

Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind, by John Miles Foley. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012. 312 pp. ISBN 978-0-252-03718-4.

Nothing about the exterior of John Miles Foley's new book, *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind*, indicates that it is not a book in the ordinary sense. It is in fact a by-product of the real work that Foley evidently would prefer us to interact with: the Pathways Project website, which is a wiki that explores the connections between oral traditions and the Internet as cultural modes. The website – like oral performance— is non-linear, always changing, and, also unlike a fixed text, has a permeable boundary that integrates it with its surrounding context. The fact that Foley has chosen to derive a printed book from the Pathways project is interesting in itself, as it has resulted in an oddly self-negating object (when regarded by itself) that nevertheless serves to demonstrate its points in the context of book-centered scholarship, where Foley remains situated. Because the book is a secondary record of the Pathways Project, it may be unfair to make it, rather than the Pathways website, the focus of this review. However, in serving as a negative illustration of much of what it says, the book adds an interesting pedagogical dimension to the Pathways Project, as well as giving it a bibliographic foothold. It is interesting as a transitional object.

For those who are not familiar with Foley's work, he is the pre-eminent scholar of oral traditions today, the founder of the Center for the Studies of Oral Traditions at the University of Missouri (home of the Pathways Project), and founding editor of the journal *Oral Tradition*. Working in a literary mode in the tradition of Milman Parry (as opposed to taking an hybridized, semi-anthropological approach to the study of oral cultures as some others have done), Foley has focused on the problem of how to faithfully record and represent oral performance in a textual format that allows examination and interpretation by scholars working in a literate tradition. Working to bridge the gap between oral performance and fixed textual records during a time of media transition has allowed Foley to find new means of solving this problem in new media developments. Beginning in the mid-2000s, he began to write about the Internet as providing an entrée into the context of oral performance in a traditional culture (in the anthropological sense, a culture characterized by ritual and repetition rather than by literacy, social change, and technological development). In 2005, in "Oral Performance to Paper-Text to Cyber-Edition," he explained the benefits of a web-based version of an epic poem for providing contextual information that is quicker to access, avoiding the limitations of a linear arrangement. Although that article had not yet begun to explore in depth the similarities Foley finds between oral tradition and the Internet, he did register a desire to pursue such a project, stating his objections to the printed book as a way of "storing" oral performance in a passage worth repeating:

The advantages of the book, that bound pile of surfaces on which we spatialize our thinking, are many, and the age of the (typographical) page has seen remarkable achievements in the construction and transmission of all those kinds of knowledge that make us human. But the price exacted by the book's dominance has been high: in the case of oral performance, we conventionally denature what we seek to understand and represent by reducing its diverse, many-sided identity to a print-centered shadow of itself. Sound and gesture and context and backstory are but a few of the innocent victims of this ritual sacrifice, and the apotheosis that rises up from the rite of edition must – if evaluated fairly and without “cultural cover” – reveal its severe, even crippling shortcomings. (Foley 2005, pp 259-260)

With the Pathways Project, Foley has sought to discover through experiment how the Internet has characteristics that are similar to oral culture. The book version, like the wiki, is intended to be read in a non-linear way; instead of chapters it has brief “nodes,” which are referenced throughout the text in parenthetical notations that suggest the influence of hypertext. Unlike the majority of Foley's previous work, the emphasis is not on understanding oral traditions as they existed in the past but on understanding the present through the lens of reconstructed oral traditions. It is a forward-looking project that aims to transcend the limitations of the book as a format by using oral traditions as a way of interpreting the meaning of new media. In the process, Foley also interprets oral traditions through the lens of the Internet, emphasizing the aspects of interaction, non-linearity, community authorship, and networks, and in so doing introduces a language for discussing oral traditions that is novel.

Foley makes use of the Greek word *agora* to refer to the community context in which communication happens. Among the many coinages in the book, he uses “tAgora” to refer to the world of texts, and the same prefix, “t,” to refer to other aspects of communication in light of textuality. In the same way, he uses the prefix “e” to make reference to the electronic communication context, and “o” to refer to the worlds of oral tradition. Some typical formations are “oWord,” in reference to the way units of communication in oral poetry can be understood to include recurring modifiers that make a traditional reference, and “ePathways,” to denote reading along networks as opposed to reading strictly linearly. These specialized terms, and the rather highly developed theoretical ideas about oral traditions that go with many of them, present a slight barrier to understanding that a more linear presentation that builds upon itself could potentially remedy. The priority here, however, is to keep meanings open-ended and modifiable; there is a less concern about misunderstanding a concept with a presumed fixed meaning than one would find in a more “book-centered” book.

The book's nodes are listed in the table of contents in alphabetical order, which illustrates the lack of a linear-structured organizational scheme that

contributes meaning. A selection of these can help to give a feel for what the book is like. Here is a snippet of the alphabetical sequence of node titles, running from I to N: “Indigestible Words,” “Just the Facts,” “Leapfrogging the Text,” “Misnavigation,” “Morphing the Book,” “Museum of Verbal Art,” and “Not So Willy-nilly.” Marshall McLuhan’s playful approach to understanding media transition is evident in the inventiveness and colloquial feel of these titles, and his influence is acknowledged with references in the index and bibliography.

By publishing a book version of a wiki that is about how the Internet is not like a book but more like an oral performance, Foley has created an interestingly demonstrative object, one whose status as an exemplar of the print tradition is in an almost humorous tension with its specific statement as discursive text. As such, its material dimension supports its textual argument for a parallel between oral tradition and Internet communication. However, in sacrificing linear argumentation it has perhaps sacrificed the critical means of determining how Internet communication is also unlike oral tradition, and remains similar to, and dependent upon, print culture traditions that deserve to be understood for their persistent implications. In light of this question, it may be noteworthy that the term “secondary orality” does not appear in the index, and the index entry for Walter Ong has only two page references. Foley’s project makes the implicit suggestion that Internet technology is “undoing” the legacy of print by breaking the linearity of the text. However, as Ong might have pointed out, the written word in alternative arrangements is still the written word, and the technology of writing has had implications for cognition that were not possible to imagine in an oral culture. This is not to say that Foley’s work can be taken to deny such a suggestion, but simply that he omits an exploration of the ways in which Internet texts are not only reflective of a distant oral traditional mode but also dependent upon print culture. It is also worth noting that this kind of critical questioning is not well-supported by the mode of writing that Foley explores here.

In conclusion, this book is a transitional object that problematizes itself as an object, functioning well as a recommendation for, and justification of, the ongoing work of the Pathways Project, which might be unknown to people in the humanities who are not otherwise focused on issues surrounding digital texts. It is interesting the way a book can, in its own right, serve as an illustration of an idea. This book is also interesting as a product of the impossible zone between oral performance and fixed linear text, out of which Foley has done his celebrated work for the duration of his career. *Oral Tradition and the Internet* is probably best understood as a book that is intended to point beyond books. Comparative study of the differences between oral and chirographic cultures that take a methodologically synthetic approach, like Ong’s, could potentially help illustrate the ways in which we are not like oral cultures, despite the parallels that are evident in new media.

References

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Reviewer

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