

Oral Tradition and Contemporary Critical Theory. II

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This is the second of two clusters of essays whose shared project is to put oral theory into dialogue, directly or indirectly, with other schools of contemporary critical thought. In many ways, oral theory is uniquely positioned to serve as a *terminus ad quem* for critical conversations that cut across temporal, generic, linguistic, stylistic, and theoretical boundaries in that it has been fundamentally interdisciplinary from its modern inception in the work of Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord, and it continues to be so down to the present day. Oral theory's openness to a wide variety of critical perspectives and practices is both one of its defining characteristics and something that has long distinguished it from other, more rigidly conceived schools of theoretical inquiry. Filtering their investigations through anthropological, historical, linguistic, or literary methodologies, to name but a few of very many possibilities, is something that oralists do as a matter of routine, whether they focus on works of verbal art produced by living tradition bearers witnessed firsthand and captured on audio- or video-tape, or whether they concentrate on traditional verbal art that survives only in mute, entexted witnesses.

Taken as a whole, what the essays in this and the preceding cluster hope to demonstrate is that oral theory is an ecology—to draw upon a recent and important formulation of John Miles Foley's (2002:ch. 8)—that functions as natural ecologies do and whose permeable borders permit, or rather encourage its practitioners to foray into other fields. Just as traditional lexical collocations cross generic borders without metrical or rhetorical impedance (and without any loss of their specialized metonymic referentiality) within a given tradition, and just as traditional thematics and even larger traditional narrative units are shared between and across discrete traditions and the space of many years,¹ so, too, do the methods and practices of oral theory draw upon and speak directly to those of other schools of thought. Oral theorists have become increasingly aware of oral theory's interconnectedness with other schools of contemporary theoretical thought and more and more of them are engaging issues that traverse the permeable, increasingly difficult-to-define borders of the field, but many of our colleagues working in other theoretical schools have yet fully to realize that oral theory can and often does speak directly and productively to many

¹ Cf. Amodio forthcoming:espec. chs. 4 and 5.

of their fields' central questions and, further, that its borders are as hospitable to ingress as they are to egress. It is our hope that the conversation initiated in these clusters will be continued by colleagues working in and among the very many networked fields of discourse that comprise contemporary critical theory.

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References

Amodio forthcoming

Mark C. Amodio. *Writing the Oral Tradition*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Foley 2002

John Miles Foley. *How to Read an Oral Poem*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. E-companion at www.oraltradition.org.