



ORAL TRADITION

Festschrift for John Miles Foley

This article is one of a series of short essays, collectively titled “Further Explorations,” published as part of a special issue of *Oral Tradition* in honor of John Miles Foley’s 65th birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John’s tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).

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Remix: Pathways of the Mind

Morgan E. Grey

John Miles Foley has described his most recent project as “exploring the homology between oral tradition and Internet technology” (Foley:2011-:“Disclaimer”).¹ This concept, at once so simple and so complex, should lead to a re-evaluation of the teaching of oral traditions as well as the understanding of how oral traditions and the Internet “mime the way we think” (*ibid.*:“Home Page”).² It is the goal of this brief essay to show how The Pathways Project has already begun to affect scholarship,³ using as an example my own contribution to the project, the node titled “Mashups” (Grey 2011-).⁴

Before I discuss the project and related work, a few key ideas should first be introduced. Each entry in The Pathways Project is called a “node,” and within the site one node can be linked to any number of other nodes. One may think of these nodes as chapters, in that each one can stand alone and be read separately, but at the same time they are integral to and integrated within the whole. Throughout the project, the textual, oral, and electronic worlds are divided into three agoras, or “verbal marketplaces”⁵—the tAgora, oAgora, and eAgora, respectively—which allow Foley to group major ideas together and discuss them as conceptual units.⁶ One of the cleverest aspects of the project is how Foley makes complex ideas seem simple through the use of plain language and unadorned rhetoric while still incorporating specialized terminology that aids in driving home his overall points. Both the web and book versions of the project display this same

¹ See <http://www.pathwaysproject.org/pathways/show/Disclaimer>.

² See <http://www.pathwaysproject.org/pathways/show/HomePage>.

³ The Gutenberg Parenthesis Research Forum (http://www.sdu.dk/om_sdu/institutter_centre/ilkm/forskning/forskningsprojekter/gutenberg_projekt?sc_lang=en) at the University of Southern Denmark (and overseen by Tom Pettitt) is the only external project I am aware of that is directly related to Foley’s work.

⁴ The full text of “Mashups” is available at <http://pathwaysproject.org/pathways/show/Mashups>.

⁵ See the “Agora as Verbal Marketplace” node of Foley 2011-: http://www.pathwaysproject.org/pathways/show/Agora_as_Verbal_Marketplace.

⁶ The prefixes o-, t-, and e- are applied frequently to other words to create The Pathways Project jargon that is both specific and broad in its usage. For example, there are the nodes “Agoraphobia,” “eAgoraphobia,” “oAgoraphobia,” and “tAgoraphobia.” Each of these nodes treats the concept of agoraphobia in relation to The Pathways Project, but clearly the e-, o-, and tAgoraphobias focus on particular “fears.”

tactic of form and function, but the website is the true heart of The Pathways Project and most fully presents Foley's ideas.

Those familiar with oral traditions know that they are based in multiformity. An oral poet continuously has options, and the audience may know the final outcome but not the path(s) the poet will take to get there. This type of performance means that no two presentations of the poem will be alike; each time the poet performs, there will be variations, though always within limits.⁷ A poet can remix elements within the tradition at his will.

Remixing is thus central to oral traditions and to The Pathways Project. That information can be delivered and redelivered in varying ways, and that multiple routes can be taken to reach the same "end," exemplifies the tenet that pathways mime the way we think. "Mashups" examines one aspect of remixing present in both the ancient and modern worlds. Though it is more commonly found within eAgora environments, remixing can be seen in at least one tAgora setting: the *cento*. *Centos* were written during the late Roman Empire and early medieval period, with the best-known practitioner of the form being Ausonius, a fourth-century poet and rhetorician whose *Cento Nuptialis* ("The Wedding Cento") is based on Vergil's *Aeneid*. Ausonius took half-lines and full lines of Vergil's epic and reorganized them to create a new poem. A short example will demonstrate how this works:⁸

Exspectata dies aderat, dignisque hymenaeis
matres atque viri, iuvenes ante ora parentum
conveniunt stratoque super discumbitur ostro.

The wished-for day was present, and with worthy wedding hymns
mothers and husbands, and the young men before the faces of their parents,
they gather together and recline at the table on top of the purple-dyed blanket.⁹

In the Latin passage, each bolded or italicized section represents a separate half-line or full line taken from Vergil. For example, the first bold half-line is from *Aeneid* 5.105; the second italicized half of that line is from *Aeneid* 11.355. The second line works much like the first,¹⁰ while the third line consists of an entire line taken intact from the *Aeneid* (1.700). This passage is representative of the entire *Cento Nuptialis*; Ausonius remixes his "samples" of Vergil to create a new poem out of an old one. While Ausonius is not strictly following an oral traditional approach toward composition, he nevertheless incorporates commonplace oAgora tactics in his tAgora work. But *centos* are unusual pieces; they were never especially popular, as they appeal to a very limited, though erudite, audience. To "read" a *cento* successfully, an audience must first be thoroughly familiar with the work on which it is based. And since *centos* take allusion to an

⁷ See Foley's (2011-) clear discussion at the "Variation Within Limits" node: http://pathwaysproject.org/pathways/show/Variation_Within_Limits.

⁸ The text of the *Cento Nuptialis* is taken from Evelyn-White's Loeb edition (1919).

⁹ The translation here is my own.

¹⁰ The line combines the first half of *Aeneid* 6.306 with the latter portion of *Aeneid* 6.308.

extreme, they eliminate in the process much of their potential audience. Therefore, even though the *cento* borrows the remixing practice more common within the oAgora, its limited appeal reflects its tAgora standing and the difficulty in transferring this technique from one sphere to another.

When we shift our focus into the contemporary world, we find that this practice of remixing is also especially prevalent in today's popular music. The majority of rap and hip-hop songs sample, recombine, and remix music from other genres, but a new trend that takes this practice even further has been emerging within pop music over the past two decades. "Mashups" are songs that take two or more songs and rearrange them in order to have parts of one song (vocals or melody or rhythm) playing simultaneously with parts of another. One of the clearest examples of this practice is 2004's *The Grey Album* by DJ Danger Mouse, which lays the vocals from Jay-Z's *The Black Album* over instrumentals from *The White Album* by The Beatles.¹¹



The Grey Album
"Glass Onion + Encore"

More recently the artist Girl Talk has released several mashup albums. His 2008 album *Feed the Animals* features fourteen tracks comprising over 300 song samples.



Night Ripper
"Smash Your Head"

Though Girl Talk, whose real name is Gregg Gillis, creates these mashup albums, he does not get permission from the artists whose songs he uses, claiming that his work is protected under the doctrine of "fair use" (Gillis 2008b). When Gillis performs live shows across the nation, each performance is unique. He does not play the songs from his albums, but instead creates new pieces for each show. Some pieces may resemble those from a previous show, but as he tours and new songs come out, Gillis reworks and remixes songs for the next show. Girl Talk's albums are captured performances,¹² but his live performances are dynamic and ever-changing. Girl Talk is an artist who works with oAgora assumptions and approaches to his medium.

That a contemporary mashup artist's works and the *centos* of an ancient poet/rhetorician parallel the compositions of an oral poet is not an idea that would have sprung to my mind before becoming immersed in The Pathways Project and its website, which demonstrates the strengths of oAgora, tAgora, and eAgora technologies without necessarily prioritizing or privileging any of them above each other. The site is still limited to a certain degree by some organizational needs and conventions, but overall it stands as both the host of Foley's ideas as well as the proof of them. Just as importantly, the website also demonstrates accessibility, as it is available to any and all interested parties. While an Internet connection is required, the site itself does not restrict access in any way; in fact, visitors are currently encouraged to login and submit their own linkmaps (<http://www.pathwaysproject.org/pathways/digest>), and at a future date a "Contributions" section (<http://www.pathwaysproject.org/pathways/show/Contributions>) will allow users to submit their own nodes and studies as well. Therefore, The Pathways Project will

¹¹ See [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26ii/grey#myGallery-picture\(1\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26ii/grey#myGallery-picture(1)).

¹² See [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26ii/grey#myGallery-picture\(2\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26ii/grey#myGallery-picture(2)).

in some senses never be finished. Given the nature of the project and its encouragement of continual additions, the website will evolve and change over the years. There will indeed be a related book by Foley (2012), *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind*, which will be an excellent resource and introduction to The Pathways Project, and this book itself may appear over the years in several new editions, but these will always necessarily be only snapshots of an ever-growing project, with the website steadfastly remaining at the center of Foley's efforts.

While Foley will, of course, oversee, affect, and directly influence The Pathways Project for the foreseeable future, the hope is that other interested parties (scholars, students, performers, the computer savvy) will also contribute their ideas to the site. The topics explored in the project are numerous: copyright, technology, and ideology are but a few of the primary ones. Each node provides information as well as a starting point for further investigation within and beyond the project. Foley, as he has in all of his works, introduces his audience to new ideas and approaches, but as part of a conversation, not a lecture. And this conversation eagerly awaits your response.

University of Missouri-Columbia

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