

**'The screaming streets': Voice and the Spaces of Gossip in *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894) and *Liza of Lambeth* (1897)**

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Gossip, or 'talk about other people', is a powerful mode of speech.<sup>1</sup> The intimacy and proximity necessary to gossip, as well as its perceived female bias, have led it to be analysed as a neighbourly act with moral and social benefits, affirming and cementing women's belonging together in a community. Critics have tended to look sympathetically at gossip's usefulness in the mid-Victorian period in particular, when other forms of organized social communication were inaccessible to women. During this period, the meaning of 'gossip' was changing. The term was appropriated by new periodicals to describe literary news as well as social events.<sup>2</sup> An article in an 1864 issue of *Bow Bells* magazine, a popular 'family' publication, describes the movement of gossip into the written, male realm of the periodical. The article suggests that written gossip was gaining acceptance as a new form of social intercourse for men. The writer observes that gossip is becoming 'much more respectable than it used to be — it is beginning to find a place of its own in literature as well as society'.<sup>3</sup> It would no longer be seen as the sole province of 'old women'. 'Men', it is noted, 'do not disdain to gossip at the rate of so much per page or column, so that literary gossip, art gossip, and musical gossip are the prominent feature of many magazines and journals.' For women, oral gossip maintained its positive, communal aspects: it 'undoubtedly helps to destroy illusions,

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, 'Borderlands: Letters and Gossip', *Georgia Review*, 37 (1983), 791–813 (p. 795).

<sup>2</sup> These ranged from, for example, the *Athenaeum*'s 'Literary Gossip' column to the 'Cycling Gossip' column in *Bow Bells*.

<sup>3</sup> 'What Women Gossip About', *Bow Bells*, 28 December 1864, p. 509.

but it also strengthens, encourages, and aids in the performance of duty' (p. 509). Gossip is thus portrayed as a useful aspect of women's talk, which aids solidarity with other women and keeps women contented and obliging. Yet as literary gossip developed links between reading communities, spoken gossip became concomitantly more fraught, even as it emphasized the respectable. Consequently, its negative aspects became more marked as the century proceeded. The uses of gossip in the later nineteenth century suggest that the networks it constituted could be destructive, especially to working-class women. The effects of this shift after mid-century were felt in the 1890s when gossip, 'if not conceived of entirely negatively, is nonetheless demeaning and corrupting of all it touches'.<sup>4</sup> Charles Annandale's 1894 dictionary definition — while identifying the positive connotations of its etymology in *god sib*, that is, a godparent or intimate friend or neighbour — defines a gossip as an 'idle tattler', purveying 'groundless rumour'.<sup>5</sup> Gossip in the late-Victorian period always contains this destructive potential; as Pamela Fox has noted, it ruined reputations with devastating effect.<sup>6</sup>

Such shifts have divided critical opinion on gossip. Some have attempted to recuperate its positive potential, asserting that since gossip is primarily women's speech, its uses might be reassessed as acts of feminist solidarity. Ned Schantz, for example, has argued that gossip allows for the development of female networks that can resist patriarchy, asserting 'the importance of gossip for an emerging feminist consciousness'.<sup>7</sup> Louise Collins has suggested that gossip ought to be reconsidered in light of its traditional meaning of 'close relation', in that gossipers could 'act as midwives to each other's moral development'.<sup>8</sup> In his 'Vindication of Gossip', philosopher Aaron Ben-Ze'ev declares outright that 'the malicious-

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<sup>4</sup> Jan B. Gordon, *Gossip and Subversion in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction: Echo's Economies* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 349.

<sup>5</sup> 'gossip', in Charles Annandale, *A Concise Dictionary of the English Language*, new and enlarged edn (London: Blackie, 1894).

<sup>6</sup> Pamela Fox, *Class Fictions: Shame and Resistance in the British Working-Class Novel* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> Ned Schantz, *Gossip, Letters, Phones: The Scandal of Female Networks in Film and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 10. See also Lisa Surridge, *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Louise Collins, 'Gossip: A Feminist Defence', in *Good Gossip*, ed. by Robert Goodman and Aaron Ben Ze'ev (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), pp. 106–114 (p. 114).

ness that is commonly attributed to gossip seems to be wrong'.<sup>9</sup> Like Collins and the *Bow Bells* writer, Ben-Ze'ev concludes that gossip 'is mostly harmless [...] not vicious' (pp. 12, 24). Yet such studies have overlooked the problem that while gossip is used by both men and women, it is primarily women to whom malicious gossip is directed. Collins's analysis in particular overlooks the variegated power of individual women. Melanie Tebbutt anticipated this blind spot in her book *Women's Talk*, pointing out that 'while all women share a subordinate status relative to men, they do not form a homogeneous group and there are many variations in language use'.<sup>10</sup>

Such variations are often subtly encoded in literary writing. Patricia Meyer Spacks influentially suggested that 'to think about gossip and literature [...] provides a vantage point from which to take gossip itself seriously'.<sup>11</sup> I contend in this article that late-Victorian realist literature is a particularly rich vantage point from which to examine this ostensibly ordinary mode of speech. It is a genre concerned with uncovering the horror in the everyday, the tragic in the 'familiar and obvious'.<sup>12</sup> In the late-Victorian texts examined here, which illuminate the experience of women in urban areas for whom the independence of the New Woman or the immersion of the *flâneuse* was not realized, I show how gossip works as an intimate form of communal orality that nevertheless contains the possibility of menace in its potential to circulate rumour. Arthur Morrison's collection of short stories *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894) and W. Somerset Maugham's *Liza of Lambeth* (1897) describe urban areas that are isolated from modernity, in which the ancient, oral form of gossip cannot be superseded by the flourishing of literary gossip. Oral gossip lingers in these areas and is pernicious and authoritative — in the mean streets it is gossip, and not the written word, that is 'the eye and the ear and the tongue of the people'.<sup>13</sup> *Liza of Lambeth* and *Tales of Mean Streets* expose the central paradox of gossip as identified by Jorg Bergmann: 'The socializing function of gossip is impossible without its social disdain. It is only as

<sup>9</sup> Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, 'A Vindication of Gossip', in *Good Gossip*, ed. by Goodman and Ben Ze'ev, pp. 11–24 (p. 12).

<sup>10</sup> Melanie Tebbutt, *Women's Talk: A Social History of 'Gossip' in Working-Class Neighbourhoods, 1880–1960* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995), p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Jorg R. Bergmann, *Discreet Indiscretions: The Social Organization of Gossip*, trans. by John Bednarz, Jr (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> W. T. Stead, 'Government by Journalism', *Contemporary Review*, May 1886, pp. 653–74 (p. 656).

something bad that gossip can be something good' (p. 153). In these texts, gossip becomes talk about *other* people: a conversational mode that identifies and punishes difference.

### Regions of strange order: homogeneity and orality

In the late-Victorian streets described in *Tales of Mean Streets* and *Liza of Lambeth*, respectability is maintained and conformity ensured by gossip. In these culturally isolated places bordering slums, written forms of gossip cannot compete with oral forms of storytelling and knowledge transfer. Where neighbourhoods are defined by proximity, not elective affinity, gossip is particularly influential. In the sketch 'A Street', usually used to introduce *Tales of Mean Streets*, Morrison characterized the East End of London as a site of commonplace poverty where separation from the slums was precisely delineated by the boundaries of the streets. Similarly, *Liza* takes place, as Roger Henkle has noted, in a South London street that is 'at the margins of slums'.<sup>14</sup> This proximity to slums is a serious threat to the inhabitants of the homogeneous streets described in *Tales of Mean Streets* and *Liza of Lambeth*. As Tebbutt suggests, gossip was most powerful in working-class places at a remove from the poorest (p. 2). Respectability is maintained by close governance of the boundaries of these streets. This need for self-governance is also due to the reluctance of the forces of formal authority to intrude into these places. (It is observed in *Liza of Lambeth*, for instance, that the police 'always keep out of the way when there's anythin' goin' on'.)<sup>15</sup> In such places, oral gossip controls errant individuals and maintains collective respectability through the vocal transfer of surveillance. As Fox observes, in working-class districts at the turn of the century, 'local talk took on a policing function, regulating conformity to certain expectations which safe-guarded the community's reputation' (p. 99). This policing function is possible because gossip can move where inhabitants cannot; it can cross boundaries and control delinquency. In 1901, C. F. G. Masterman wrote that the East End was a 'region of strange disorder, cut off within a different Universe of Being

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<sup>14</sup> Roger Henkle, 'Morrison, Gissing and the Stark Reality', *NOVEL*, 25 (1992), 302–20 (p. 311).

<sup>15</sup> W. Somerset Maugham, *Liza of Lambeth* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 70.

from the London that thinks and talks and chatters'.<sup>16</sup> Seen through the lens of gossip, the streets in *Tales of Mean Streets* and *Liza of Lambeth* might be more usefully understood as places of strange *order*, in which inhabitants take on the responsibility of talking about wayward others to conserve homogeneity. Here, gossip is not frivolous talk and chatter, but a serious use of language evincing moral judgement. Gossip is the mode by which communities, defined by the uniformity of the streets they inhabit, manifest themselves as crowd and make the streets scream.

*Tales of Mean Streets* established Arthur Morrison as a chronicler of the late-Victorian East End. In this collection Morrison revises a Victorian literary topography inspired by slum tourists and sensational slum novelists who portrayed the East End as what Joseph McLaughlin has called a 'playground for thrillseekers'.<sup>17</sup> *Tales of Mean Streets* was developed from a series of sketches Morrison produced for the *National Observer* between 1892 and 1894, under the editorship of W. E. Henley. At Henley's suggestion, Morrison collected the sketches, as well as two sketches published in the *Pall Mall Budget*, into one volume. The collection was received variously, with great attention being paid to the domestic violence in the story 'Lizerunt'.<sup>18</sup> Michel Krzak, introducing a recent edition of the collection, notes that '*Tales of Mean Streets* generated reactions so extreme in some cases that the book was banned and boycotted'. Clerkenwell Public Library and W. H. Smith and Sons were among those who banned the book.<sup>19</sup> However, some reviewers were impressed, notably the anonymous reviewer of the *Bookman*, who stated that *Tales* was 'unmistakably strong' and 'scrupulously truthful'.<sup>20</sup> In the short stories and journalistic sketches of the collection, Morrison employs a detached narrative style to configure a late-Victorian East End characterized by, as Peter Keating has noted, 'monotony, respectability, and violence'.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> C. F. G. Masterman, *The Heart of the Empire: Discussions of Problems of Modern City Life in England* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1901), p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph McLaughlin, *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Review of *Tales of Mean Streets*, *Spectator*, 9 March 1895, pp. 329–30.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Krzak, Preface, in Arthur Morrison, *Tales of Mean Streets* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), pp. 7–17 (p. 13). Morrison was outraged at this, and protested against Messrs Smith and Sons' 'convenient' application of morality in 'Authors, Libraries, and the Public', *Athenaeum*, 27 April 1895, pp. 536–37 (p. 536).

<sup>20</sup> 'Novel Notes: Tales of Mean Streets', *Bookman*, January 1895, pp. 120–21 (p. 121).

<sup>21</sup> Peter Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 173.

In *Tales of Mean Streets*, Morrison takes the authorial objectivity of late-Victorian realists to its limit, combining free indirect speech with journalistic style to efface himself as author from the text. It is gossip that allows Morrison to achieve the realist ‘blurring of the boundaries between author and [...] ostensibly “factual” subject’.<sup>22</sup> In his use of free indirect speech to represent the collective, Morrison establishes gossip as the narrative voice — an unattributable, unaccountable voice. The journalistic opening sketch ‘A Street’ is, as Adrian Hunter has observed, a ‘rhetorically complex’ piece in which Morrison employs the disconcerting method of repeating back to the reader their own misconceptions about the East End.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the East End is established as a site that is gossiped about: ‘one will say’ it is ‘a shocking place’ while ‘another [says] it is a place given over to the Unemployed’.<sup>24</sup> Its features are exaggerated and sensationalized through gossip — rumours are exchanged about it and a conglomeration of wrong impressions is created. The East End, Morrison suggests in such rhetorical gestures, has been misunderstood and rendered unknowable precisely due to its representation using gossip. In his own use of gossip to introduce the collection, then, Morrison plays with the inaccuracies of language and suggests his own ability to disclose the hidden truth.

In playing games with gossip in *Tales of Mean Streets*, Morrison exploits the realism and immediacy of the form. Assuming an anonymous role (like the writer in *Bow Bells*) and treating the material as overheard, he reduces his own responsibility, making what he writes only as reliable as the spoken word. Morrison’s frequent employment of gossip as both plot point and narrative mode in *Tales of Mean Streets* enables his uniquely detached realism. The point of view is both of and from the street, drawing the individual reader into the community of the text. In both *Liza of Lambeth* and *Tales of Mean Streets* we see a movement away from the omniscient mid-Victorian narrator who could witness his characters from above. Morrison, the late-Victorian realist, descends to the level of the street, allowing the voice of the street itself to determine the text.

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<sup>22</sup> Emma Liggins, *George Gissing, the Working Woman, and Urban Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. xix.

<sup>23</sup> Adrian Hunter, ‘Arthur Morrison and the Tyranny of Sentimental Charity’, *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 56 (2013), 292–312 (p. 299).

<sup>24</sup> Arthur Morrison, ‘A Street’, in *Tales of Mean Streets* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), pp. 19–28 (p. 19).

The streets described in *Tales of Mean Streets* and *Liza of Lambeth* are characterized by uniformity and symmetry. This, as Donald Olsen has suggested, was the intention of the nineteenth-century architects who created 'single-purpose, homogeneous, specialized neighbourhoods' in which privacy, not diversity, was realized.<sup>25</sup> 'A Street' describes exhaustively the grim consequences of this insistence on homogeneity. Morrison conveys the repeated diurnal pattern of one street — a synecdoche of the entire East End. The tedium and relentless homogeneity of the whole East End can only be conceived, Morrison suggests, by imagining a single street, of 'about one hundred and fifty yards — on the same pattern all' repeated for 'hundreds of miles' (pp. 20, 28). The East End, Morrison states, has been misrepresented as 'an evil plexus of slums that hide human creeping things' (p. 28). By contrast, Morrison insists that the problem of the East End inheres in its 'dismal lack of accent, its sordid uniformity, its utter remoteness from delight' (p. 28). Negative repetitions throughout the sketch reinforce the representation of the street as a cultural vacuum: 'There are no dances, no tennis, no water-parties, no picnics.' For young people in love there is 'no exchange of promises, no troth-plight, no engagement, no love-talk'. It is a closed space with its own 'indigenous' customs (p. 27). 'Nothing disturbs' the street and 'no event in the outside world makes any impression' (p. 24). Through repeated negation, Morrison creates a place characterized by absence — of outsiders, of culture, and of pleasure.

Morrison describes the cultural silence of the monotonous streets of the East End:

Nobody from this street goes to the theatre. [...] Nobody reads poetry or romance. [...] A Sunday paper in some few houses provides such reading as this street is disposed to achieve. Now and again a penny novel has been found among the private treasures of a growing daughter, and has been wrathfully confiscated. (pp. 27–28)

Similarly, in Lambeth at the time that *Liza* is set, Maugham perceives no literary interlocutions; he states in his preface that people there 'did not read the papers' (p. ix). In *Liza of Lambeth* the only cultural interpolation comes from a melodrama that Liza is taken to see by married man Jim. The play captivates her. However, when Jim grabs Liza in the street after-

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<sup>25</sup> Donald J. Olsen, 'Victorian London: Specialisation, Segregation, and Privacy', *Victorian Studies*, 17 (1974), 265–78 (p. 267).

wards, her ‘apt misquotation of the melodrama’, ‘Un’and me, villin!’ is laughed at by Jim and he beats her until she acquiesces to his advances (p. 70). She has no other cultural mode with which to interpret her situation. Isolated from any other culture, Liza’s life becomes melodramatic in a site which, like Morrison’s ‘A Street’, is ‘unfavourable to the ideal’ (‘A Street’, p. 28). Working-class literacy is represented in these texts as being distrusted by the inhabitants of such streets. Where literacy incites wrath or distrust, orality retains its influence. In such places, oral gossip cannot be supplanted by literary gossip but retains the characteristic of a ‘respectable’ form of ‘talk about other people’. The written word can have no purchase in these places: gossip proceeds unrestrained by literary forms.

### Gossip and the silenced in ‘Behind the Shade’ (1893)

The short story ‘Behind the Shade’, one of the most poignant in *Tales of Mean Streets*, was first published in Henley’s *National Observer* in 1893.<sup>26</sup> It was described by its *Bookman* reviewer as a tale of ‘grim independence’ (‘Novel Notes’, p. 121). ‘Behind the Shade’ describes the tragic destructiveness of gossip. Neighbours who are suspicious of the pretensions to gentility they perceive in the newcomers Mrs and Miss Perkins use gossip to maintain surveillance and to control the otherness the women represent. Mrs and Miss Perkins move to a street such as Morrison describes in ‘A Street’ after the death of Mr Perkins. However, we never hear of their experiences there from the Perkinses themselves. The story is composed of fragments of hearsay passed along the street. Instantly isolated by the situation of their ‘odd box of a cottage’ at the borders of the street, Mrs and Miss Perkins accentuate their difference by refusing to engage in gossip. Their silence colludes with the emplacement of their cottage to establish their otherness, which prompts malicious talk about them. The talk has tragic effects: ‘a few plain words [spoken] in the right quarter’ by a resentful neighbour are sufficient to hasten their destitution by stopping Miss Perkins from working to support her mother (p. 75). Eventually the women are found dead in the cottage, their reserve having been misinterpreted by the street as pretension, and all their activities having been misconstrued through gossip.

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<sup>26</sup> Arthur Morrison, ‘Behind the Shade’, in *Tales of Mean Streets*, pp. 75–82.



The stark uniformity of the street is disrupted by the dwelling place of Mrs and Miss Perkins. Their cottage defies the otherwise total homogeneity of the place:

The street was the common East End street — two parallels of brick pierced with windows and doors. But at the end of one, where the builder had found a remnant of land too small for another six-roomer, there stood an odd box of a cottage, with three rooms and a wash-house. (p. 75)

The situation of the cottage prefigures the cruelty that will take place. The site itself, it is intimated, has been created by violence: the walls have been ‘pierced’. Voices — which can also pierce — will have power in such a site. Lacking the power to demolish the difference indicated by the house, but accepting the responsibility for its regulation, the street collectively engages in an attack upon the women who seem to deliberately defy the street’s stolid uniformity. The house is in sole occupation, which not only effects isolation but is also suggestive of a deliberate and ‘offensive alienation’ (p. 78). In their lace curtains, their piano, and the shade of fruit in the window, ‘a sign [of respectability] accepted in those parts’, Mrs and Miss Perkins are demonstrating that they have been used to better surroundings (p. 75). The separation of the house is further emphasized by the dimension in which their door exists — it is round the corner. ‘A Street’ introduces the spatial conceit that round each corner is another division of respectability. Such boundaries must be marked and maintained. The women cannot be incorporated into the street; they are both inside and outside its borders and so threaten the security of its boundaries.

Without other means to defend their neighbourhood against the potential disturbance of the Perkinses, inhabitants of this street use gossip to grasp a modicum of control. As sociolinguists Adam Jaworski and Justine Coupland attest, gossip inheres in ‘marginalized, liminal, or uncertain social spaces’.<sup>27</sup> It is most useful in places where the design of the space is not sympathetic to human habitation. The need for gossip displays the overwhelming power of the design of the streets. Gossip’s usefulness in these places bordering slums is proof that, as Spacks has suggested, ‘anyone can invoke the dangerous magic of language; a weapon

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<sup>27</sup> Adam Jaworski and Justine Coupland, ‘Othering in Gossip: “You Go out You Have a Laugh and You Can Pull Yeah Okay but Like ...”’, *Language in Society*, 34 (2005), 667–94 (p. 667).

for the otherwise powerless, a weapon [...] usable from dark corners' (*Gossip*, p. 30). Gossip thrives in the 'dark corners' of ordinary poverty and reflects the submission of their inhabitants to 'the nightmare of a world that is all streets'.<sup>28</sup>

Everything about the Perkins women raises suspicions that necessitate surveillance:

When people keep a house to themselves, and keep it clean; when they neither stand at the doors nor gossip across back-fences; when, moreover, they have a well-dusted shade of fruit in the front window; and, especially, when they are two women who tell nobody their business, they are known at once for well-to-do, and are regarded with the admixture of spite and respect that is proper to the circumstances. They are also watched. (p. 75)

However, language proves to be more powerful than surveillance, which is made difficult by the parallel alignment of the street. When the Perkins women begin to sell their belongings to stave off poverty, it is stated that

none of the neighbours saw the cart that came in the night and took away the old cabinet piano [...]. Mrs Clark, the widow, who sewed far into the night, may possibly have heard a noise and looked; but she said nothing if she did. (p. 77)

It seems as though visual surveillance here has failed. However, gossip succeeds. Mrs Clark has her double in 'A Street' as the widow woman who gossips about a newcomer the street describe as 'helpless' ('A Street', p. 24). Bergmann suggests that widows are the most likely to suffer from the harmful machinations of gossip as they are already socially isolated (p. 15). As the narratorial voice has become that of the street, we can deduce that Mrs Clark allows the fiction that she 'said nothing' to be passed along the street, due to fears of the reciprocity of gossip. Her feigned silence works to preserve both her respectability and that of the street. As in Morrison's novel *A Child of the Jago* (1896), the community protects itself. Of the Jago it is said that 'to assail the pure fame of the place — to

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<sup>28</sup> Walter Besant, *East London* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1901), p. 255.

“give the street a bad name” [...] was to bring the Jago howling and bashing about your ears’.<sup>29</sup>

The narratorial voice becomes unaccountable: it acknowledges only that Mrs Clark ‘may possibly’ have looked. Gossip achieves a twofold preservation of respectability by cleansing the street of variance and necessitating no outside intervention. The inhabitants successfully contain the threat of difference. The confidential mode in which the narrator conveys information is itself gossip-like. Information about the Perkins women is circulated in this anonymous, passive voice with phrases such as ‘it was said’; ‘it was generally held’; ‘there was a discovery’; and, most damningly, referring to the advert for piano lessons which Miss Perkins places in her window: ‘it was not approved by the street’ (pp. 77–78). The street’s resistance to this advert also reveals the frailty of the written word in this place.

The Perkins women are further outcast because they do not gossip: they wilfully ignore the principal medium of speech open to women in these areas. The consequences of such refusal are also revealed in *A Child of the Jago* in which Hannah Perrott’s integration into the community is deferred by her initial refusal to gossip (p. 32). Karen Chase has suggested that gossip was an important medium by which women could assert their ‘moral solidarity’ with their neighbours.<sup>30</sup> This is supported by Ellen Ross’s research into neighbourhood support in working-class areas before the First World War. Ross suggests that the Perkinses contribute to their own demise: rejecting gossip, they reject the mutual aid afforded by participation in neighbourhood life.<sup>31</sup> Ross sees the neighbourhood’s attention in ‘Behind the Shade’ as ‘prying yet protective’ and believes that the Perkins women are examples of those who ‘remained aloof from neighbourhood sociability [...] to demonstrate their superior “respectability”’ (‘Survival Networks’, p. 19). Ross’s analysis neglects the problematic emplacement of the cottage that prefigures the isolation of the two women;

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<sup>29</sup> Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago*, ed. by Peter Miles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 59.

<sup>30</sup> Karen Chase, “‘Bad was my commentary’ — Propriety, Madness, Independence in Feminist Literary History”, in *Victorian Connections*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), pp. 11–30 (p. 23).

<sup>31</sup> Ellen Ross, “‘Not the Sort That Would Sit on the Doorstep’: Respectability in Pre-World War I London Neighborhoods”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 27 (1985), 39–59 (pp. 51–52), and ‘Survival Networks: Women’s Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I’, *History Workshop*, 15 (1983), 4–27 (p. 19).

nonetheless, it is clear that gossip would be their only defence against the malicious spreading of tales against them. Their refusal to engage in it enforces their total silence.

As the voices of the gossips rise in the street, Mrs and Miss Perkins attempt to mortify their relation to place and guard the boundaries of their home. They struggle to maintain their separation from the street by guarding their doors and windows and thereby preventing further punishment: 'the curtains were drawn a little closer across [the window]' (p. 77). As their suffering progresses, Miss Perkins alters the curtains again, so that they are 'drawn close and pinned together' (p. 80). However, the street's voice is penetrative. With their lives being discussed up and down the street, the women futilely attempt to keep the interior of their house private. Their silence cannot prevent the fact that everything is thought to be known about them.

Through gossip, the street feels that they gain knowledge about the women. Gaps are filled in with gossip: 'the neighbours knew the history of the Perkinses, [...] in its main features, with little disagreement: having told it to each other, filling in the details when occasion seemed to serve' (p. 76). What the street does not know is invented: ignorance of facts only fuels gossip. As a knowledge-seeking conversational device, Clive Scott argues, 'gossip is justified by ignorance and can thus proceed irresponsibly, whimsically, because its guess will always be as good as another.'<sup>32</sup> This analysis is supported by Spacks, who notes that gossip 'may promulgate fiction in the guise of fact'. Through gossip, 'fragments of lives [are] transformed into story' (*Gossip*, p. 3). The Perkinses are transformed into a story that the street tells itself. Neighbourhood relations are thereby secured; 'little disagreement' exists between those who talk about *other* people.

The women respond silently to the gossip. Miss Perkins, whose dame school is failing, joins the local chapel in an act of reparation for her difference. 'Chapel' being lower in the social scale than 'church', Miss Perkins is degrading herself in the eyes of the wider social world but attempting to improve her relation to the street in order to prevent punishment for difference (Ross, 'Not the Sort', p. 43). While Spacks suggests that 'gossip speaks in the world's voice', Miss Perkins's behaviour reveals that gossip speaks in the street's voice; she responds to locally held opinion (*Gossip*, p. 8). Amid the clamouring voices that discuss the beating to

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<sup>32</sup> Clive Scott, *Street Photography from Atget to Cartier-Bresson* (London: Tauris, 2007), p. 133.

near death of Mrs Perkins, 'the one distinct opinion the adventure bred in the street was Mrs Webster's, the Little Bethelite, who considered it a judgement for sinful pride, for Mrs Perkins had been a Church-goer' (p. 76). Miss Perkins does not speak, but it is clear that she listens.

The violent attack against Mrs Perkins is the cause of the shift in tone from a detached journalistic reportage of the facts to a clamour of gossiping voices in which from time to time one 'distinct opinion' rises to the fore. Morrison introduces free indirect speech to portray the wrong conclusions gossip makes about the Perkinses. The street perceives

a grasping spirit on the part of people able to keep a house to themselves, with red curtains and a shade of fruit in the parlour window; who, moreover, had been able to give up keeping a school because of ill-health. (p. 77)

Omniscient but not intrusive, Morrison allows an unmediated outpouring of the street's opinion.

After the attack which nearly kills Mrs Perkins, the street name Miss Perkins 'Mrs', 'seeing no one else thus to honour' (p. 77). This renaming consolidates Miss Perkins's difference from the street. It makes her even more of an odd woman: she unwittingly becomes a wife by name, with no husband. It reveals that the real Mrs Perkins has already been effaced from the street and it ties Miss Perkins's fate irrevocably to that of her beaten mother. The relation in which mothers are held is already inverted in this place where the violence of the man who beat Mrs Perkins almost to death is explained thus: 'In the dark, it afterwards appeared, he had mistaken her for his mother' (p. 76). The street's renaming of Miss Perkins suggests the overriding power of gossip. She does not gossip and so cannot retaliate. In tacitly accepting her street-given name, Miss Perkins succumbs to the voices that reconfigure her identity.

The street accepts the transmission of spoken language as an accurate representation of visible evidence. Miss Perkins, who begins sewing shirts at home to support herself and her mother, is seen

in broad daylight, with a package in newspaper [...] [making] such haste past a shop-window where stood Mrs. Webster and Mrs. Jones, that she tripped on the broken sole of one shoe, and fell headlong [...]. It was plain to see that [her parcel] was made up of cheap shirts, cut out ready for the stitching. The street had the news the same hour. (p. 78)

However, what the street hears is that Miss Perkins, in taking home piecework, is ‘taking bread out of the mouths of them that wanted it’ (p. 78). The idea that this is ‘plain to see’ is an expression of the street’s opinion. Treating language as a game of ‘whisper down the lane’ the street has disregarded that which is plain to see — the poverty evidenced by Miss Perkins’s broken shoe. Gossip does not help the street to understand these women; instead it fixes mistaken ideas about them. Mrs Webster follows up this incident: ‘foremost in the setting right of things’, she says ‘a few plain words in the right quarter’ preventing Miss Perkins from working (p. 78). Gossip becomes not only malicious but dangerous: Morrison reveals that ‘plain words’ are no such thing.

Silenced by the street, Miss Perkins uses a non-verbal tool left to her disposal, but it increases her isolation. In her encounter with the relieving officer, Miss Perkins employs what Lynda Nead has called ‘the respectable lady’s heavy artillery in her social weaponry’. This was the ‘cut’ — either a stiff acknowledgement of the notice of a known gentleman or, as in Miss Perkins’s case, the ignoring of him entirely. For Miss Perkins this is, as Nead has suggested, ‘a last resource’.<sup>33</sup> The elevated position in the street of the two women caused by the singularity of their house ‘had caused some little disturbance’ in the relieving officer’s ‘system of etiquette’. The relieving officer ‘felt that the Perkinses were entitled to some advance upon the nod’ he gave to ‘ordinary female acquaintances’ and has invented a unique salute designed as a visual acknowledgement of their difference:

He closed his finger and thumb upon the brim of his hat, and let his hand fall forthwith. Preparing now to accomplish this salute, he was astounded to see that Miss Perkins, as soon as she was aware of his approach, turned her face, which was rather flushed, away from him, and went hurrying onward, looking at the wall on the other side of the street. (p. 79)

Miss Perkins has disturbed the hierarchy of the street and ignored the acknowledgement made to her special position. In her shame at her poverty, she seeks the shelter of the pavement: ‘hugging her parcel on the side next the wall’ (p. 79). For the late-Victorian woman walking the streets there can be no such shelter. In seeking physical safety at the mar-

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<sup>33</sup> Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 73.

gins of the street, Miss Perkins emphasizes her own marginal position and so destroys herself.

In the figure of Miss Perkins, Morrison reimagines the debilitation of the ‘physically or morally infected woman’ who, as Deborah Epstein Nord and others have noted, appeared in literature throughout the earlier nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> Miss Perkins and her mother are characterized by their cleanliness. One of the primary features of their cottage is the wash house. The regularity with which the shade of fruit in the window is dusted is noted. Their threat is non-sexual: they are a departure from the mid-Victorian figure of the ‘fallen woman’. Indeed, the inscription of the violent voices onto their bodies is such that they lose any womanly physicality. Miss Perkins’s thinness is remarkable even before her slide towards death. She is described by the gossiping voices as ‘a scraggy, sharp-faced woman of thirty or so, whose black dress hung from her hips as from a wooden frame’. Her ‘spare figure’ is discussed and derided (pp. 76–78). Jan Gordon, examining gossip in relation to *Jude the Obscure* (1895) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), states that ‘Jude and Dorian are materially reduced as their deeds are inflated by whispers’ (p. 56). This process is similarly demonstrated in the bodies of the Perkinses. Both women die of starvation. Wasting away, they take up less space, ending by sharing one room in the four-roomed cottage. Miss Perkins’s autopsy reveals ‘a degree of shrinkage in the digestive organs unprecedented in [the doctor’s] experience’ (pp. 81–82). In Miss Perkins’s body the threat of social infection is reimagined. Rather than expressing the social threat of female sexuality, in Miss Perkins’s depiction we see that ‘the system of the body’s boundaries is used [...] to express danger to community boundaries’.<sup>35</sup> Her literal and metaphorical wasting away is an assertion of the power of the boundaries of place.

It is only when sight and sound are obliterated by a ‘choking brown fog’ that the women’s torture by the street ends (p. 80). However, the gossip’s objective has already been achieved. As the fog clears, the neighbourhood women engage in a communal activity of sweeping their steps, cleansing the street of the aberrance of the two women, whose absence is eventually noted when the rent is not received. Breaking into the silent property, the landlord discovers blinds in all the windows, evidence that

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<sup>34</sup> Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 82.

<sup>35</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 152.

the women have attempted to preserve privacy. Nothing else remains in the house apart from the wooden box and the pile of newspapers on which the women have died. Their struggle to maintain a place separate from the street surmounted all other needs, but the voices of the gossipers have reduced the space in which they can be. The Perkins women have suffered because they believed that ‘the home can only be a home in opposition to the city, as its antithesis’.<sup>36</sup> This desire for a home separate from the city collaborates with the situation of their ‘odd box of a cottage’ to destroy them: they cannot participate in anything like neighbourhood. The street’s view of their house as an ‘odd box’ penetrates the house itself, so that one of the women dies on an ‘odd box’. The other lies on the wasted material body of the written word (p. 75).

Even the report of their deaths in the newspaper is passed to the reader through the medium of gossip. Language that manifests itself as gossip cannot be meaningfully translated into print: ‘the papers printed coarse drawings of the house, and in leaderettes demanded the abolition of something, or the reform of something else’ (p. 82). As a site regulated and represented by orality, rather than print, the street escapes implication in a fixed, enduring record of what has occurred — which would turn their ‘evening’s fame’ into infamy (p. 82). In his study of the relationship between surveillance and newspapers in late-Victorian towns, Andy Croll has suggested that ‘the local newspaper’s ability to act as a shaming machine was severely curtailed when dealing with those who stood outside the values of respectable society’.<sup>37</sup> In ‘Behind the Shade’, the women of the street have conflated respectability with homogeneity. They are therefore so unashamed of their role in the deaths of Mrs and Miss Perkins that they dissolve the leaderettes in ‘whisper down the lane’ until the leaderette’s purpose is unreadable. Having successfully effaced difference, the street returns to normal; it ‘became its wonted self’ (p. 82). The gossip persists, but subsides into ‘idle talk’ (Spacks, *Gossip*, p. 5). It is no longer vindictive, merely curious: ‘it was doubted if the waxen apples and the curtains fetched enough to pay [the landlord] his fortnight’s rent’ (p. 82). Gossip has preserved the homogeneity of the street, and the disembodied voice of community retreats into the everyday.

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<sup>36</sup> Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> Andy Croll, ‘Street Disorder, Surveillance and Shame: Regulating Behaviour in the Public Spaces of the Late Victorian British Town’, *Social History*, 24 (1999), 250–68 (p. 268).



### Violence and voices in *Liza of Lambeth*

In 'Behind the Shade', the shade of fruit in the window marks the boundary of the Perkins women against the street. A shade of fruit, that recognized totem of respectability, is also the 'chief ornament' in the home of another female-only household, that of Liza Kemp and her mother (*Liza*, p. 75). However, this shade — unlike that of the Perkins — is unostentatiously set upon the mantelpiece; it does not announce the Kemps' social aspirations to the street. It is Liza herself who takes up the space in the window and who is therefore simultaneously at home and in the street (p. 14). The novel is an exploration of this problematic liminal position. While the Perkinses are wilfully isolated and seek privacy inside their home, Liza takes up too much space and spends too much time out of doors. However, ultimately the effects of gossip on Liza are the same as the effects on the Perkins women. Stories told about Liza by the street make it impossible for her to be there.

It has been well documented that the late-Victorian street was not a place for respectable women. For men only, in the late-Victorian city, 'a home is possible in the street' (Marcus, p. 149). An exuberant and popular factory girl, Liza is punished for having too great a place in the street. Her affair with married man Jim enhances this liminal position: Liza inhabits space between the home and the street — between the position of a wife and that of a prostitute. Liza lives with her mother, a drinker who nonetheless hears and heeds the respectable voice of the street and attempts to preserve Liza from being talked about by keeping her indoors (p. 13). Liza becomes the subject of gossip, which inspires violent retaliation by Jim's wife and causes Liza's death from a miscarriage. As in 'Behind the Shade', voices reduce spaces for the victims of gossip, and drive women back, fatally, into their homes.

Vere Street, where Liza lives and where most of the action takes place, is described as

a short, straight street [...]. It has forty houses on one side and forty houses on the other, and these eighty houses are very much more like one another than ever peas are like peas, or young ladies like young ladies. [...] They are perfectly flat, without a bow-window or cornice to break the straightness of the line from one end of the street to another. (p. 3)

Liza is the anomaly in this very straight street. From her initial introduction Liza's appearance proves that 'young ladies' are not all 'like young

ladies'. She defies the uniformity of the space. Liza's capacious, confident physical presence overwhelms the narrow street. Late-Victorian factory girls were said to be 'as featureless and colourless as the very streets they live in'.<sup>38</sup> Liza's singularity is revealed by her violet gown, which defies the blandness of the street. Every effort she has made at personal adornment has aspired to the immense: she has an 'enormous' fringe, 'great lappets' on her dress, and an 'enormous black hat'. She walks in the street 'swaying her body from side to side, and swaggering along as though the whole place belonged to her' (p. 6). Liza dominates the space and stands out in it.

At the opening of the novel Liza incites comment, and revels in it: "Look at 'er legs!" cried one of the men. "Look at 'er stockin's!" shouted another' (p. 10). Liza is initially the subject of positive gossip: "Good old Liza," they would say, as she left them, "she's a rare good sort, ain't she?" (p. 25). However, once someone is the subject of gossip this cannot be simply beneficial. This good gossip is insufficient to keep Liza integrated into the street. Her situation differs from that of the Perkins women in that she has a voice; she speaks in the language of the street. However, once she is the subject of gossip, she is considered other by the street. As Bergmann and Fox recognize, gossip confirms belonging to a social group against which a victim of gossip must be defined (Bergmann, p. 144; Fox, p. 99). Unable to choose between the street and the interior of the house, Liza's position is chosen for her; she is seen to belong to the street.

Late at night, Liza sees the street uninhabited for the first time. She realizes that as much as her body seemed to belong to the street — a fact suggested by the discussion of her body by its anonymous inhabitants — she is separate from it. Its very regularity marks her difference and provokes feelings of 'solitude': 'The regular line of houses on either side, with the even pavements and straight, cemented road, seemed to her like some desert place, as if everyone were dead, or a fire had raged and left it all desolate' (pp. 49–50). Her relationship with Jim begins in earnest at this point, as she feels instinctively her difference from the street and so engages in a relationship that defies the street's values. When Liza voices her regret for her aberration, her words suggest the recognition that the straightness of Vere Street reflects its respectability; she tells Jim: 'I wish I was straight' (p. 93).

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<sup>38</sup> Albinia Hobart-Hampden, 'The Working Girl of To-Day', *Nineteenth Century*, May 1898, pp. 724–30 (p. 727), cited in Liggins, p. 39.

Like the Perkinses, Liza is watched. Her former lover Tom begins to spy on her. He tells Liza, 'I've seen you when you didn't see me' (p. 78). This surveillance by Tom is represented by him as an act of beneficence; he perceives it as being for Liza's own good. Meeting Jim outside the bounds of the street, Liza at first feels safe, but 'twice, as they were walking along, they were met by people they knew' (p. 84). These sightings result in gossip, so that 'notwithstanding all their precautions people in Vere Street seemed to know' (p. 87). Liza and Jim must travel further from the street in order to meet. This mobility is seen as one of their greatest transgressions. Walking in Westminster, along the Albert Embankment and to Battersea Park, they can have no excuse for being together, so when sighted are condemned. They risk acting as a pollutant to the city as a whole. Liza's boundary crossing therefore threatens the respectability of Vere Street, which is insecurely positioned near to slums. The street needs to contain transgression within its own boundaries in order to maintain them. As Croll has suggested, backstreet problems such as violence were not permitted to infiltrate or infect the 'front streets': such a refutation of boundaries must be disastrous for the couple (p. 256). This phenomenon has also been noted by Chris Willis, who argues that one of the fears the middle classes had regarding working-class women was their potential 'invasion of public space'.<sup>39</sup>

In *Liza*, hard words and physical violence are mutually reinforcing. The inhabitants of Vere Street understand the potential violence of gossip. This is reflected in the way in which women describe domestic violence with the euphemism of having had 'a few words' (pp. 57, 120). The gossip that arises when Liza's infidelity is proven is understood as violence because it must be retaliated against with physical violence. When she is talked about, Tom defends her by beating the male gossiper, in spite of Tom's knowledge that the rumours about Liza are true. Gossip is also the preliminary to Liza's beating by Jim's wife, Mrs Blakeston. As in 'Behind the Shade', gossip is heard by its victims, so that Liza anticipates the violence that Mrs Blakeston thinks her due, as she tells Jim: '[Mrs Blakeston's] been telling people in the street' that she will fight Liza (p. 105). Although it is clear from Tom's experience that men gossip too, the perception of gossip as a female mode that enables women's solidarity is dangerous rather than empowering in this novel. Liza's friend Sally is beaten by her husband: 'Just because Sally'd gone aht to 'ave a chat with

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<sup>39</sup> Chris Willis, 'From Voyeurism to Feminism: Victorian and Edwardian London's Streetfighting Slum Viragoes', *Victorian Review*, 29.1 (2003), 70–86 (p. 73).

Mrs McLeod in the next 'ouse, when she come in 'e start bangin' 'er abaht' (p. 99). For all of the inhabitants of Vere Street it is essential to recognize that 'gossip can effect incalculable harm' (Spacks, *Gossip*, p. 4).

Towards the close of the novel, gossip gathers at the door of Liza's room, and a chorus of neighbours discuss the relative merits of the nurse caring for the dying Liza. Liza is finally confined to the interior. The nurse brings gossip inside the house in her conversations with Liza's mother about the recent death of another woman after a miscarriage: 'Of course, the other one — well, she was only a prostitute, so it didn't so much matter. It ain't like another woman, is it?' (p. 134). The nurse provides a counter to Liza's behaviour. Though Liza is 'other', she is not a prostitute. Through this gossip Liza's mother is able to claw back the respectability Liza has threatened, by talking about an other against whom the dying Liza can be positively defined. As in 'Behind the Shade', the gossip in Vere Street is eventually silenced. With Liza's imminent death, all threats from her behaviour are contained so that 'all was silence'. Liza's death ends the gossip: it is no longer necessary. The threat of her difference is contained, and the street remains. However, the return to respectability is marred by the loss of Liza, the only point of interest in the street, so that ultimately 'the silence was terrifying' (p. 138).

## Conclusion

In the late-Victorian design of urban working-class housing, the insistence is upon 'making the irregular straight, the cluttered orderly, the unbridled controlled'.<sup>40</sup> These stories demonstrate how spatial bridles can become vocal bridles. Trapped in the ceaseless sameness of mean streets, women who seem different will be punished with the only weapon that can be wielded by their 'otherwise powerless' neighbours: the piercing voice of gossip. Morrison and Maugham's employment of gossip in their experiments with realism led them to uncover the menace in the ordinary. Transforming places considered as 'unknown' and unknowable into the knowable realm of print, *Tales of Mean Streets* and *Liza of Lambeth* bring sites of orality disquietingly near to the late-Victorian reader.<sup>41</sup> In doing so, Morrison and Maugham assert their own privileged position, that of

<sup>40</sup> James Winter, *London's Teeming Streets, 1830–1914* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 32.

<sup>41</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 221.

access to the inaccessible. The epistemology of the slum margin is told with gossip in order to convey its distance and separateness from the world of the written word. Concomitantly, though, the written form of the malicious utterance, apparently unmediated by the author, portrays these places with ‘a new reality and an immediate presence’.<sup>42</sup>

In *Tales of Mean Streets* and *Liza of Lambeth* Morrison and Maugham use gossip, that ostensibly ordinary mode of conversation, to convey the everyday horror of these lives. Gossips in these texts preserve the homogeneity of the streets they inhabit and commit themselves to a degree of conformity that ought to be unbearable. The restitution to order is no gain for the community left behind. As Mary Douglas states:

When the community is attacked from outside at least the external danger fosters solidarity within. When it is attacked from within by wanton individuals, they can be punished and the structure publicly reaffirmed. But it is possible for the structure to be self-defeating. (p. 173)

These streets retain the characteristics of sites defined by orality. ‘Seeing nothing, reading nothing, and considering nothing’, the inhabitants consign themselves to a dullness too ignorant to be desperate. Having guarded the boundaries of their spaces, they return to the safety of ‘utter remoteness from delight’ (‘A Street’, p. 28). Gossip keeps these streets separate from the world of the written word which cannot understand or remedy these crimes and can only call vaguely and futilely for ‘the abolition of something, or the reform of something else’ (‘Behind the Shade’, p. 82). Ultimately these stories show that gossip is not, as Kathryn Waddington has suggested, ‘disorderly, disruptive and digressive’.<sup>43</sup> For by using their voices to attack women, gossips in these texts continually reinforce their own subjugation to the spaces in which they live. Gossip here is a tool of hegemony, a maintainer of monotony: it is the voice of the straightness of streets.

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<sup>42</sup> Arthur Morrison, ‘What is a Realist?’, *New Review*, March 1897, pp. 326–36 (repr. as ‘Preface to the Third Edition’, in *A Child of the Jago*, ed. by Miles, pp. 3–8 (p. 4)).

<sup>43</sup> Kathryn Waddington, *Gossip and Organizations* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 17.