

Oral Tradition and Contemporary Critical Theory. I

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This is the first of two clusters of essays devoted to exploring the ways in which oral theory intersects with, informs, and is in turn informed by other schools of contemporary criticism. Those of us who are regular readers of this journal and who work in the field know how extremely valuable and flexible an interpretive strategy oral theory is: its fundamentally interdisciplinary nature, its reliance upon comparative and crosscultural methodologies, and its ability to shed light upon the complex processes involved in the composition and reception of works of verbal art produced in cultures situated at various points along the oral-literate continuum have led to oral theory being productively applied to an extraordinary range of texts, oral and written, from ancient times up through the present day. But even though it has been a vital part of the critical landscape since the early decades of the twentieth century—a remarkable but often unremarked upon fact in its own right, especially given what Wendy Steiner has aptly characterized as the “frantic succession of critical theories” over the past three decades—, oral theory continues in many ways to be very much a specialized critical discourse spoken chiefly by oralists to other oralists. It is precisely the project of this cluster and the one that will follow in *Oral Tradition* 17/2 to cross the boundaries that often serve to segregate schools of critical thought, even as they define them, and to call attention to some of the very many important points of contact that oral theory shares with other critical approaches.

In keeping with this aim, the essays in these clusters all work, either explicitly or implicitly, to traverse the borders of field and specialty and to put oral theory into dialogue with other theories. One of the strengths of these clusters is that they not only include essays by oralists who look out towards other fields and theories (Kelber and DuBois in this cluster, Bradbury and Watson in the next) but also essays by scholars who look from different critical perspectives in towards oral theory (McBratney and McLane in this cluster; Hill, Joyce, and Zacher in the next). The multiplicity of views and the plurality of voices in these clusters are offered as the first step in what we hope will be an ongoing conversation, one that will be further enriched as more colleagues from more fields join the discussion.

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