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“Oral Tradition”: Weasel Words or Transdisciplinary Door to Multiplexity?

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“Oral tradition”—not a concept I’m really comfortable with, actually. It’s partly its sneaky connotations: “oral” as symbol of the primitive, the other, the marginal at the edge of the triumphant western dream; “tradition”/“traditional” too: opposed to modern/western/literate/individual/creative, implicitly highlighting transmission and the “old,” downplaying creativity, multiple agency, politics, inventiveness. Nowadays we query those once-obvious ethnocentric universalizing assumptions, of course, and instead explore the overlap and interpenetration of oral and written (their intermingling with other media too—music, dance, material displays, electronic options) and look not to essentialized divisions between “old” and “new” but to historical changes and multiplicities (to changing genres, to new media interacting with established themes, to contemporary forms not just “traditional” ones)—but the older connotations still keep sneaking through. “Oral tradition” isn’t very transparent as an analytical concept anyhow: “oral” with its ambiguity between “voiced” and (the potentially much wider) “non-written”; “tradition” as—what exactly? what’s ruled out? In the areas I’ve worked in (around issues to do with performance, oral/performed literature, narrative, popular culture—in Africa and comparatively) the term “oral tradition” hasn’t proved particularly illuminating as such and isn’t nowadays very widely used.

It has pragmatic uses, though. As in this journal, it has served to gather together questions of textuality, orality, voice, text, performance, verbal art in a way too often ignored elsewhere. It fills—and challenges—gaps left in the canons of many established academic disciplines. And its cross-cultural framework and synoptic wide-ranging vision, unfettered by discipline-imposed shibboleths, can take us constructively across language, text, literary analysis, genre, media studies, popular culture, performance, information technology, and

communication—in the process, paradoxically, transcending the separating marginalizations once implied in “oral tradition.”

Current growing points? Manifold, but linked above all, I’d say, to an increasing awareness of the multiplexities of human creativity. Not just the multiplicities of diverse viewpoints, genres, cultures, social situatedness, power relations, or historical specificities (all now rightly recognized themes in social and humanistic study), but more the move away from the narrowing ethnocentric models implied in the binarism of oral/literate into the amazing range of multifaceted spectrums that people actively and creatively draw on in their communication and expression. This brings insights into the many-sided interactions of co-participants/co-creators even within and during one “single” “performance”; into the multiplex processes humans are actively engaged in across the many dimensions of textualization, of exegesis, of “meta”-perspectives, of using language; and—currently closest to my own heart—into the multiple modes and media that are so often, in their multi-dimensional ways, bound in with that simple little term “oral.” When examining the actual practice and experience of a (so-called) “oral” performance, researchers now pay growing attention to how people are deploying not just “words” but a selection from that huge array of auditory, kinesic, visual, spatial, material, tactile, somatic, and olfactory resources that humans have creatively developed and put to their purposes. (For examples of this multiplexity, see the references below.)

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