

# Introduction. From Transcribing Orality to Oral Practices of Writing

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## ABSTRACT

This special issue of *Martor* problematizes the complex relationship between the written and the oral in the production of meaning that defines "traditions," community and group relations, in different contexts of change (post-communism, migration, the use of hypermedia, storytelling, and so on). It approaches the new ways orality is found in contemporary societies, but also opens avenues for methodological discussions in ethnological research regarding the phenomenon of orality in contemporary societies, dominated by history and written texts.

## KEYWORDS

Orality; written practices; tradition; storytelling; hypermedia.

“Once upon a time” goes one of the best-known formulas for beginning a story and preparing oneself and the audience to imagine all that will happen in a story that is about to be told. In the late twentieth century, for example, adults and children could already hear stories from different sources and experience various types of interaction. From a genealogical perspective, stories can be oral, transcribed, or written, the “once upon a time” formulaic beginning placing the story in the third category, that of literary stories. And it is only through the shift from written text to its oral expression that the literary story becomes emblematic of a particular manner of oral narration, the mentioned formulaic beginning thus becoming representative of the same oral by-product of the written

text. This approach highlights the historical and, more importantly, contextual nature of storytelling.

Those who grew up in the 1960s through the 1980s can remember well spending our childhood years listening to stories told by our parents, their parents, or any other person who had been raised in an oral culture. So, we would see the performer, hear his or her voice and intonation, watch his or her gestures (see Calame-Griaule 1965, 1977, 2008; Bernus and Calame-Griaule 1981) and by this enter the realm of the story brought up to life by the speaker. There were particular stories that the children requested time and time again, every night, but each time new details popped up, the plot became increasingly complicated, the dialogue between characters changed:

although it was the same story, it felt like a new one, and this was what children enjoyed.

Even though storytelling constitutes one of the first means for experiencing narrated fiction in human communities, children are not the only audience for storytelling. This particular practice is a by-product whose origins can be traced back to storytelling as a social practice, for example, in France, from 1690 to 1790 (Storer 1928; Barchilon 1975). At the time, women, who were the initiators of this fad, developed a discourse on the literary story (fantastic or otherwise) as being intended for children (especially princes). This is also where the image of the grandmother surrounded by children listening to her telling a story originates (see Gustave Doré's drawings: Raymonde 1982; Defrance 1998).

Such an experience is widespread in societies defined by "primary orality" (Zumthor 1990; Ong 2002), where "the strength of speech is limited only by its impermanence and inexactitude" (Zumthor 1990: 19–20) and characterized by variability (see Goody 2010; Görög-Karady and Seydou 1982; Baumgardt 2008). While "primary orality" is far from dominating contemporary European societies, it can still be found here, coexisting with writing; in these societies, one can experience, as Paul Zumthor (1990) explains, a "mixed orality." The cohabitation of oral and written cultures is visible already starting with the ancient texts (see Crosby 1936; Goody 2010), or the Middle Ages when, for example, "the masses of the people read by means of the ear rather than the eye, by hearing others read or recite rather than by reading to themselves" (Crosby 1936: 88; see also Nisard 1854; Bollème and Andriès 2003), and therefore, writers would address in their work both readers and hearers.

This points to a second situation where a story/composition is created by written means, but it is delivered by oral performance, a situation illustrative of "second orality" (Zumthor 1990), one defined by an orality

reconstructed based on written sources. Following on our example, children in the twentieth century could also listen to stories that were read by parents from books with wonderful covers and beautiful drawings or paintings. In this case, the voice was bringing back to life a world that was dormant in the pages of the book, as the storyteller's speech was fixed in writing. The imagination was thus guided not only by the voice heard, or by the written text, but also by the illustrations, which the children were able to "read," even if they could not read the alphabet. In this type of societies, orality coexists with writing and printing, "technologies of communication" (Mason 1998: 308) that enable duplicating (and freezing in time) the spoken word, as Zumthor explains (1990: 26). Even more so, as stated by many scholars (see Crosby 1936; Goody 1973; Finnegan 1974; Zumthor 1990; Ong 2002), "writing does not put an end to oral tradition" (Zumthor 1990: 26), they in fact coexist, interact, and influence each other constantly (see Finnegan 1974; and Levy 1981 for the Chinese tradition). Above all, as Jack Goody points out, writing helps shift language "from the aural to the visual domain" (1973: 78), regardless of the scholars' efforts to write down the words as they were spoken and heard—for example, in dialectological transcriptions of speech (see Bîrlea 1966). After all, these books are only meant for the eyes of specialists. Moreover, writing is integrated among the mechanisms of transmission and reproduction of local (rural or folk) cultures. As a result, oral narratives reified in written form are often reintegrated and reinterpreted into the oral dimensions of the life of a community, mainly through storytelling. Over the years, researchers who study the relationship between orality and writing have focused on linguistic aspects (see Foley 1990), or the dynamic between oral memory and written memory in the process of transmitting local cultures (see Goody 1973, 2010; Labrie 1984). These studies have led to the present epistemological theoretical frame, as well as,



anywhere. Even more, the physical presence of a speaker is eliminated (Zumthor 1990), which allows any recording to be an “echo of the voice” (Goody 2010: 19).

Already in the twentieth century there were so many technologies that enabled communication: "In the global village, radio becomes 'the tribal drum' [citing McLuhan—editors note] of the new electric tribe; the newspaper becomes the land of simultaneity which can annul all space and time barriers and which turns each experience into a group or society experience" (Lamberti 2004: para. 3). The fast-paced technological advancement over the past years has emphasized the importance of oral culture for humankind, and the need to communicate in any way possible. Thus, with the emergence of the new electronic and digital technologies at the end of the twentieth century and in the first decades of the twenty-first century, new mediators came along: computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones, and so on. They all make use of the world wide web, "a community of communities" (McClelland 2000), which brings people together "in a media embrace in spite of spatial location, and makes them part of social practices shared at the same time, therefore offering them a sort of new 'electric body' and 'tribal psyche'" (Lamberti 2004: para. 3).

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of the hypermedia, the internet reaches a wide range of audiences. As a result, the researchers have been focusing increasingly on how the internet is integrated into oral cultures and how it contributes to the endorsement of local identity (see Castleton 2016; Lafkioui and Merolla 2005). The connections between the internet and the oral traditions have already been explored by John Miles Foley in his book published posthumously in 2012. Both oral tradition and the internet are seen by the researcher as similar cultural practices: the performance is non-linear, subject to variation (websites also change constantly); defined by communal authorship; and made available to a wide audience, considerably larger for the hypermedia. As a result, there are some similarities in cognitive pathways that the internet users and the oral performers are using, making sense of the correspondences between the ancient and modern technologies of communication. At the same time, Foley points out the differences: the internet, unlike the oral tradition, is dependent on written culture, outside which it cannot exist, although visual and audio information can be retrieved online, helping the reader (in this case the internet user) "to understand the epic less as an item and more as an experience" (Foley 2005: 255). Following on our example, in these first decades of the twenty-first century, a child can listen to stories told/performed online, either in the form of a performance, a cartoon, or simply as a text, via a host of social media channels: YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and so on.

Obviously, the complex and dynamic relationship between the oral and the written expression of human communication is today more challenging than ever. The explosive development of communication technologies opens up an unprecedented dimension of this relationship, accompanied by new processes through which the relationship between writing and orality is recalibrated and reconfigured emerging.

It challenges all researchers of human societies. The approach to these processes from any classical disciplinary perspective, whatever it may be, remains ineffective for a deep understanding of the contemporary relationship between orality and writing.

This volume brings together texts that talk about the transformation of orality into text, but also the way electronic devices and hypermedia incorporate orality. All of them are based on the dynamic aspect of orality in contemporary local cultures and present examples of recent practices of modernity, where experiences become texts, but also where certain areas of social life are transferred into the virtual realm.

Apparently heterogeneous in their approaches and themes, the studies that make up the current issue of the journal represent, in fact, the multitude of processes and phenomena of reorganization and rehierarchization of the relationships between the oral and the written expressions of communication.

In accordance with the basic structure of the journal, the volume is composed of four sections, preceded by an introduction. The first section, titled "Writing Orality. Production and Legitimation of the Past," has as its main theme the relationship between the archived text and writing as a graphic expression of oral communication. The studies authored by Anete Karlson, Olga Vl. Maltseva, Mirela Florian, Diana Mihut, and Florența Popescu-Simion discuss subjects from various geographical areas (Latvia, the Amur region, or various rural areas in Romania), as well as different life situations (handcrafts, fishing, soldiers in the First World War, private life, or relationship with death), but they are all historical approaches to the process by which orality becomes a written text, thus legitimizing and explaining the past and certain social phenomena (see also Pejoska 2018; Iosif 2019).

The second section, "Orality as a Tool. The Production of the Continuous Present," includes five studies whose themes while

diverse are also convergent: they all deal with the topic of recorded audiovisual (or written) memory as a form of transition from orality to writing. Thus, oral communication, even if occasionally recorded in the form of written text, audiovisual recording, internet-mediated communication, or archived record, remains a privileged tool for cultural transmission and knowledge production, for living the past as a continuous present. The studies that make up this section are written by Christina Alexopoulos de Girard, Laura Jiga Iliescu, Mélanie Nittis, Stefana Yorova, and Marin Constantin.

The third section, "Orality on Display" is dedicated, as with previous *Martor* issues, to the junction between cultural action, ethnological reflection, and museum display. It includes two studies focusing on artistic projects: one that is a result of an applied ethnology endeavor, and the other a result of a complex educational project. Both focus on heritage issues, both are a source of cultural action projects and a model for patrimonial ethics. The first text is written

by Krassimira Krastanova, Maria Kissinova and Elitsa Stoilova, and the second by Ioana Corduneanu.

Three reviews of recently published books that are relevant to the topic of orality make up the final section of the volume. The theme of storytelling, developed in the third section, is thus consolidated. However, in this last section, the reader's attention is additionally directed to two extremely important themes for the issue of orality, which are missing from the volume: that of "ethnic show" stage performance and that of traditional music.

The discussion on orality remains open. It is obvious today for all researchers that the nuanced and profound understanding of the relationship between orality and writing is central to any approach to understanding contemporary society, from the cultural, sociological, historical, technological, or any other point of view. The current issue of *Martor* journal is but a small contribution to a broader contemporary discussion concerning orality.



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