

Editor's Column

With this issue, *Oral Tradition* offers a miscellany of six essays examining traditional verbal arts that range from Mayan mythology and Senegalese song through medieval Slavic epic and early twentieth-century speech lab recordings, as well as two essays on new analytic models: an algorithm measurement of formulaic density and a traditional poetics for expressing covert dissent.

In his essay "The Ch'orti' Maya Myths of Creation," Kerry Hull leads off with an examination of internal and external dynamics that operate upon Ch'orti' Maya creation myths. He traces the decline of their oral transmission and sketches how the remaining fragments constitute a coherent narrative that still informs Ch'orti' practices.

Next, with "Traditional Poetry in Contemporary Senegal: A Case Study of Wolof Kasak Songs," the renascent Wolof song form, *kasak*, offers Cheikh Tidiane Lo primary material for ethical, generic, and performance frames of analysis. The findings of these investigations undergird his contention that despite the demise of the cultural institutions in which *kasak* originated, the practitioners of the form have adapted techniques from modern urban resulting in its transformation.

The third essay is from Robert Mann who offers "The Silent Debate Over the Igor Tale." Mann maintains that passages in the medieval *Slovo o polku Igoreve* that puzzle modern readers were readily comprehended by medieval audiences who were well-versed in the epic's traditional referentiality. He argues that certain hallmarks of oral composition evinced in the poem are sufficient to contravene scholarly claims that the Igor Tale is the work of an erudite literate author.

Passing from medieval Slavic epic to early modern sound-recordings in the United States, with "James Weldon Johnson and the *Speech Lab Recordings*" Chris Mustazza delivers a study of the recordings of the poet James Weldon Johnson's recitations made at Columbia University, December 24, 1935. Mustazza's digitization of these sonic recordings invite serious consideration of their aural dimension and shed light on how the recordings reframed the poems' topics. Mustazza contextualizes and historicizes these pieces within the ethnographic *Speech Lab Recordings* project housed at Columbia University.

In his essay "A New Algorithm for Extracting Formulas from Poetic Texts and Formulaic Density of Russian *Bylinas*," Dimitry Nikolayev proposes a definitive response to a vexed folkloristic question: what is a formula? His formal definition and an algorithm devised for measuring formulaic density are brought to bear on his analysis of a Russian *bylinas* corpus that serves to illustrate Nikolayev's methodology.

Finally, Jillian Shoichet proffers "A Model of Defiance: Reimagining the Comparative Analysis of Concealed Discourse in Text." Shoichet advocates an analytic model of processes for

concealment that imbricates three principles: articulation, diction and syntax; *construction*, at the level of narrative or textual structure; and diversion, distracting attention away from subversive meanings. Focusing passages from the Babylonian Talmud, the *Odyssey*, and Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* through these three lenses, Shoichet underscores the reciprocity of text with context. She argues that her model allows for the perception of otherwise unnoticed nuances that are obscured by literate texts.

This issue of *Oral Tradition* emerges into the light of day thanks to the combined efforts of the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition staff—Mark Jarvis, Hannah Lenon, Elise Broaddus, Katy Chenoweth, Chris Dobbs, Rebecca Benson, and recent arrival Emily Horn. Former managing editor Justin Arft has stepped into his new role as Assistant Professor of Classics, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and Ruth Knezevich is now pursuing other avenues of scholarship in upstate New York. The contributions that Ruth and Justin made to *Oral Tradition* during their tenures will be sorely missed. We anticipate just compensation for their absence will be forthcoming in the form of their future scholarly contributions.

It is a source of great satisfaction for me to recognize the signal contributions made by the readers who referee for *Oral Tradition*. These anonymous colleagues generously share of their time and expertise guiding the editorial treatment of essays submitted to *Oral Tradition*. Your counsel is indispensable and, as previously mentioned, constitutes the measure for maintaining the standards of scholarly excellence that John Miles Foley established for the journal. Among Professor Foley's many signal accomplishments, his work to ensure that *Oral Tradition* serve as a space for debate and discussion about humanity's verbal arts has born fruit for three decades. To the extent possible, the editorial staff aspires to continue his practice of encouraging dialogue and inquiry. This work is made possible by the steadfast support of the College of Arts & Sciences and Dean Michael O'Brien.

As is customary, I invite you to share your research into the world's traditional verbal arts with us. Evaluation of submissions is made by two referees, a specialist and a generalist, and is generally reported to prospective authors within a trimester of receipt. Published online and open access, *Oral Tradition* is seen by more than 20,000 readers in 200 countries and territories. In closing, though calendar year 2015 CE delivered a decisive rebuke of my plea (voiced in volume 29.1 of *Oral Tradition*), would that 2016 CE prove itself cooperative.

John Zemke
Editor, *Oral Tradition*