

## **Introduction: The Search for Grounds in African Oral Tradition**

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The critic J. Hillis Miller has written of the “terror or dread readers may experience when they confront a text which seems irreducibly strange, inexplicable, perhaps even mad” (1985:20). Literary study in the 1980s, he writes, is beset by profound disagreements over whether the “ground” of literature is to be found in social forces, metaphysical presuppositions, individual psychology, or language itself. For the future of criticism, he counsels “slow reading,” uncovering assumptions, and continuing interrogation of “the very idea of the ground.” Since the West began confronting the irreducibly strange yet compelling power of the word in African verbal art (Calame-Griaule 1963, Peek 1981), terror and dread have never been far from the surface. A classic means of addressing one’s terror is mimesis, as my undergraduate aesthetics professor told us: imitation for the sake of mastery springs from a compulsion to order. In the light of Michael Taussig’s recent book (1993) exploring the complicated relations of mimesis and alterity, mimesis can be seen to underlie all nine articles in this special issue. All in their various ways attempt to create a correspondence between the artistic human communication of African peoples and a written representation, which may be a set of propositions and correlates, a translation and summary, or an analysis that will imitate and celebrate African oral traditions while making them reasonable and explicable. The issue opens a perspective on contemporary folkloristic issues; this introduction interrogates the ground for scholarly and critical mimesis, assuming that oral and written literature both grow in such a ground.

In a recent textbook surveying the genres and literary features of African oral literature (Okpewho 1992), one looks in vain for any questioning of why anything should be called literature to begin with. “One can always inscribe in literature,” Jacques Derrida has said, “something

which was not originally destined to be literary, given the conventional and intentional space which institutes and thus constitutes the text.” This inscribing has certainly occurred in the mere transcription and translation of African oral traditions, as well as in the reclassifying of oral histories, genealogies, and personal experience narratives as legends (Okpewho 1992:183-203). Contributors to this issue give new data about how African artists frame some utterances into performances—how they “entextualize.” “But if one can re-read everything as literature,” Derrida continues, “some textual events lend themselves to this better than others, their potentialities are richer and denser.” Ahmed and Furniss and Camara, in this issue, give especially forceful instances of textual events of that sort. Derrida concludes with a warning to those who observe, record, transcribe, and translate: “Even given that some texts appear to have a greater potential for formalization, literary works *and* works which say a lot about literature and therefore about themselves, works whose performativity, in some sense, appears the greatest possible in the smallest possible space, this can give rise only to evaluations inscribed in a context, to positioned readings which are themselves formalizing and performative” (Derrida 1992:46-47). This issue presents nine positioned, formalizing, and performative readings of African oral traditions.

In the past, classic approaches to African oral traditions have sought their ground in anonymous social forces, “primitive” mentality, the entextualizing of words, or metaphysical presuppositions. Often the approaches have been positivist, in the sense of the 1892 definition cited by Raymond Williams, “the representation of facts without any admixture of theory or mythology” (1976:200). Facts in the colonial period were the decontextualized words of spoken performances, captured with the pain voiced by Smith and Dale in what was then Northern Rhodesia (1920:336):

Ask him now to repeat the story slowly so that you may write it. You will, with patience, get the gist of it, but the unnaturalness of the circumstance disconcerts him, your repeated request for the repetition of a phrase, the absence of the encouragement of his friends, and, above all, the hampering slowness of your pen, all combine to kill the spirit of story-telling. Hence we have to be content with far less than the tales as they are told.

As a ground for folklore research, then, positivism had its discontents and diminutions.

Decontextualization gained new theoretical force when, under the

influence of the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* and of Rudolf Carnap, positivism entered the Anglo-American literary world as New Criticism. The ground was an organic conception of literature and a separation of literary criticism from sources, social effects and backgrounds, history of ideas, and politics, for the sake of attention on the object called literary, which was separated from its producer and sociohistorical setting (Leitch 1988:26-35). New Criticism thus unknowingly justified the practice of generations of Africanist ethnographers, who published lists of proverbs and riddles, translations of folksong lyrics, and texts of folktales quite separately from their accounts of economic activity, gender roles, and political organization. The principle of such an “objective orientation,” wrote the New Critic M. H. Abrams in 1953, is to regard the work of art “in isolation from all these external points of reference” and analyze it “as a self-sufficient entity constituted by its parts in their internal relations” (21). This “objectivism,” now generally rejected in African studies, was classically refuted by a zealous, penetrating researcher of Tanzania, T. O. Beidelman: “if folklore has any lasting merit as a field of study by anthropologists, it is in its relation to other spheres of society and social action. Indeed, this too is the relevance of literature,” which, he concludes, can have significance only “within a wider cultural context, including social relations and cosmology” (1971:xiv-xvii). Most students of African oral traditions would concede these points, while regretting the lack of information about social relations and cosmology to inform the collections made in the past. Azuonye and Ahmed and Furniss accord their texts the sort of evaluation that, New Critics held, should be based only on criteria intrinsic to the mode of being of the work itself (Abrams 1972:21). They conceive its mode, however, as inextricably imbricated in social life. Görög-Karady with equal emphasis insists on a correspondence between the values of Bambara narratives and an ideology oppressive to women. To document that correspondence, she presents an exemplar of such informed interpretation within the context of Bambara social relations.

Transcription and translation do not stand alone; they require commentary, as another part of their ground. Our authors thus disagree with critics like Christopher Miller, who believes there is such a thing as “pure transcription.” This would be “the degree zero of francophone African literature, the point at which the author is merely a transcriber and translator of oral texts . . . . This degree zero describes large numbers of texts from the early francophone tradition” (Miller 1990:54). It also

describes a goal for many folklorists (e.g. Goldstein 1964) and one relation between folklore and American literature (Dorson 1972:473-74). But there is no degree zero of commentary either. Like literary critical theories, commentary on African oral traditions always “exhibits a discernible orientation” to artist, audience, or universe (Abrams 1972:4). Camara’s essay in translation, for instance, is mimetic in the Aristotelian sense: it is a written imitation of the manner in which Mandinka myth operates. Görög-Karady’s comparison of two Bambara tales, mimetic in a different sense, explores the relation of imaginative verbal art to the social world from which art arises and to which it is subject. Jama’s account of women’s literary production is “pragmatic” in showing the bearing of the rules and precepts of Somali poetry. Pragmatic too is Azuonye’s story of the effect of folkloric criticism on the performer; his focus on the individual artist classifies his approach also as “expressive.” Offering, finally, to put mimetic, pragmatic, and expressive orientations into a new perspective is performance-based research, which up to now has flourished outside Africa (Bauman 1982, 1989, Briggs 1988, Fine 1984, Limón and Young 1986). Several of our contributors apply this approach to their African materials; one interrogates it sternly. Performance research in Africa promises to achieve what Derrida claims for deconstruction, “a *general* displacement of the system” that opposes informants to investigators and text to context.

Transcription, however, is always with us. A reader of Sory Camara’s “Field of Life, Sowing of Speech, Harvest of Acts” might at first be tempted to see it as pure transcription. His revelatory interview with the Mandinka Pathmaster Kandara Koyi granted him a precious recording of the narrative of creation, that primordial time when light was confined to the heart of the world and human beings separated into greedy actives and ascetic contemplatives. Transmitting this wisdom, Camara positions himself not as a quasi-scientific invisible observer, but as the successor to the Pathmasters of eastern Sénégal. The Pathmasters assert that their Most Ancient Words constitute a metalanguage, in which they explain to us the proper place of words of power in human life. The means of their explanation is the narration of a past that has been perceived by no one except through their discourse. For Camara to record, combine, and translate their utterances is already commentary, exegesis, and explanation. Because he is their successor, his writing is also *mimesis*. What Terry Eagleton says of literary critics is *a fortiori* true of the Pathmasters, with Camara among them, but also of our contributors. They “are not so much

purveyors of doctrine as custodians of a discourse. Their task is to [hear and] preserve this discourse, extend and elaborate it as necessary, defend it from other forms of discourse [such as Western skepticism], initiate newcomers [like ourselves] into it, and determine whether or not they have successfully mastered it" (Eagleton 1983:201). The Pathmasters' discourse confronts us with what a New Critic would have called a concrete universal, a Mandinka metaphysic of the word, perhaps to be found too among their Bambara and Dyula cousins (Bird 1972:275). As Jacques Derrida says of literature generally, the Mandinka story of the origin of speech and lying "stands on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself. It's the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world" (Derrida 1992:47). Camara's translation challenges the position of critics like Mamadou Kouyaté, that oral tradition cannot be transcribed or translated without being destroyed (C. Miller 1990:94). Problems of representation and description have long plagued Africanists (Blacking 1972); solutions have often come from in-group spokespersons like our contributors.

A more accurate term for Camara's transcription and translation of myth (not to mention my Englishing of it) would be decontextualization, if that term is properly understood to imply placing the portable in another context. As Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs have shown (1990), narratives, in African or any context, have a portability that makes their words susceptible of decontextualization. This portability becomes problematic when we confront the esoteric nature of narratives about the ordering of the cosmos, of human beings, or of speech. Because these narratives partake of secret or hidden knowledge, like Camara's example, they are less overtly performed. "Field of Life . . ." declares one finding of the issue as a whole: the inaccessibility of the wisdom found in African oral traditions. Only under controlled conditions will Camara's Pathmaster bring to life through his word and gesture the "phenomenologically distinct realm of experience" translated here (Briggs 1990:216). There are two ways of envisaging decontextualization: either the interviewee has prepared and facilitated decontextualization of his speaking, as the Pathmasters have done, or the interviewee, under the pressure of the moment, has offered fragments of a belief system, a literary discourse, or a style in order to satisfy an interviewer. Camara encourages us to believe that we are looking at the gradual outgrowth of a smoothly developing, well guarded tradition, which he recontextualizes for a European audience that may well need its

message: the only mastery human beings can claim in this world is speech in harmony with the strings of life, which are stretched over the abyss of death.

Decontextualization is sometimes misunderstood to mean the mere removal of words from a performance setting, as though the words then were nowhere, or in limbo. But limbo too is a context, and there is no decontextualization without recontextualization. When Camara presented a brief version of this myth as “Pouvoirs de l’homme et puissances de la parole” in the context of a scholarly conference in London on January 12, 1991, no hearer could miss its “decisive mimetic component” (Taussig 1993:109). Many layers of mimesis are involved in the English translation of a French translation-and-summary-and-commentary of several Mandinka narratives in an uncertain relation to one another. It is with Camara as Taussig describes the Cuna chanter: “he creates the bridge between original and copy that brings a new force, the third force of magical power, to intervene in the human world” (1993:106). Not merely that first recitation, but the transcription and translation as well, brings into existence the power of spirit (108). Camara’s role as transmitter of Mandinka wisdom invokes a dilemma of artistic politics. When a wisdom master employs trickery to make sure his words are recorded, isn’t he an accomplice in his own dispossession? The Siberian shaman has sometimes been regarded as an actor, his tribesmen as an audience, their enclosure as a stage set; the anthropologist Bogoras (1904-9) even describes a shaman’s curing as performance. Does performance, then, mean fakery? Does the shaman’s use of ventriloquism, or the Pathmaster’s use of “mind games,” make him a charlatan? And is the anthropologist who so describes him, then, a debunker? Camara is not, but he forcefully brings into the foreground some of the performance elements of Mandinka myth.

After this proclamation of the power of the word, our other contributors regard verbal art as a social reality imbricated in, indeed helping to constitute, social life. Veronika Görög-Karady documents the ways in which the messages of two Bambara tales contribute to the prevailing male-centered ideology. Storytelling here makes no attempt at protesting or even questioning male dominance. “The Bambara tale,” Görög-Karady has written, “is at once act and discourse, a consequential cultural fact through which the society’s attitude toward itself is expressed” (1979:13). Men’s fear and distrust of women and women’s capacity for trickery and betrayal dominate the tales, despite the polar opposite figure of

the beneficent mother. In consonance with the androcentrism, the female narrator of “Siriman the Hunter” employs two characteristically African motifs of female negativity, the transformation of an animal into a woman to accomplish revenge and a woman’s persuading a man to leave behind his weapons so that she can do away with him (111). Internalizing the prevalent male-dominated ideology of such motifs is one means of female survival. By giving her a larger audience, Görög-Karady here sounds the theme of all our articles: politics and poetics are inseparable.

Again showing that inseparability, Daniel Avorgbedor presents the *haló* of the Anlo-Ewe of Ghana, a “sociomusical drama,” as an artistic rendering and perpetuation of conflict—a continuation of war by other means. In contrast to the colonial anthropologists who pictured African life as placid and undisturbed, Avorgbedor reveals the continuity of tension and conflict in a society he knows well. Thus his essay raises the question of the role of poetics and performance in regulating social life. African societies in the post-colonial era seem constantly to be seeking homeostasis, a temporary balance, which is bound to be upset and will again require rectification. Avorgbedor shows a direct relation between the devices and techniques that characterized *haló* in its day, and the aims of aggression and violence in Anlo-Ewe society. For Avorgbedor as for Briggs (1990:239), this relation means that poetics and politics are one. Similarly, in Mexican-American folklore, José Limón (1982) has shown that performances create, refresh, or constitute ideology.

Other connections between poetics and politics inform Sa’idu Babura Ahmed and Graham Furniss’s essay on Hausa rap artists, which presents the verbal part of a filmed performance. Their method, deliberately seeking to capture a fleeting moment instead of entering into intimate collaboration with performers, forces the issue of representation. Two generations after independence, how and by whom shall African oral tradition be represented in Africa and to the outside world? The discontents of representation haunt contemporary literary criticism. Ahmad and Furniss’s commitment to honoring their artists and extending their audience implies an aspiration to broadening the oral-traditional-literary canon. Does representation by these investigators necessitate exclusion of the artists and their audience, as some writers hold (Spivak 1987)? Though their non-interventionist fieldwork raises difficulties for them in perceiving the parallelisms that key performance by *’yan gambara* artists, it does not impair their connecting the performances with contemporary notions of textuality, that

“open-ended, heterogeneous, disruptive force of signification and erasure that transgresses all closure,” whether in Flaubert or Muhammed Duna (B. Johnson 1990:40). Finally, Ahmad and Furniss subtilize our knowledge of the dialectic between monologism and dialogism (Bakhtin’s terms). The interlocutory nature of *’yan gambara* performance, instead of generating dialogue, forestalls it. Thus it resembles other forms that effect authoritative, monologic speech by conventionalizing a practice of dialogue (Bakhtin 1981:342, Haring 1992:63-97). Other African instances of this monologism are arrayed by Okpewho (1992:52-57).

Poetics and politics reveal another facet of their identity in Chukwuma Azuonye’s study of variation in performance of Igbo epic under the impact of what Alan Dundes (1966) calls oral literary criticism. He reviews the debate over epic in Africa and eliminates one of the criteria for African epic put forward by John William Johnson (1980). In the time since Azuonye began working with him, Kaalu Igirigiri, the Igbo epic bard, moved from a “purist” style to a “novelistic” style. By analyzing performances from two times in the bard’s career, Azuonye demonstrates the impact of the most immediate sort of politics, criticism from a rival performer. A close parallel to this bard’s movement of style towards greater expansiveness is the experiment in competition carried out by Milman Parry with a performer of comparable rank, Avdo Medjedović, in Yugoslavia in 1935. Avdo listened to a 2,294-line performance of a previously unknown song and replied with a 6,313-line version of his own (Lord 1956). Comparable to this influence from a rival performer is the influence of larger audiences and halls on the Scottish ballad singer Jeannie Robertson, whose performance of a well-known, much anthologized ballad approximately doubled in length during her recording career (Porter 1976). For both the Scottish singer and the Igbo bard, responding to a sense of audience means more volume and comprehensiveness. With such prolonged concentration on a single artist, we are a long way from the anonymity imposed by literacy and colonial oppression.

Performance, as I have hinted, occasions controversy among our contributors as a primary category of analysis for African oral traditions. Rüdiger Schott, on the attack, contends that performance studies are a subterfuge to avoid the content analysis that he believes to be the primary task (so energetically carried out for instance by Görög-Karady). He supports his skepticism and demonstrates his method by analyzing variants and motifs in ten tales of the *Bulsa* of northern Ghana. Circumstances of



collecting, which he sees as a variable of performance, seem to have no influence on the aesthetic quality of the tales. He finds “coherence, richness in motifs [and] structural and logical consistency” in texts collected in the most “artificial” circumstances. His presence or absence from recording sessions makes no qualitative difference, nor is quality concomitant with length, since boring reciters are also longwinded. Schott rejects the argument of Bauman and Briggs that analysis of text is central to the study of performance. Schott’s deliberately controversial assertion that performance studies and content analysis are philosophically antithetical (in which Görög-Karady might concur) is contested in the ensuing articles. Whatever the outcome of that debate, Schott’s dedication to collecting and analyzing narrative texts, however, cannot be faulted; it pays tribute to a noble tradition of Africanist scholarship. As Robert Georges has observed, “Nineteenth-century scholars came to regard stories as cultural artifacts and to conceive of them as surviving or traditional linguistic entities pervaded by meaningful symbols” (1969:313). The extensive analysis of keywords, motifs, themes, types, and structures of Balsa and Lyela tales, which Schott initiated at Münster in 1986, offers the possibility of being extended to other African peoples, at least in West Africa, if scholars are willing to collaborate. The Paris research team of which Görög-Karady is part offers a model of profitable collaboration (Biebuyck 1984). Schott’s goal, as he has described it at folk narrative congresses, is to uncover ethos, values, and attitudes from the tales.

Other contributors seek a different ground. The limitations of a strictly verbal orientation to narratives were criticized as early as 1910, when that wisest of folklorists Arnold van Gennep wrote, “In our time, what we want to know is where, when, and to whom a tale is told.” Van Gennep goes on to assert that the circumstances of the performance of the tale and the identity of the performer or performers actually constitute the genre of the tale. The time, place, and occasion of the storytelling and the social position and role of the storyteller, he saw, actually have the power to create or establish the kind of story there existing (1910:306). Like many of van Gennep’s ideas, this reconceptualization undermines a longstanding assumption, in this case that tales exist in folk memory and await realization in performance. In the second half of the twentieth century, American folklorists such as Georges, Bauman, Briggs, and Abrahams have begun to put much more emphasis than used to be allotted to the role of the individual narrator (as Azuonye does here) and to the social conditions

surrounding a narrator's performance. Moreover (to return to Miller's "Search for Grounds"), the assumption of the stability of works of literature, or in this case the stability-within-variation of African folktales, has been challenged in critical theory as contradictory. "It is just because, and only because, [African folktales] are stable, self-contained, value-free objects of disinterested aesthetic contemplation that they can be trustworthy vehicles of the immense weight of values they carry from generation to generation uncontaminated by the distortions of gross reality" (J. Miller 1985:24). But the only way African folktales can acquire such contemplation is through recontextualization in the scholar's discourse. Görög-Karady, for instance, would not agree that Bambara tales are anything but responsive to gross reality.

The three final articles on the oral traditions of African women show three ways in which the arts of the word help to constitute African social life. Here, perhaps, is a ground for the study of African oral traditions. The authors also defend performance, not as an ancillary context for words but as the primary object of study, and they show African women refusing to accept psychological marginalization evident in Görög-Karady's texts. In Africa, perhaps more than any other region, gender speaks loudly as a "persistent and visible cultural resource in folk models of difference" (Mills 1992:2). If the poetics of particular groups of women must be understood in relation to their experience and their performance practice (Donovan 1987:100), it is from African women that we get the finest and most outspoken data for both the experience of oppression (Görög-Karady) and the practice of protest. The system of marginalizing women as social beings and artists becomes in these articles a fundamental topic. They add Africa, for the first time, to the array of non-western societies where research has begun to reveal that "performances are often overtly concerned with deconstructing dominant ideologies and expressive forms" (Bauman and Briggs 1990:66). African women's poetics are an inseparable part of women's politics.

Here again literary-cultural criticism converges with our concerns. In a brilliant and searching article on Third World women's literature, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) asks, "Can the subaltern speak?" Her bitter conclusion is that she cannot, given the colonial history in India of such a tradition as widow sacrifice (*sati*). "The abolition of this rite by the British has been generally understood as a case of 'White men saving brown women from brown men'" (297), but, says Spivak, we hear nothing of the

voices of those brown women. In an analogous mutism of American and British literary circles, only middle-class white women's productions are accorded status as real literature, and other women's productions are read as social documents (Robinson 1987). Reading women's verbal art as anthropological documents has been an African commonplace for so long that we have almost ignored it. The role of spokespersons like Agovi, Jama, and Fretz is to disturb this critical standard by examining the difference or specificity of women's folklore (Showalter 1987:39). Spivak's most serious charge against these three articles may be that performance studies are part of the "benevolent first-world appropriation and reinscription of the Third World as an Other" (1988:289). Yet she welcomes the sort of information that a folklorist like Zainab Jama, a "brown woman," provides here about Somali women (295). She might acknowledge that Jama is saving brown women from the deafness of white men. In a time of political turmoil and ghastly social torment, Jama shows, poetry by Somali women has broken through to new audiences and channels of distribution and forged new artists. Called forth from the shadow, is the subaltern not speaking, "protesting against patriarchal literary authority" (Showalter 1987:39)? Through Jama's interviews and data collection, we watch the subaltern challenge the Somali division of labor in the production of oral and written traditions. The recent book by Deborah Kapchan, *Gender on the Market* (1993), treats a similar challenge in Morocco, where women confront an increasing marginalization of the marketplace and become increasingly audible actors in it.

The second of the three, K. E. Agovi's "Women's Discourse on Social Change," uses performances of *ayabomo* songs by Nzema women to give insight into women's attitudes towards their oppression. The women move from self-censorship, meeting the expectations of the male stereotype, through a "loosening of tongues" that included mild protest and a few deliberate insults to men, to an aggressive and defiant attitude in the 1950s. The spontaneity of their performances, for an audience comprising both themselves and the rest of their community, demands a hearing for the "collective voice that is entirely their own." The "groupiness" of their traditional performance style contrasts oddly with the increased individual emphasis in the content. Reading their economic situation all too correctly, the women encourage men to achieve material prosperity and benefit their spouses by working in the city. The paradoxical results are twofold: to the extent that men are so persuaded, they will attenuate the marriage relation

by living apart from wives and children, and they will enlarge the pool of “paracapitalist labor,” thus throwing into doubt the all-important status of agriculture in Ghana (cf. Spivak 1988).

Oral tradition becomes a tool for modernization, though the women are not yet aware how much they are complying with the ideology of the world economic system. Instead of a simple antagonism between men and women and between tradition and modernity, the ambiguity of these women’s performances permits the presentation of their alternative social vision. They proffer a simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction of dominant ideology. Agovi’s content and style analysis of the ambiguity arises from his scrutiny of the women’s performance, in which they “appropriate a profound awareness of changes in their environment” and undermine their audience’s fixed perceptions of women. Thus he aligns himself with the performance orientation of Avorgbedor and Ahmad and Furniss, while raising the question of the extent to which folksong performance is or can be used to promote fundamental changes in a society (Dorson 1976:67-73). Perhaps too much remains to be discovered about the articulation of performance to support any generalizations now about protest or ideology.

Concluding this special issue, Rachel Fretz confirms Agovi’s insight into the crucial role of ambiguity in African women’s performances. “During storytelling,” she writes, “Chokwe women of Zaïre express their insights through veiled metaphoric speech. Both as performers and as responders, they address such topics as infertility and co-wife tension from a distinctly gender-specific perspective.” One Chokwe woman, in fact, uses ambiguity to respond to a previous performance in the same session by a male. Again the gender system and the social interaction of performance are the inseparable categories of analysis. Fretz offers the most direct refutation of Schott’s skepticism by asserting, “the storytelling session functions as the most immediate framework for interpreting.” Neither the words of the artist nor even her whole solo performance, she says, should be taken as the minimal unit of analysis: it is the session, the communicative event, that is the object of study. The session, therefore, is not “background” or “setting”: it is what brings verbal art into existence (Bauman 1977:11). In a Chokwe performance event, where the male orientation holds sway, it falls to a woman to subvert the expected social values through her use of metaphor, and to her audience to apply ambiguity to the act of interpretation (a form of criticism seen also in Michael

Jackson's 1982 studies in Sierra Leone, and Robert Cancel's 1989 monograph on Zambia).

The three articles on women's folklore pave the way for future research based on questions raised about the literary language of African Americans (McDowell 1989:1140). In any given African society, what are the kinds and profiles of internal differentiation among the folkloric behaviors of women? Do Nzema, Chokwe, or other African women share among themselves some common traditions but not others? What regional variations exist in African women's oral traditions? What differences exist between the folk speech or folktale language of women and men in a given African society (Keenan 1974)?

Though the Africanists who contribute to this special issue do not have to wonder, as medievalists have had to wonder, whether the materials they study were orally performed—they have witnessed the performances themselves—they support the view that poetics and politics are one. The aesthetic not only reflects but also helps to constitute the political. Charles Briggs (1992) has pointed out the danger of rendering invisible the role played in this identity by the folklorist, who collaborates with the artist in deciding what is and is not a text ("entextualization"). Whatever text is, whether words or complex communicative event, the context becomes the waste or rubbish (Thompson 1979). This decisive role needs constant light thrown on it, for (in spite of Okpewho's strongly literary approach), if oral traditions have any claim to study by cultural critics, that claim lies in their relation to such spheres of society and social action as deciding what literature is. For

there is no text which is literary *in itself*. Literarity is not a natural essence, an intrinsic property of the text. It is the correlative of an intentional relation to the text, an intentional relation which integrates in itself, as a component or an intentional layer, the more or less implicit consciousness of rules which are conventional or institutional—social, in any case. Of course, this does not mean that literarity is merely projective or subjective—in the sense of the empirical subjectivity or caprice of each reader (Derrida 1992:44).

But it does mean, as van Gennep observed (1937-58:20), that what distinguishes the study of oral traditions is not the facts it deals with, not its theory, not its system, but the angle from which the facts are observed. All the multitudinous details of performance and the variations of content and style in time and space become not aberrant, not obstacles to the work, but

normal.

What contribution is the study of African oral traditions making to literary theory? Though critics have long acknowledged the importance of the fundamental folkloric topic of variation in their understanding of Yeats or Henry James, the study of oral tradition, with its local knowledge (Geertz 1983) and its passion for the politically disenfranchised, occupies an oppressed position lower even than feminism. In the hands of performance researchers, the question is changed from “Can the subaltern speak?” to “When, where, and to whom is the subaltern speaking?” and “To what extent and in what ways is her status as subaltern conditioning her speaking?” Thus performance offers “to make visible the unseen,” by “addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic, political or historical value” (Foucault 1980:50-51). Folklore studies are generally “disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (82). The emergence of such local popular knowledge as performance-based research will enable criticism to do its work.

The great contribution of oral tradition study to criticism is its insistence on the importance of the actual artistic behavior of oppressed peoples. For many literary theorists and critics (as Gardiner 1987:111 says of feminist criticism), “the notion of theory is invested with values antithetical to those of [folkloric] criticism.” Those values declare that articles attesting to artistic diversity, especially those focusing on African women, arrive at formulations applicable only to a marginal, irrelevant, though pathetic social group. Therefore they are “anthropology.” Quite the contrary is true. Folkloristics is contributing dramatically new ideas about literary production to criticism, on the feminist model of “theory up from under” (Nader 1972, Ritchie 1992). Africanist folklorists argue that traditional artists, especially women, are breaking through old barriers to publications media, refusing to let differences be effaced, and claiming power through poetics. The precision of field observation offers an alternative to monolithic conceptions of oppressed groups and gives factual answers to the question how specific groups of women and men, actually speaking in history, enter into dialogue with their specific system of oppression. Studies like these close the gap identified so precisely for language twenty years ago by Hymes, whose words I adopt in closing

(1972:41-43):

For some of the most brilliant students of [African and other oral traditions], the proper strategy is to select problems that contribute directly to current [folklore] theory. A primary concern is relevant to particular problems already perceived as such in the existing disciplines, although the modes of work of those disciplines must often be transformed for the problems to find solutions . . . . [By contrast,] I accept an intellectual tradition, adumbrated in antiquity, and articulated in the course of the Enlightenment, which holds that mankind cannot be understood apart from the evolution and maintenance of its ethnographic diversity. A satisfactory understanding of the nature and diversity of [African] men [and women] must encompass and organize, not abstract from, the diversity.

Taxonomic descriptions and sympathetic interpretations are coming to prove the inseparability of poetics and performance from African social life.

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