This project has been transformed by the research I did on it. I was doing the research for my dissertation—which became my first book—when I first heard stories of the firemen in colonial Nairobi who captured Africans and took their blood. Back then, I was incredulous. In fact, when I repeated this story to my research assistant’s mother, I learned the word for “crazy” in Swahili in order to describe the woman who told it to me. It only struck me that this might be an interesting thing to pursue when my assistant’s mother assured me that it was true, that it had happened from “the fighting of the Germans to the day Pangani was broken,” from World War I to 1939. But the more questions I asked about these bloodsucking firemen, the more I learned about these stories and how different versions of them commented upon the history of which they were a part. On all the research trips that inform the bulk of this book—to western Kenya in 1986, to Zambia and Uganda in 1990, and to do archival research in England in 1991 and 1992, Italy in 1991, and Belgium in 1992 and 1993—I told myself that I needed one more piece of the puzzle, one more fragment with which to write a history and then I would be done. But I learned, quite slowly in fact, that there was no puzzle, no flat, two-dimensional representation of the world that Africans had represented in vocabularies of blood, firemen, and injections. Instead, there was a maze, almost a series of mazes, a set of meanings and messy epistemologies embodied in every fearsome hour when men and women had wondered whether it was safe to go outside.
and animated with every recounting of a blood accusation. Letting the maze be the maze, letting this history be as messy and meandering as it needed to be, occasioned a rethinking of the historiography that had dismissed rumor and gossip as a likely way to reconstruct the past. As this book took shape, I found myself moving from contextualizing these vampires to allowing them to comment on historiography and evidence. What better way to reexamine the way historians have thought about evidence, reliability, and truth than by studying the history of things that never happened?

The research for this book began in the 1970s. It has been funded by the Jan Smuts Fund of Cambridge University, the Division of the Humanities at Rice University, the McKnight–Land Grant Professorship at the University of Minnesota, the American Philosophical Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Wellcome Trust. That these funds became research owes much to the extraordinary generosity of those with whom I stayed while in Europe and Africa as I followed these bloodsucking firemen, and I want to thank the late Timotheo and May Omondo for my home in Yimbo, Siaya District; Jane and Opiyo Odhiambo in Alego, and Sidney Westley in Nairobi, in Kenya; Hugh and Monica Macmillan for housing in Lusaka; Megan Vaughan and Henrietta Moore and William Beinart and Troth Wells for housing in Oxford; and Robert and Helen Irwin for accommodation and friendship in London over the years. My research in Uganda would not have been possible without the generosity of Nnakanyike and Seggane Musisi. I owe a special debts to archivists: Musila Musembe at the Kenya National Archives in Nairobi; Mrs. M. N. Mutiti at the Zambian National Archives in Lusaka; Père Renault at the White Fathers Archives in Rome; Père Christian Papèians de Morchoven at Saint Andreas Abbey in Bruges; John Pinfold at Rhodes House, Oxford; and Julia Shepard at the Wellcome Trust in London.

None of this would have been possible without some extraordinary research assistants: Margaret Makuna and Paul Kakaire in Nairobi, Odhiambo Opiyo in Siaya, Fred Bukulu, Godfrey Kigozi, and Remigius Kigongo in Kampala.

This book was written during periods of unemployment and has been sustained by a number of institutions and a somewhat larger circle of friends. Fellowships at the Institute for the Humanities at the University of Michigan and the Institute for the Advanced Study and Research in the African Humanities at Northwestern University gave me the time to start two chapters. From 1993 to 1995, I had the great good fortune
to be at the National Humanities Center, where fellow Fellows and staff nurtured this project: I am grateful to Robert Conner and Kent Mullikin for their generosity and to Alan Tuttle and Jean Houston for library services above and beyond the expectations of even the most pampered academics. Most of the book was finished when I was a Fellow at the Center for Folklife Programs at the Smithsonian Institution, and I am grateful to Peter Seitel for his stewardship and many discussions about orality and genre. The book was revised when I took time away from another project while at the Woodrow Wilson International Center, where Ann Sheffield’s enthusiasm made a wonderful year even better. Several friends deserve special thanks. William Beinart and Troth Wells provided a respite, and a place to think about work and career, in Oxford in late 1992; David William Cohen and I have talked and written about African oral history so much that it is hard to remember who said what when, and this book owes much to his generosity; Frederick Cooper has encouraged me to let the ambiguity of African vampire stories remain ambiguous and explore the relations of power and uncertainty in which most colonized people lived; Laura Fair was my student when I began this project and is now my most astute and critical reader; Barbara Hanawalt showed me an example of unflinching professionalism, the strength of which was equal to that of her scholarship; Ivan Karp read my work with a breadth and passion of interests (and reading lists) that inspired me; Corinne Kratz helped me think about language and speech in ways that oral historians rarely do; John Lonsdale’s enduring friendship and unbounded imagination has influenced this project in ways he might not recognize; David Newbury paved the way for me to teach two courses at the University of North Carolina in 1994–95; Atieno Odhiambo saw this project at its earliest point in Nairobi and insisted that it become a book; Randall Packard talked through any number of points in medical history with me, and provided a situation at Emory University in 1995–96 that enabled me to continue my work; and Megan Vaughan has discussed many of the ideas in this book, housed me on various trips, and once suggested that I read about missionary medicine as a good way to think about blood. Throughout the time I was thinking and writing about blood, I was fortunate to have the encouragement of David Brent, Monica McCormick, and Ken Wissoker.

Earlier versions of chapters in this book were given at seminars in North America, Europe, and southern Africa. and I learned an enormous amount from the comments I received at them. Tom Beidelman,
Bill Freund, Lynn Hunt, Ivan Karp, and Tom Lacquer all read this manuscript and provided exceptionally helpful comments. As this book was revised, several friends—all on leave—took time away from their own projects to read and then reread a few of my chapters. Charles Briggs, James Ellison, David Gilmartin, Barbara Hanawalt, Laura Fair, James Hevia, Douglas Howland, and Timothy Scarnecchia were wise and careful readers, for which I am grateful.

Laura Fair, Johannes Fabian, Steven Feierman, and Peter Seitel helped me with Swahili translations; Mwelwa Musambachime and Debra Spitulnik helped me with the Bemba; and Remigius Kigongo did the Luganda for me.