

## Editor's Column

With this issue *Oral Tradition* offers a somewhat different vantage point on its subject matter: some two dozen essays introduce archives, physical and digital, that hold records of traditional verbal arts from around the world—brief summaries crafted by archivists and researchers directly involved in their creation, maintenance, or operation. To situate this perspective, a word about the genesis of this issue should suffice. Early in 2013, the fact became apparent to us that a searchable database of names, locations, and contents of repositories of the world's oral traditions was, as far as could be discerned, nowhere to be had. Though the staff consensus that undertaking to compile an exhaustive compendium of such archives was out of the question, the practical usefulness of a comprehensive rough guide seemed patent. In consequence, the International Society for the Study of Oral Tradition circulated a petition for assistance identifying relevant archives and repositories. A first round of responses netted particulars about many institutions and websites (your indispensable help locating additional archives is most welcome, see [www.issot.org/archives](http://www.issot.org/archives) or alert my colleague Darcy Holtgrave [info@issot.org](mailto:info@issot.org)). *Oral Tradition's* Associate Editor Lori Garner seized the opportunity and proposed an issue of the journal that would showcase archives and digital platforms. She devised a set of guidelines for archivists to consider in crafting an introduction to the sites: origins, contents, audience, protocols, a case study or illustration, and plans for future development. The essays assembled here embody the outcome of Lori's proposal. They describe an array of research tools for the study of oral traditions spanning a continuum from aspirational universality to specific regional, mono- and multilingual collections, some dedicated to epic, ballad, or narrative, others to children's play and thematic oral histories, along with broadly inclusive collections of ethnological descriptions. In lieu of the usual editorial remarks about each separate essay, then, I will point to a few of the common threads woven into this archival panoply.

First, the turn to digitization is transforming what was formerly physically recondite primary source materials—manuscripts, printed matters, field notes, wax cylinders, aluminum disks, audio tape recordings, videos, and photos—into readily available web-based virtual records. This move has been accompanied by an ascendant practice of returning archival copies of the ethnographic record to their source, a particular social community. This methodological shift acknowledges the reciprocal relation between tradition bearers and academic researchers for whom the donor's linguistic and behavioral cultures constitute the primary study source; activating the reciprocity satisfies some measure of the ethical compact that binds individuals with shared experiences. The returned copy of a hereditary verbal tradition enables the original donator community to make a lapsed or enfeebled practice available to all of its constituents via a virtual archive, renewing it or furthering a fundamental cultural objective such as language maintenance and survival; witness, for example, the long-running "Breath of Life" series of conferences at the University of California, Berkeley. Several of the authors writing here note how audition of field recordings made by academic researchers lend credibility and prestige status to languages and cultures that may otherwise be considered marginal and insignificant. This, in turn, can inspire young people's pride in their own indigenous community's verbal cultural heritage. Thus, online platforms can advantageously harness technological power to

youthful enthusiasm and advance the renewal of a community's traditional verbal knowledge systems. Widely available and relatively inexpensive digital recording equipment permits communities to create and maintain their own endogenous digital archives of cultural knowledge and practices. Whether created "in-house" or by outside investigators, historical recordings afford fortunate individuals the extraordinary pleasure of hearing again, or for the first time, the voice of a loved one who sang, chanted, recited, verbally communicated an imperative of her identity, conjuring a sonic presence that thwarts perpetual silence.

Yet another common theme touches on the inevitable tension arising among competing interests and impulses, between voices advocating open access to all archival material on one hand, and counterpoint circumspection about unfettered access on the other. The ramifications of these ethical and intellectual questions have prompted curators to devise practical safeguards and protections that effectively shield culturally and/or personally sensitive materials from audiences for whom their audition or viewing would be inappropriate, while ensuring that non-controversial materials become available without unnecessary restriction.

As would be expected, many of the digital platforms have been built on the foundation of a physical archive. The digital version incorporates one or more so-called heritage collections held by its precursor site, a stock initially compiled by an anthropologist, ethnographer, folklorist, linguist, philologist or other like-minded fieldworker before the advent of contemporary communications technology. Their collective labors inventory historical samples of humanity's traditional verbal arts, conserving them for analysis and interpretation. Their preservation of the linguistic tissue that encodes the existential sentient being and binds it to a given social skeleton, provides a record of incalculable value for humanistic studies. Thus the virtual platform unseals a cache of human expression formerly sequestered in local storehouses, bringing it via the World Wide Web to a wide audience. Legacy collections compiled by pioneering scholars and master practitioners such as Elias Lönnrot, Jakob Hurt, Wilhelm Radloff, Matti Kuusi, Douglas Hyde, Joe Heaney, Calum MacLean, MacEdward Leach, J. M. Carpenter, Franz Boaz, Edward Sapir, Milman Parry, Dorothy Howard, Iona and Peter Opie, Dwight Reynolds, Samuel G. Armistead, and other twentieth-century recordings of endangered languages in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, the Pacific Islands, and the Philippines, now share technological platforms and advantages with the contents of new "born-digital" archives. Different archives have achieved varying degrees of technological sophistication. One may present only electronic copies of physical documents while another may offer a fully searchable catalogue, a relational database or texts with HTML mark-up language that tags semantic metadata and allows sophisticated comparative analyses and adumbrate desiderata in the field of corpus linguistics such as the derivation of narrative ontological structures, their eventual cognitive mapping, and devising of computer programs that would generate novel narratives.

I pass over without remark other crucial matters that pertain to archives, historical perspectives, methodologies, technologies, and what could, finally, be termed authority. Keen insights and helpful guidance into contemporary archives may be gleaned from the two dozen essays presented herein. For further consideration of archives "as an intellectual problem and a

cultural artifact worthy of study” let me refer you to an edifying letter from Francis X. Blouin, Jr. published with the title “History and Memory: The Problem of the Archive,” in *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 119.2: 296-98; 298.

This issue came to fruition through the combined efforts of staff of the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition: Lori and Scott Garner, Mark Jarvis, Hannah Lenon, Justin Arft, Elise Broaddus, Katy Chenoweth, Ruth Knezevich, and Chris Dobbs, as well as long-time staffers Rebecca Richardson Mouser and Elizabeth Janda, who now depart for new opportunities. We wish both Rebecca and Elizabeth success in all their future endeavors. It is my pleasant duty to recognize the outstanding debt *Oral Tradition* owes the many colleagues who unstintingly share their time, expertise, and advice with us by evaluating submissions. Their guidance vouchsafes the intellectual integrity and interdisciplinary bona fides established for *Oral Tradition* by its founding editor, John Miles Foley. With its publication, the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition aspires to contribute to the many significant discussions under way about the dense and tightly woven web of human activities that operate and intersect along the world’s traditional verbal arts. The merits of John’s pioneering scholarship were universally recognized and garnered steadfast support from the University of Missouri. The Center continues to receive encouragement and assistance from the College of Arts & Sciences, and Dean Michael O’Brien in particular is to be thanked for the confidence he places in the Center’s mission. To all who support these efforts I express my sincere thanks, appreciation, and gratitude. Your contributions permit us to attain to the benchmarks that John established 28 years ago.

In closing, we invite you to share your research into the world’s traditional verbal arts with us. Our review process consists of a refereed evaluation done by a specialist and a generalist reader, generally reported within a trimester of receipt. Published online and free of charge, *Oral Tradition* is consulted by more than 20,000 readers in 200 countries and territories. We look forward eagerly to learning from you about traditional verbal arts and about the archives that preserve their record.

John Zemke  
Editor, *Oral Tradition*

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