

“Oral Tradition” in a Technologically Advanced World

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In the field of folklore, the study of “oral tradition” cannot be an either/or proposition. Rather, the responsible study of oral tradition recognizes the interdependence of both of these concepts: while “oral” clearly modifies “tradition,” there is an equally important coloring of “oral” by “tradition.”

“Oral” indicates both speech and reception, and implies face-to-face interaction. With its coloration by “tradition,” “oral” also indicates a degree of informality. It does not refer to scripted expression, but rather unscripted expression, marked by improvisation and characterized by variation. Although it is tempting to use Woody Allen’s desultory characterization of “tradition” as “the illusion of permanence” (1997), it is more worthwhile to view tradition as process—a clear expression on the part of tradition participants of a “will to permanence.” Tradition exists wherever the members of a group intend, either explicitly or implicitly, for their oral expression(s) to persist. This acknowledgement of a “will to permanence” (rather than alleged permanence or age) shifts the focus onto the emergent nature of oral tradition in performance, and aligns well with significant advances in oral tradition studies (Lord 1960; Hymes 1975; Bauman 1977).

There are several key research areas that need to be explored in the coming years. One of the great advantages presaged by the information technology boom is an ever-increasing access to properly encoded digital archives and texts. Working in a digitized realm allows one to answer broad questions concerning such things as vocabulary, language usage, and repetition in a manner far more sophisticated than before. One can more fully engage a type of ethnophilology in which lost voices hidden in the archive or in early texts can be recovered, and one can ask questions that seemed impossible to answer or even pursue before. These textual and archival tools have great promise: they will help us identify the contours of oral tradition in older texts, they will help us discern previously unrecognized patterns in the archives, and they will help us shape new research questions. The digital archive will also move us away from a

primarily text-based environment to one that incorporates the aural and visual components of traditional performance by storing sound and video recordings.

We need to explore more fully the relationship between “oral tradition,” “place,” and historical processes. “Oral tradition” must be considered within the context of political developments—including colonialism, the postcolonial world, the impact of globalization, and the emergent hybridities that mark the traditions of diasporic populations. We must also explore the manner in which people use oral tradition to reshape their physical and social environments (Bhabha 1994; de Certeau 1985). Moving toward this new “historic-geographic” method is an important and necessary endeavor.

Finally, exciting developments in the field of neurology present an intriguing locus for the type of transdisciplinary work that will mark the future academy (Rubin 1995; Bookheimer 2002). How does storytelling map in the brain compared to conversation? Are there differences in the functional MRI of an epic singer and an audience member as they hear or remember a scene? Does a person who becomes an active tradition participant early on in life have a different method of physically storing “tradition” in the brain than other language functions?

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