

A Review of *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind* by John Miles Foley

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Abstract

Described by the author as a “morphing book”, John Miles Foley’s *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind* is an ambitious project that extends from the textual to the digital. Through a nonlinear reading, the book illustrates and explains to readers the various similarities and potential interactions “between humankind’s oldest and newest thought technologies.” Without traditional organization, the book invites readers to jump from section to section much like the way one might peruse a website — and in fact was paired with the accompanying Pathways Project website (currently offline). The nodes as Foley calls them (small chapters arranged in alphabetical order) cover a variety of topics, utilizing the authors prefix appended terminology (such as tAgora and eWords) including thought experiments that challenge our conception of what constitutes a text. The argument lies therein: a nontraditional and nonlinear “book” reveals the tension and dynamic relationship between oral tradition and Internet technology.

John Miles Foley’s book, *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind*, resists the idea of a book. Its self-referential introductory sections draw towards the main underlying idea — the Pathways Project website, an exciting, ambitious, and somewhat overstretched attempt to illustrate the linkages between Oral Tradition (OT) and Internet Technology (IT). Such resistance, along with the inability to access the Pathways Project seven years after the author-creator’s passing, gives the book a feeling of a past relic of scholarship, echoing Marshall McLuhan’s *The Medium is the Message* in its of-the-moment importance paired with an overzealous effort to make sense of the ensuing culture of a new technology. Foley’s work, however, preempts criticisms by refuting its presence as a “solution”; instead, like the wiki-based website of the Pathways Project itself, encouraging others to constantly interact with the text (all versions of it) and layer new meaning and insights into the corpus. Ironically, or perhaps poetically, the stasis with which the book text (and the tAgora) exists seems to undermine many of the interesting decisions Foley made when constructing the book as a “provocation” meant to stimulate dialogue. Also, while the author cites Walter Ong to invoke the idea that “the conversation is never over” [Foley 2012, 26] the current discourse around the Internet indicates that there are too many conversations about too many other things — in other words, the conversation has been passed by and muffled by digital noisiness elsewhere. Still, revisiting the text and the remnants of the Pathways Project provides a fascinating view into how literary scholarship can be both ill- and well-equipped to grapple with Internet culture.

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Rather than take a traditional linear approach, the author encourages the reader to hop around the text as if it were a web page (which it was in the past). Responding to several anticipated questions in a “Questions and Answers” section of the preface, Foley explains that the most important manner through which readers navigate the text is the one they themselves choose — not linearly and not the purely pragmatic alphabetic “Table of Nodes” with titles that read like blog posts (“Excavating an Epic”, “Indigestible Words”, “Impossibility of tPathways”, etc.). In this way, the “morphing book” as he describes it serves as a marker for how the Internet can simultaneously feel like it gives the reader (or perhaps participant) more agency even as the content itself is curated specifically for a certain kind of reading. I myself was particularly intrigued by several sections for what they alluded to but did not directly address.

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The node on “eWords” (Foley utilizes e-, o-, and t- prefixes for electronic, oral, and textual respectively, as in

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ePathways, oWords, tAgora, etc.) references ever so briefly texts that live primarily on the Internet through which users “find their way through a constellation of pathways constructed and used not by a single person but by a group (Distributed Authorship)” [Foley 2012, 99]. What Foley says without actually saying it is that there exists a new genre of literature, different from both the oral epic poem and the written text novel, that can be co-authored by a vast expanse of writers and navigated in a variety of ways — and in fact the navigation of a text can in fact be part of the “writing” process itself. He is talking about electronic literature and games. It is for this reason I found it odd that Foley did not choose to include e-lit titles or specific games, or in fact the fields of Digital Literature/Media Studies and Game Studies themselves. While it feels easy to criticize this omission in 2019 now that there exist such widely popular choose-your-own-adventure media like *Black Mirror’s* “Bandersnatch” that lives on a streaming service (Netflix), it is still odd given the vast array of digital objects that existed well prior to publication. Perhaps, ironically, that points to a refusal to accept such media objects as part of the greater canon — a refusal that continues preventing Western academia from accepting oral literary traditions from *Other* parts of the world as being worthy of literary study, something Foley himself should know given his prolific career focusing on oral traditions.

Such a blind spot seems most glaring when in a wandering section on the hypothetical “Museum of Verbal Art” the author uses a tongue-in-cheek tone to note how “high-traffic” exhibits featuring “elite” authors like Chaucer “require a bit of face-lifting to acknowledge oAgora dimensions of their artistry” [Foley 2012, 153]. He immediately goes on to clunkily add, still in a somewhat cheeky manner that:

Similar woes have beset the Curators of Eastern Art, whether Indian, Oriental, or Arabic. Not only do texts like the *Mahabharata* stem from oral traditions, it seems, but some of them also appear to have “lesser” kin still alive today in folk tradition. And this is to say nothing of Middle Eastern Art, in particular the Judeo-Christian Bible — both Old and New Testaments — with its roots firmly planted in the realm of the spoken, embodied word. [Foley 2012, 153]

It is an odd section that utilizes the thought experiment of a “Museum of Verbal Art” to point out the absurdity of freezing oral tradition for prestige’s sake and how a focus on tAgora and not oAgora would lead to the loss of the museum’s accreditation. It is especially odd that Foley chose not to highlight the Qur’an (given its more pronounced oral identity) or pre-Islamic Arabic poetry as his examples of Middle Eastern Art. Even his sardonic choice of the word “lesser” seems counterintuitive to the possibilities of studying oral literature (or folktales, fables, and folk art). Regardless, the indication is that such a museum, or any type of monument to oral literary works, would be best if it existed in the digital realm (or with ePathways) where it can navigate the terrain between orality and textuality more smoothly. Yet the section becomes even more “meta” when you consider that this hypothetical now exists solely in a textual object. The stasis in which *Oral Traditions and the Internet* lives contradicts so many of its insights, but even if the wiki were still digitally alive and active, I have my doubts that the other issues would be able to stimulate enough dialogue to rectify the cultural oversights.

John Miles Foley’s work through the past several decades shows an intellectual who significantly built upon the early orality scholarship of Milman Parry and Walter Ong while extending the field into the 21st century digital paradigm. Unfortunately, even with its self-awareness, the book’s ipseity as a stagnant artifact that is no longer supported by its web-based counterpart is further exacerbated by the unusual omissions above-noted from the conversation. That is certainly a shame, for if Foley were still with us today *perhaps* the wiki would grow to more accurately grapple with the distinct differences of oral traditions and the Internet — astutely commenting on the similar nature in which certain cultural objects (such as Ibo folktales a la *Things Fall Apart* or the Arabic epic oral poem *Sirat Bani Hilal*) are excluded from literary canonization, instead of buoyantly touting their supposed kinship. Or Foley could also be dismayed by the current state of the Internet not having actually helped the conversation to continue (per early, overly optimistic scholarship), consumed instead by the overwhelming volume of so many other deafening conversations. Conversations, I might add, that are increasingly not oral — instead taking place in ePathways such as online social media or various online journals. Readers interested in such topics may be better served by looking at scholars such Angela Haas (who engages in cultural and digital rhetorics) or Mark Turin’s *World Oral Literature Project* and edited collection *Oral Literature in the Digital Age: Archiving Orality and Connecting with Communities*.

Works Cited

Foley 2012 oley, J. M. *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind*. University of Illinois Press, Champaign (2012).



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