the ambiguity of our own analytical categories and questions.⁶ Yet, the use of a less charged terminology, like in the case of Baxter's, hints not only at the history of ideas, but also at the fuzzy character of our analytical concepts, as well as at the asynchronous relationship between our own terms and those of the past.⁷ We, as historians, use categories that are different from the concepts actors used in the past.⁸ The foreignness of the past will always be an element we as historians have to grapple with, and we will always fail to fully capture its different layers of meanings.
- 6 Coming back to rumor and gossip: if we take these incidents of "uncertain knowledge"⁹ seriously as knowledge in the making, the perception and interpretation of rumored stories and reports goes beyond the usual archival quagmire, as it confronts us with something even more profound about the ways in which we conduct our business—rumors are in themselves events and stories that carry a lot of uncertainty and chaos. But how can we make that element part of our own narratives?

2. Uncertainty

- 7 As historians, we are trained to look at a variety of traces from the past, weigh them and make claims about their importance, impact and, ultimately, synthesize them into a narrative of bygone times. We have certainly come a long way since Leopold von Ranke formulated his long-lasting axiom of telling it "as it actually happened", almost two-hundred years ago. And yet, the paradigms of objectivity and truthfulness continue to serve as guiding principles of historiography or, at least, the gold standard around which most methodological debates in the discipline evolved.¹⁰ Yet, the subject of rumors still poses a major challenge to us: they are distinctly vague, unreliable, we find them often to be untrue and we have, accordingly, often dismissed them as the

annoying background chatter of real history. What can we then say with, through, or about rumors in a historical context? For that—back to the sources.

- 8 In early March 1857, Dr. Robert Eden Peyton of Fauquier County, Virginia sent a letter to a friend in Louisiana announcing the following: “This evening I got a note, whilst in my field superintending the planting of corn [,] from a neighbor, inclosing another, containing the information, that on this night, there was to be a general rising of our servants, and the [very] mischief to pay there from—having a hundred on the place & no manager at present, I concluded to patrol [sic] a little & write a little, at any rate, till I was sleepy.” However, the next morning, after having survived the impending danger of a slave revolt, Peyton added another section to his original letter. With a facetious undertone he acclaimed: “So we are all alive and kicking—I have little doubt, but the report spoken of, was a mere phantom of some fools brains, I doubt whether one of mine [ever dreamed] of it—but such things coming suddenly on us, will have its effects for the moment, our unprotected situation stares us in the face, on the [rare] possibility of such a thing—but “forewarned, forearmed,” and when it does come, if ever, it will have no rumor or suspicion as [arrant] courier.”¹¹ With near certainty (“little doubt”) Peyton retreated to the comforting paternalistic narrative that his seemingly loyal “servants” would never engage in such a rebellious endeavor while, at the same time, not excluding the general possibility or rather the likelihood of a massive slave uprising in the future.¹²
- 9 What, however, is the historic validity of this source? Was there an attempted slave insurrection that night in 1857? Or is this simply the wrong question to ask? Regardless if there was a shred of truth to the claim made by Peyton’s neighbor, the sharing of the suspicion had an effect on Peyton and his contemporaries, notwithstanding the outcome of that night. Therefore, instead of asking what ‘really’ happened on March 4th 1857, we have to widen our focus and take the *rumor* seriously as a historical event in itself. As we can read about how Dr. Peyton struggled with the uncertainties of the situation, we are able to ask how the information about the impending insurrection became so credible. What were the structures of communication? What did Dr. Peyton do to cope with his lack of certainty? With that in mind, one can not only observe the transition from “report” to “rumor,” but one can get a sense of how Peyton made sense of his environment with the information that was available at the time. In the case of Peyton’s letter, it becomes obvious that the message was related to him by a neighbor; trust was established through spatial proximity, recognition and a shared social environment.¹³ Furthermore, if we look at the alleged bigger picture, the message is by no means an outlier. Others have also written about similar instance in late 1856 and early 1857.¹⁴ Actually, one can see how, starting in the fall of 1856, a series of rumors resonated from Kentucky and West Virginia through the South and, in the spring of 1857, had reached Virginia. Thus, credibility was also lent to the report through the general political climate of the time. As Peyton explains in a different part of the letter, he sees these events in the context of “the infernal abolition movement in the late Pres. Elect.” He connected his own experience to the election of 1856, from which Democrat James Buchanan had emerged as the victor after a bitter fight over the issue of slavery with the candidate of the brand-new Republican Party, John C. Frémont. Peyton referred to external events in order to make sense of the “message” he had received and, thus, was able to establish further credibility. By looking at rumors we can, thus, understand past regimes of plausibility. Rather than being obstacles to good historical

work, these expressions of vagueness and uncertainty become productive elements of our work.

- 10 Even more so, this short piece teaches us something about the importance of time in a narrative and about the limits of our linear understanding of history. As Peyton wrote about the insurrection, past experiences and expectations of future scenarios appeared in the present moment. In that very moment, the reference to “rumor” served as a hinge between the narrative conclusion of the past and an unsettling imagination of the future.¹⁵ Writing constituted a relational practice—a practice in which different layers of time merged. Even more so, rumor was way more than a reflection upon existing conditions. These reports were not mere descriptions of a situation, but they became agents of change, as they inspired or forced people to respond or to take a stance. There is something profoundly performative about them: on the one hand, they are never new and fully original in themselves as they are the product of existing conditions, power structures and imaginations through which people understood and shaped their environment. On the other hand, they constantly challenge and change these conventions and assumptions and open up spaces for agency and individual interpretations—under the conditions of uncertainty. The report of an impending revolt made Peyton do things to respond to a potential crisis, as he understood the report, once it had turned into rumor, as well as its content as a threat to the cultural and political certainties of his everyday-life.¹⁶
- 11 What shall we do with rumors, then? When I present my research on slave rebellions at conferences in the U.S. South, I often encounter listeners who are interested in the nuts and bolts, in the facts—in whether there really was an insurrection. Although that is a legitimate question, it ultimately becomes rather uninteresting as the flying reports themselves had an effect on communities anyway, regardless of their truth value. Instead of focusing on the outcome of this drama in two acts, we can analyze the role of writing and fact-gathering as a unified way of dealing with uncertainty, and focus on knowledge as dynamic rather than static. Dr. Peyton responded to his own uncertainty by checking his own assumptions, by patrolling, and by relying on writing as a coping mechanism. In that sense, rumors are stories people tell about themselves, their hopes, assumptions, fears and aspirations. For us, rumors become “futures past,” to borrow from historian Reinhart Koselleck.¹⁷ These loose ruminations on the topic yield two important results.
- 12 First, vagueness is part of the very nature of these collective attempts to produce usable knowledge. Instead of accessing data and facts they can base their narratives on, in the case of rumors historians are confronted with knowledge in the making. One can see how contemporaries grappled with the evidence they thought they had at their disposal and the tentative moves they made to come up with a usable version of what was happening around them. Rather than a clear picture of historical settings and personnel rumors provide an image of the past that remains hazy and inconclusive at best. Most prominently, sociologist Tamotsu Shibutani understood rumors as something that emerged as a manifestation of collective knowledge production in situations of crisis (e.g. natural disasters or war) when more formal or official sources of information fell short of providing adequate facts. Yet, as Marc Bloch has shown in his essay on false stories during World War I, one cannot reduce the role of rumors to their function as ad-hoc emergency facts. As he focused on fantasies and wishes of soldiers in the trenches, he highlighted the emotional and distractive qualities of these

stories. This lets us move beyond the idea of rumors simply being faulty versions of the truth in lieu of something better or more objective.¹⁸ Thus, if one changes the premise of analysis, rumors and gossip can turn from being merely unsubstantiated claims and distracting background noises that threaten historians, to a productive kind of material. They appear as efforts to come up with truthful stories and represent a rich material for cultural analysis that helps us to understand contemporary communication structures, values, emotions and the complex ways in which knowledge was produced.¹⁹

- 13 Second, rumors as materials of historical research point at something more general in the craft of writing history: the fractured and provisional character of our own research. In handling the uncertainty of the past, we encounter our own uncertainty and the limits of the knowable. The idea of what we can write about becomes more elusive, when we focus on the processual quality that is inherent to all sources that we use—they are knowledge in the making and so is our own writing. Rather than providing us with the raw material we need for our research, the documents and traces present themselves under the auspices of being preliminary—pointing at the preliminary and provisional status of our historical writing, as well. Instead of crafting one storyline or plot that weighs all the different sides in a mostly objective manner, rumors and gossip give us the chance to historicize the panorama of subjective perspectives, contextualize the rumor-mongering and give room to the voices of *the many* in these stories, even if it means that they contradict each other. We should let that stand, and resist the urge of molding them into one single narrative. In so far as it is necessary to represent different versions of the past, I have to admit that the multivocality and these strains of parallel narratives sound overwhelming and not exactly like a juicy and compelling read. Yet, instead of asking the so-called big questions, what I am proposing here is a more tactile and anthropological approach to history that carefully explores how far different versions of the same historical event will take you.²⁰ But how do we do that?

3. Speechlessness

- 14 By accepting the value of rumors and gossip, do we as historians become agents of ‘flying reports’ as well? Does it mean that anything goes in historiography? Is it all just fiction? Many have already asked that question—especially after Hayden White, in his *Metahistory*, famously proclaimed that it was the plot rather than the scientific archival work that drove the narrative. He explained that by thinking in preconceived narrative forms, historians already approach their materials in a certain manner and cannot escape the effects of these forms on their historical narrative.²¹ Thus, he likened historians to poets, novelists, and other fictional writers. However, White’s sharp analysis was just one piece that critically examined the possibility of historical evidence and historical truth. What started out as a noble dream of objective storytelling was dismantled and deconstructed piece-by-piece. Uncertainty is part of our trade.²²
- 15 This question of uncertainty becomes relevant on two levels. First, it is something we find in our archival materials. Letters, reports, court documents do not simply present the truth—even though terms like “source,” “Quelle” or “fonte,” which are used to describe historical materials, all share a similar kind of optimism in this regard.²³ The

documents we find are traces of people trying to organize, interpret and to come to terms with their experiences. However, not only are these documents highly selective, but the words and signs people found are also never reality itself. Robert Peyton's letter is great example of "uncertain knowledge" in the making.

- 16 Yet, as we approach these documents, the uncertainty of our research objects in turn becomes our own. We will never be able to fathom the intentions of the so-called Founding Fathers, we will never find out whether the report/rumor Robert Peyton dealt with was spread on purpose by his neighbor in order to scare him or mobilize the community. But our uncertainty goes beyond the question of how much credibility and truth-value we assign to certain letters or reports. As Max Weber pointed out, historians have to be selective and focus on certain aspects while dismissing others in order to be able to write.²⁴
- 17 The past that historians venture to conquer is never separate from their own research environment.²⁵ If we view writing history as a relationship we need to tell the stories of the contexts, in which this act happens, the contexts we encounter, but also the ones we create ourselves. As we create the object of our research, it is not only our perspective that is uncertain, the past itself becomes unstable. Writing history, thus, is neither an accurate representation of the past nor a mere reflection of the present: it is history in its double meaning—a reference to past events, and historians writing about these events. In the process of writing, past, present and future expectations are inseparably intertwined. The history of the present shapes our view on past events, as well as these past events have shaped our present views and perspectives. Akin to the task of the translator, history is the process of relating one to the other, a constant attempt of likening one to the other. The performance of history creates something new—something that is a third space, a "fantasy echo" chamber.²⁶ In this echo chamber, the sounds of the past remain fragmented, incomplete and dissonant. We can only offer different versions of these stories that are plausible according to the materials available to us and as we perceive them. The subjectivity of historians is, thus, not an obstacle to writing history, something that taints the purity of our story, but a necessary element of it.²⁷ The materials we find are informed by the questions we ask—and vice versa.
- 18 If we follow this oscillating movement, though, we practitioners of historical research cannot be left out of the picture. Thus, when we think of multivocality in our texts, we have to become part of these stories, as well—not as an act self-aggrandizement or to show our own smartness or humbleness, but in order to add our own voice to the space called doing history. Sounds familiar? Yes, like the setting in which Robert Peyton tried to make sense of his environment, we need to historicize ourselves! If we assume that we, like anthropologists, are an inseparable part of our own work, we have to become part of the story, as well: our subjectivities, the institutional context in which we write, the archival space in which we operate, the audience or the marketability of our research. Uncertainty is constitutive of this operation—on both sides. It affected the people whose lives we study and it affects us, as professionals. In the process of writing history, we have to become aware of our own uncertainties.²⁸ For historians, in accordance to what postmodern theory has taught us, truth becomes the object of doing history rather than its ultimate epistemological goal. So, is multivocality the fix for it all?

- 19 Not quite. What if one's voice remains silent in the archive and in historical writing? Speechlessness, shock, and irritation are part of our business. On the one hand, they strike us as part of what people from the past remained silent about or what they admittedly could not express verbally. Experiences of pain or joyful emotions immediately come to mind. It is not rare that we find quotes like "words cannot describe" or "you can imagine where it goes from here." In a Foucauldian reading, these instances let us analyze the categories people used to produce knowledge and make sense—including their blind spots, ambiguities and unthinkabilities. For instance, the failure of the colonial archive to describe and understand the nature of same-sex relations in nineteenth-century New Zealand, as analyzed by my colleague Lee Wallace, is a good example for these regimes of truth—that also have effects on the materials historians have access to in archival repositories.²⁹ Thus, it has become standard in history not only to write about what was being spoken about, but also to include what people remained silent on. Yet, rumors and the uncertainty that the stories carry can also confront historians with their own speechlessness on a different level: the ethics of history.
- 20 Another archival finding: a couple of years ago, when I worked in the Southern Historical Collection searching for sources for my project on rumors of slave revolts, I came across the personal diary of one Moses Ashley Curtis. While many white Southerners in the fall of 1831, during the time of the Nat Turner Revolt, wrote contradictory and fearful accounts, Curtis in his diary portrayed himself as an objective and calm observer of the events. One of the passages did, however, stick out among the reports:
- Sept. 21st Four of the insurgents have been condemned in W.[ilmington, NC] + have received the reward of acknowledged guilt. One of them was deeply affected at his situation. Dan was horribly indifferent, + I believe had enticed some or all of them to a participation in the plot. Their heads are sticking on poles in different parts of the town. Four more are to be shot to day or to morrow. In Duplin County one black has been roasted + others otherways executed.³⁰
- 21 At first, I was very excited to find such a detailed account with rumors of insurrections in North Carolina. The entire passage that stretches out over 15 pages in the original diary provides information on how Curtis attempted to portray himself as a rational and cool-headed (and male, one might add) observer in the face of all the uncertainty, panic and fear that emerged all around him. His writing can be seen as an anti-rumor stint, in which he made fun of everyone else who was getting overly excited in the face of a threat that, he revealed, was blown way out of proportion. But the longer this testament of (un)certainly sat on my desk, the more appalled and upset I became by idea that someone would, in passing, in such an unbearably laconic fashion, and *in no uncertain terms*, describe the death of human beings. Even as a cold-hearted historian I was speechless, irritated and affected by the language used in this document—I was basically done for the day and had to leave the archive to clear my mind. Even after the anger was long gone, and until this day, this section of Curtis's diary leaves me speechless, because his description and my experience cannot simply be resolved and molded into a perfectly arranged discourse analysis about power formations and knowledge production. My own words fail me, I cannot fully rationalize this piece. The certainty that Curtis had tried to project throughout his diary in order to overcome the uncertainty of his own times has become my unsettledness.

- 22 This kind of material confronts us with our own limits of understanding. On the one hand, this is a good thing. The difficulty of understanding a slave-holding white man, an overseer in a concentration camp or a mass murderer can, actually, be morally reassuring because it separates their spheres from ours. This is not in order to suggest seeking intellectual refuge in an exculpating “mad man” theory, which does not get us any closer to understanding. Historians like Christopher Browning and other scholars in the field of perpetrator research have shown the many layers that contributed to acts of incredible violence beyond mere ideology or psychopathy, including emotional bonding, masculinity or work ethic being driving factors that enabled violent action.³¹ Even more, beyond its ethical or emotional implications, not-understanding remains also an important part of the historical profession. Although we strive for a complete picture of the past, some things will remain unsettling, strange and incomprehensible—some frameworks cannot be fully translated into the language of our times. The act of writing history is a process of bringing closer what people experienced in the past, while, at the same time, keeping this past at a distance.³² However, the violence uttered in Curtis’s words retain a certain power, even though almost 200 years have passed since the events in North Carolina—like an echo have resonated up until the present. They resonated throughout the melancholia of the anti-lynching era and that remains audible in the debates about racialized (police) violence in recent years.³³
- 23 Coming back to the unknown Black person who was killed in Duplin County, NC in 1831. The act of lynching, of reducing the suspected insurrectionist to his mere flesh, and the symbolic obliteration of the body did not only foreshadow the many more acts of violence to come in the post-Civil-War South, they were also attempts to regain control over the uncertainty of the situation following the deadly violence in August 1831. By using a culinary metaphor (“roasting”) Curtis turned the black body he wrote about into a blackened good that could be consumed and digested. The dangerous black body would become a well-packaged and portioned entity that would lose its scandalous nature.³⁴ Only Curtis got to have a voice in his story, the Black person he referenced in his narrative existed only in the space of the fire. While being stripped of its individuality he/she becomes any Black person and even though it is highly likely that Curtis spoke about a man, his act of second-hand lynching renders any other kind of identity trait meaningless and reduced him/her to his/her racial identity. While Curtis came to terms with the events of September 1831, the violence and the trauma inflicted on the Black community remained absent from his story—as did the individual identity of the individual he referred to in his description. However, in that Curtis’s rendition of the events in Duplin County reflect the uncertainty many contemporaries faced and the rumors they worked through as well as his own subject position that allowed him the formulate, with absolute certainty, the solution of that problem.³⁵ The raw violence that struck both physically and symbolically reasserted white dominance over the Black community.³⁶ And, by giving such a prominent position to the quote in my writing of Curtis’s, I encounter an ethical dilemma: do I not (as a white, non-American historian) run the danger of “pornotroping” and of reiterating the same power structures and the “ontological terror” drowning out the words of that “one black” who was apparently killed in Duplin County, in 1831? Does the writing of history, instead, allow for ways to unsettle this seemingly certain narrative, and counter its dehumanizing gesture?³⁷

- 24 I now have a good answer to that question—however, in order to counter the certainty Curtis performs in his diary, it is not only an epistemological but an ethical necessity to contextualize the sheer violence, because the victim’s voice cannot be recovered from Curtis’s comments alone. In the face of this absence and of my own uncertainty it might be a first step to make certain that everyone is aware that “one black,” a human being was killed in Duplin County, NC in September 1831 by a violent mob.

4. Conclusion

- 25 In many aspects, the topic of rumors pushes the limits of historical research: the material basis and the epistemological conditions of writing as well as the limits of historical concepts and rhetoric point towards the need for an ethics of history. In both the traces that we find from the past and in our own writing there remain moments of uncertainty, silence or speechlessness that mark the limits of what we can comprehend. Loose ends of our stories that cannot be resolved, that evade clear categories are part of our research—be it our own uncertainties or ambiguities we encounter in our archival sources. As complicated and as unexciting as this sounds, we also have to give room to the things we cannot write about, to our own limitations and misunderstandings. It would not only make visible the process of producing knowledge, but it would also allow us to understand our writing as an open-ended process. Uncertainty and speechlessness do not mark the failing of historians, but are productive and, I would argue, necessary elements of our trade. Thus, like those rumor-mongers we engage in an unfinished and unsettling business—of which uncertainty and doubt are a constant part. *So, let us embrace uncertainty!* But let us also preserve or recover the humanity of the subjects we write about—their fractured subjectivities and the distant echoes we perceive in the face of ambiguous feelings are a challenge to our own agendas and goals.
- 26 Therefore, rumors become a way to open up our stories to modes of writing that allow for contradictory versions of the past and that pay tribute to the many uncertainties contemporaries faced, as well as to our own intellectual unsettledness. In that sense, historians should not shy away from the House of Rumor that Ovid has pictured more than 2000 years ago, but stroll its halls and listen to the fractured echoes and “the subdued murmur of voices” in order to understand the fringes of the knowledge of the subjects we write about, as well as of our own ones.

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NOTES

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3. Among the many articles and contributions are Karen Adkins, *Gossip, Epistemology, and Power: Knowledge Underground* (New York, NY: Springer Science + Business Media, 2017); Jason K. Phillips, "The Grape Vine Telegraph: Rumors and Confederate Persistence," *Journal of Southern History* LXXII, no. 4 (2006); Clay Ramsay, *The Ideology of the Great Fear: the Soissonais in 1789* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992, 1992); Y. A. Sternhell, "Communicating War: The Culture of Information in Richmond during thje American Civil War," *Past & Present* 202 (2009); Anjan Ghosh, "The Role of Rumour in History Writing," *History Compass* 6, no. 5 (2008); Jason T. Sharples, "Hearing Whispers, Casting Shadows: Jailhouse Conversation and the Production of Knowledge during the Antigua Slave Conspiracy Investigation of 1736," in *Buried Lives: Incarcerated in Early*

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5. For that e.g. Andrea Zemskov-Züge, "Narrating the Siege of Leningrad. Official and Unofficial Practices in the Memorialization of the 'Great Patriotic War'," in *Unsettling History: Archiving and Narrating in Historiography*, ed. Sebastian Jobs and Alf Lüdtke (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2010); Leora Auslander, "Archiving a Life: Post-Shoah Paradoxes of Memory Legacies," in *Unsettling History: Archiving and Narrating in Historiography*, ed. Sebastian Jobs and Alf Lüdtke (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2010).

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14. Tynes Cowan, "The 1856 Slave Insurrection panic and the Williamsburg Gazette," *ATQ* 12, no. 4 (1998); Charles B. Dew, "Black Ironworkers and the Slave Insurrection Panic of 1856," *Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 3 (1975); Harvey Wish, "The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1856," *Journal of Southern History* 5, no. 2 (1939).

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16. Ghosh, "The Role of Rumour in History Writing."

17. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York, 2004).

18. Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966, 1966); Marc Bloch, "Réflexions d'un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre," *Revue de synthèse historique* 33 (1921).

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21. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
22. François Berthomé, Julien Bonhomme, and Grégory Delaplace, "Preface: Cultivating Uncertainty," *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 2 (2012).
23. On the very subject of idolizing historical sources: Michael Zimmermann, "Quelle als Metapher: Überlegungen zur Historisierung einer historiographischen Selbstverständlichkeit," *Historische Anthropologie* 5, no. 2 (1997). In a broader context springs and water as metaphors of emerging knowledge since the Enlightenment Hans Blumenberg, *Quellen, Ströme, Eisberge: über Metaphern*, ed. Ulrich von Bülow and Dorit Krusche (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012).
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25. Achim Landwehr, "Die Kunst, sich nicht allzu sicher zu sein: Möglichkeiten kritischer Geschichtsschreibung," *WerkstattGeschichte* e, no. 61 (2012); Achim Landwehr, *Die anwesende Abwesenheit der Vergangenheit: Essay zur Geschichtstheorie* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2016).
26. I borrow this metaphor from Joan W. Scott, "Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (2001).
27. Reinhart Koselleck, "Vorgriff auf Unvollkommenheit," *Deutsche Akademie für Dichtung und Sprache Jahrbuch* 1999 (2000).
28. Landwehr, "Die Kunst, sich nicht allzu sicher zu sein."
29. Lee Wallace, "Outside History: Same-Sex Sexuality and the Colonial Archive," in *Embodiments of Cultural Encounters*, ed. Sebastian Jobs and Gesa Mackenthun (Münster: Waxmann, 2011).
30. Curtis, Moses Ashley: Curtis, Moses Ashley - Personal Diary, 1830-1836, and no date, Folder 111, Moses Ashley Curtis Papers #199, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, NC.
31. Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Aaron Asher Books/HarperCollins Publishers, 1992).
32. On the performative qualities of that operation: Greg Denning, "The Theatricality of History Making and the Paradoxes of Acting," *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 1 (1993); Greg Denning, "Performing on the Beaches of the Mind: An Essay," *History and Theory* 41, no. 1 (2002). On the otherness, incommensurability and speechlessness as a fundamental elements of history: Lucian Hölscher, "Hermeneutik des Nichtverstehens," in *Semantik der Leere: Grenzfragen der Geschichtswissenschaft*, ed. Lucian Hölscher (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009).
33. Dominik LaCapra has conceptualized that entangled relationship between historians and the topics they write about in the following fashion: "What is the relationship between the differentiated experience of agents or subjects in the past and the differentiated experience of observers or secondary witnesses, including historians in one of their roles, in a present marked in complicated ways by that past" *Writing history, writing trauma* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 37. Also Joan Scott has used the metaphor of a fractured echo in order to describe how past experiences and events shape current (self-)conceptualizations and perspectives, "Fantasy Echo."
34. On that particular aspect of race and cuisine: Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial indigestion: eating bodies in the 19th century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).
35. This idea has been specified by Lydia Plath, "North Carolina and Nat Turner: Honour and Violence in a Slave Insurrection Scare," in *Black and White Masculinity in the American South, 1800-2000*, ed. Lydia Plath and Sergio Lussana (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Pub., 2009).

On the tradition of the body as a site of white control and the creation of certainty Sebastian Jobs, "An Act for the Better Ordering of Negroes (1712) – Oder: Keinen Zweifel lassen," in *race & sex – Eine Geschichte der Neuzeit*, ed. Jürgen Martschukat and Olaf Stieglitz (Berlin: Neofelis Verlag, 2016).

36. On the symbolic dimension of lynchings esp. Andrew S. Buckser, "Lynching as Ritual in the American South," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 37 (1992); Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and spectacle: witnessing racial violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

37. On the concept of "pornotroping," which critically engages the ways in which Black subjectivity and humanity can be written about in the face of continuous violence Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987); Alexander G. Weheliye, "Pornotropes," *Journal of Visual Culture* 7, no. 1 (2008).

ABSTRACTS

Rumors are a challenging kind of archival material for historical research. They provide vague, unreliable and obscure information—far from the reliable source material required to write history “as it really happened.” In this article I will, however, show how the uncertainty that is characteristic for rumors opens up a chance to understand knowledge-in-the making. By looking at reports of slave revolts in the U.S. South I try to find out how people at the time grappled with contradictory information and tried to evaluate the credibility of their sources. In a moment of crisis, rumor-mongering for nineteenth-century southerners functioned as a narrative way to come to terms with their collective fear and to performatively reestablish order. In the end, rumors became collective stories that help us, as historians, to understand the ambiguous character of uncertainty that can both challenge and stabilize power structures. In that, the focus on rumors also allows us to embrace uncertainty, fuzziness and speechlessness as constitutive elements in our own writing.

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Keywords: history, rumors, gossip, uncertainty, slavery, slave insurrections

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