

## Talking of Gossip

by Polly Wright

A Gossip banner by Livio Casanova is to hang on the façade of Palazzina in Allschwil, Basel, from 1st - 18th September 2022. This will be the first artist project at the new home of Palazzina, who started in 2019, as a group of artists hosting exhibitions, performances, readings, talks and dinners in their housing community/exhibition space.

This invite from Palazzina to Livio has offered an expansion to the gossip Livio and I have shared - a continuous line of inquiry since Livio exhibited Gossip Talks at Brighton CCA in October 2021, a show of seven textile works accompanied by a magazine that we worked on together including collected research, an essay and fictional texts based on the seven gossip "characters". Since then, Livio and I have continued to work with gossip as a notion and as a tool. I am writing this text now with the intention to informally explore this edition of gossip, asking questions as much as imagining answers.

I want to start by revisiting the essay I wrote last year in the paragraphs that follow as a thread to stitch the editions together,

So, what is gossip? Both a noun and verb, the dictionary definitions of gossip vary from chatty, informal conversations, storytelling people's private lives to unkind or disapproving reports on the behaviour of others. To be a gossip can be associated with being a newsmonger, tattler, fish wife. Yet etymologically, gossip derives from 'god+sibb', godparent, which then, after time, expanded to refer to the females accompanying their friend in childbirth.

Silvia Federici begins the chapter 'On the Meaning of Gossip', "Tracing the history of the words frequently used to define and degrade women is a necessary step if we are to understand how gender oppression functions and reproduces itself." The chapter goes on to explore the shift in meaning of gossip, a word that originally denoted the solidarity of collective female sociality in the Middle Ages and continued to expand to represent female friendship without any derogatory connotations. Federici remarks, "it had strong emotional connotations."

How did this light talk amongst female friends become a sort of ridiculed practice with malicious intent? Mystery and morality plays of the pre modern English society, were written by the guilds. Men who formed the guilds were expected to satirise those to be condemned in order to boost their power locally, and they were particularly wary of strong, independent women who seemed to prefer time with their friends than their husbands. The idea then becomes that gossips are disagreeable, aggressive and argumentative. In 'Witch-Hunt', author Hannah Black writes, "Gossip has always been a secret language of friendship and resistance between women." The essay takes Federici's research and argument to discuss the entanglements of capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy throughout history through the lens of gossip.

Revisiting the core of last year's essay, I am struck by the strong sense of the potential of gossip to evoke powerful and emotional human connections, both spoken and felt. I was reading *The Observer*, a UK newspaper, this past Sunday, and the backpage's feature *Ask Philippa* centred on the role of gossip in the workplace. Philippa gave the advice, "Gossip can work as a glue, it flows between people who feel mutually friendly and it's a sign that you trust them." This offered a - coincidental - reminder of how gossip might be thought about as something essentially human and social. In the field of psychology, where gossip has commonly been overlooked until recently, the psychologist Toni Brenn suggests "the role of gossip in human interaction ... has arguably shown that gossip has many positive effects – if nothing else for the therapeutic and enriching exchange of 'tales of the human condition.'" From journalism to academia, gossip continues to be discussed, studied and debated.

Storytelling our experiences of sociality to engage with what it is to be human has a history as far back as we go. The multiplicity of the meanings gossip has held over this time is exemplified in the book covers collected surrounding this essay. From 'Miss Read's' wry social comedy set in a fictional village in England *Gossip from Thrush Green to Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors and Gossip*, a book that combines two classic topics in social anthropology and demonstrates the role of rumour and gossip in the genesis of social and political violence, the variety of uses for gossip emphasises its curious journey across centuries.

Meanwhile, I have been reading *Floating Margins*, a compilation of essays exploring care. In Helen Starr's essay, "Bush Tea," she writes about her curatorial thinking that engages with world histories and anticolonial futures. Within the essay, she writes, "The story of humanism (whether as a philosophical doctrine or as a worldly orientation) is often told as a kind of European coming-of-age story. On this account humanism marks a certain stage in Europe's consciousness of itself" putting forward that "Humanism and colonialism inhabit the same cognitive-political universe inasmuch as Europe's discovery of itsSelf is simultaneous with its discovery of its Others..." I think about the structures of knowledge from which we have learned and wonder if gossip might too offer a counter position to the hierarchies we find ourselves in. Starr later asks "What would a society centered on healing look like?" How could gossip as a means to share tales of the human condition support this?

The word *Gossip* is central in Livio's commissioned banner for *Palazzina* with depictions of hand gestures found in imagery of medieval manuscripts, surrounding the text. The hands are inspired by representations of the magician and witch; revealing the medieval fascination with the points of contact between this world and the celestial and infernal realms. I am reminded of the compelling arguments by Silvia Federici and Hannah Black, citing the events leading up to where gossip was reframed by a patriarchal shift and wonder what these gestures might be able to reclaim. To me, the hands and *Gossip* feel both a call to action whilst communicating the potential of secret languages, sisterly whispers and colloquial hand signals. The hands also evoke practicing palmistry, offering other worldly readings of the human experience transcending what is rationally known.

Again I ask,

How do we reclaim gossip?

My last answer was,

A return to a different connotation of gossip in order to challenge structural hierarchies as we perceive them today is what I want to continue to develop and reimagine today. The sources and references I've found bring up themes of informally conversing with loved ones, friends and family, and often include gathering around food, or evoke a communal sensibility.

For the opening of PALAZZINA FACADE Hello Baslerstrasse!, Laptopradio will play music and Lorraine Baylac, part of La Soupe Collective, will cook food for everyone. Livio's banner with this glorious, collective act of hosting stands as a metaphor, a message and an invitation.

References:

Gossip Talks, Livio Casanova, Brighton CCA, 2021

Hannah Black, "Witch-hunt," The Gossip Issue, (TANK Magazine, 2017)

Tonni Brenn, "Gossip - tales of the human condition," The British Psychological Society, September 2014

Silvia Federici, "Witches, Witch-hunting and Women," (PM Press, 2018)

Philippa Perry, "Ask Philippa," The Observer, 21 August 2022

Miss Read, Gossip From Thrush Green, (Orion, 1981)

Helen Starr, "Bush Tea," Floating Margins, iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts), May 2022

Pamela J. Stewart, Andrew Strathern, Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors and Gossip, (Cambridge Press, 2003)