Oral Tradition and the Internet: Navigating Pathways

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
Lecture 5
Friday, September 25, 2009
John Miles Foley

Two questions to begin….

Plan for today’s lecture
1. Background of lectures # 1-4
2. Differences between OT and IT
3. Media homology or similarity
4. From homology to opportunities

I. Background of lectures # 1-4
   A. The four topics to date
      1. “What is Oral Tradition?” (9.21)
         -- historical and geographical variety; four-part system
      2. “Epics from Oral Tradition” (9.22)
         -- comparability, micro- and macrostructure, audiences, performance
      3. “Non-epic Genres from Oral Tradition” (9.23)
         -- in living and manuscript traditions; ecology of OTs
      4. “Methods for Approaching Oral Traditions” (9.24)
         -- review of approaches; focus on Performance theory, Ethnopoetics, and Immanent art
   B. Overall perspective for all four lectures
      -- to sketch the enormous variety of OTs worldwide & through history
      ++ much greater in content than written traditions
      ++ much more diverse in content than written traditions
      ++ much more diverse in social function than written traditions
      -- to distinguish OTs from written literature
      ++ but not as an oral-versus-literate dichotomy
      ++ allowing for the interaction of orality and literacy
      -- to offer a practical tool-kit of methods for approaching OTs
      ++ again allowing for diversity in viewpoints

II. Differences between OT and Internet Technology (IT)
   A. recall the “invention of media” calendar from Lecture # 1
      -- Internet appeared at 23:46, 12.31, of hominids’ species-year
      -- OT available as a communications technology long before writing
      ++ first true writing systems about December 19th
   B. commonly cited contrasts between OT and IT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oral tradition</th>
<th>Internet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person-to-person</td>
<td>Person-to-machine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primitive technology</td>
<td>The newest technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient</td>
<td>Ultra-modern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Global</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perishable talk</td>
<td>Ever-ready resource</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
C. How many of these are true differences?

III. Media comparisons
   A. Six correspondences between OT and IT
      1. **Processing along pathways**
         -- Homer, oral singers, and *oimai*
         -- Networked potentials on the web
      2. **Distinct from texts**
         -- Not warehousable items
         -- But dynamic, patterned possibilities
         -- OT and IT are *living* and *emergent*
      3. **Non-identical “performances”**
         -- Surfing the web/Surfing the tradition
         -- Options at every node in both media
      4. **Variation within limits**
         -- Rule-governed performance by individuals
         -- Rule-governed evolution & change in the system
         -- Powerful & durable via variation (not in spite of it)
      5. **Idiomatic code**
         -- “green fear” in Homer, for example
         -- www.43things.com, for example
      6. **OT and IT **mime the way we think**
         -- Cognitive “scripts” for creation & performance
         -- as contrasted with the linear, sequential processing of book & page

   B. Refining the comparison
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perf./Comp.</th>
<th>OT</th>
<th>Books</th>
<th>IT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singer(s)</td>
<td>Author/Reader</td>
<td>Fixed pages</td>
<td>Designer/Surfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathways</td>
<td>Navig. + l. s.</td>
<td>Surfer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigation</td>
<td>Reader</td>
<td>Pathways + pages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>Singer-Aud.</td>
<td>Author-Reader</td>
<td>Designer-Surfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>Lit. tradition</td>
<td>“www tradition”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   C. Parallels among sources
   
<table>
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<th>Books</th>
<th>IT</th>
</tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   For OT: special register, prior generations of singers
   For books: writing within a literary tradition
   For IT: special register, prior generations of designers/surfers + texts

   D. Summary of the theory
      **Similarities in dynamics between OT and IT**
      • navigating pathways
      • distinct from texts
      • non-identical performances
• variation within limits
• idiomatic code
• mime the way we think

Comparison to open-source software
• OT is an “open-source” phenomenon
• OT works like open-source software
  -- expressive & communicative power results from sharing

Ideology of the text
The well-entrenched ideology of the book and page has
  -- “rewritten history” by revising the reality of media usage
  -- warped our understanding of present-day OTs
  -- made modern texts always and everywhere the “default” medium
  -- blinded us to the anachronism of imposing a textual frame of reference
  -- blinded us to the cultural hegemony of doing the same for living OTs

Why the homology is important
By using the OT-IT correspondence,
  -- we can better understand OT (as scholars and students)
  -- we can better represent OT (as a more faithful audience)

**Animation for textual technology

**Animation for OT-IT technology

IV. From homology to opportunities
A. Applications of the homology
  -- What are some practical ways in which we can use IT to better understand OT?
B. Examples of applied OT-IT homology
  • Oral Tradition migrates to the web
  • eEdition
  • eBibliography
  • eBook
  • Pathways Project
C. Taking the journal Oral Tradition online
  • Oral Tradition migrates to the web
    ** in response to an international field
    – Open-access and free of charge
    – Searchable and downloadable
    – Readership now: 169 countries & territories
    – 559,000 sessions logged over 3 years
    – Articles from a much more diverse group
    – eCompanions for multimedia
    – http://journal.oraltradition.org
D. eEdition
  • Multimedia
  • Hypertext
  • All “parts” present “on the same page”
  • Resynchronizing the performance

E. eBibliography
  • Ready by the end of 2009
  • Bibliography of all sources ever cited in the journal *Oral Tradition*
    – 20,000+ titles of books and articles in 100+ fields
    – Searchable
    – Open-access and free of charge

F. eVideoBook
  • Ready in early 2010
  • Video “book” on Paolo Zedda
    – both a Sardinian oral poet
    – and a Professor of Ethnomusicology
    – Double perspective on his OT
    – Covers poetics, performance, learning the tradition, etc.
    – Open-access and free of charge

G. The Pathways Project
   Also known as OT and IT
   – = Oral Tradition and Internet Technology
   – A comparison or homology
   – Not an identity
   Twin purposes of the Project
   1. to study the **similarities between oral tradition and the internet (OT & IT)**
   2. to create a **multimedia network for publication of the ongoing results**

Pathways Project design
[www.pathwaysproject.org](http://www.pathwaysproject.org)

Two complementary aspects
1. Morphing book
2. Online wiki (with gatekeeping/monitoring)

Morphing book

*Pathways of the Mind: Oral Tradition and the Internet*
– Chapters introducing core concepts
  • oWords vs. eWords
  • oAgora vs. eAgora
– Contracted with U. of Illinois Press
– Rest of Project: Creative Commons License

**Can be read in many different ways**
Online wiki

A system, not a thing
Also consists of chapters or “nodes”
  –Most of them short
  –Linked in a web with multiple options

Also can be read in many different ways
  –The “reader” becomes a co-creator
  –Power derives from potential, not fixity

Built-in updating
  •RSS syndication & aggregation
    –Notification via subscription
    –Updates the investigator automatically
    –Post-copyright date developments
  •These features are designed to avoid foreclosing on evolving knowledge, to take account of the future

Visiting the Pathways Project at http://pathwaysproject.org

Pathways Project aims
1. Avoids understanding OT only through texts
2. Evolves a more faithful way of understanding OT, which is by nature
   -- Variable
   -- Multimedia
   -- Highly coded & idiomatic
   .... and does so by juxtaposing IT, which is also by nature
   -- Variable
   -- Multimedia
   -- Highly coded & idiomatic
3. Both analyzes and exemplifies
   -- The OT/IT connection
   -- As “bookends to the waning age of print”
4. Illustrates, via OT/IT, that
   -- very much unlike texts –
   These two media mime the way we think.

*****

Homer has the last word, describing what it means to be a singer of oral tradition:
  “For among all mortal men the singers have a share
  In honor and reverence, since to them the Muse
  Has taught the pathways [oimai], for she loves
  the singers’ tribe.” (Odyssey, Book 8)

For Homer, making an oral poem is a journey
  •fluently surfing through networked possibilities, through the OT web
  •enacting as he goes, singing reality into being

What better analogy could there be than surfing the pathways of the Internet?
Resources
dynamic relationship between oral tradition and Internet technology ...more. Get A Copy. Amazon.

He was the founder of the academic journal Oral Tradition and the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition at the University of Missouri, where he was Curators' Professor of Classical Studies and English and W. H. Byler Endowed Chair in the Humanities. John Miles Foley (1947 – 2012) was a scholar of comparative oral tradition, particularly medieval and Old English literature, Homer and Serbian epic. He was the founder of the academic journal Oral Tradition and the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition at the University of Missouri, where he was Curators’ Professor of Classical Studies and