Orality and Technology, or the Bit and the Byte: The Work of the World Oral Literature Project

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Looking Back

In 2010, I invited John Miles Foley to be the keynote speaker at the World Oral Literature Project workshop at Cambridge University. Given John's formative role in shaping scholarship and publishing on oral traditions, as well as his deep commitment to exploring the affordances of new digital worlds, I could think of no scholar better qualified to speak to the theme of our annual meeting: "Archiving Orality and Connecting with Communities."

John's keynote address was a great success and connected strongly with the assembled participants. He focused on the core questions that had bedeviled scholarship in our field ever since Walter J. Ong pronounced that "thinking of oral tradition or a heritage of oral performance, genres and styles as 'oral literature' is rather like thinking of horses as automobiles without wheels" (1982:12). While Ruth Finnegan, who generously offered the keynote address at our first workshop in 2009, had prepared the ground by redeeming the term "oral literature" from the scholarly equivalent of the recycling bin,[1] John took us on a conceptual journey, beyond text, beyond Ong, and in many ways beyond oral tradition itself.

In his presentation, and in the important book (*Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind*) that was subsequently published, John illustrated how our oldest and newest technologies of communication could be thought of as fundamentally homologous. Simply put, and in John's own compelling words, oral tradition and internet technology share the core dynamic of navigating through networks. In the process, they foster co-creative, participatory, contingent, and ever-emergent experiences. Fortunately, we were able to unite the medium with John's message, and recorded his keynote presentation.[2] Less than a year and a half later on May 3, 2012, we lost one of our best minds with John's passing.

Four presentations from the 2010 Cambridge workshop were subsequently published in Volume 27, Number 2, of *Oral Tradition*.[3] Volume 26, Number 2, of *Oral Tradition* was John's Festschrift, and the next issue, Volume 27, Number 1, was dedicated to his memory. This brief

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[1] See http://sms.cam.ac.uk/media/756900.

[2] See http://sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1092059.

[3] See http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/27ii.

contribution on the aims, scope, and reach of the World Oral Literature Project, and how it connects orality with technology through its online archive, is offered in honor of John's remarkable legacy.[4]

Redeeming Oral Literature, Questioning Literacy, and Situating Technology

For societies in which traditions are conveyed more through speech than through writing, oral literature is often an important medium for the transmission of ideas, knowledge, and history. The term "oral literature," while contested, can be broadly read to include ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, folk tales, creation stories, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue twisters, recitations, and historical narratives. This list is by no means exhaustive or intended to be definitive, but it serves rather to underscore the range of performative styles that can be accommodated within the category of oral literature (and, by association, within folklore and oral tradition). In many cases, oral and performative traditions are not translated when a community shifts to using a more dominant language, and oral literature in general remains one of the most poorly studied and least recognized forms of human creative expression.

Oral literatures are in decline for a number of complex and interrelated reasons. One principal driver behind the decline of oral culture is the ever greater focus on universal, basic literacy promoted by international organizations working in human development and education. Another causal factor is the high degree of endangerment of many of the world's remaining indigenous languages. Rather paradoxically, the family of organizations that make up the United Nations are involved in campaigns that address both processes: on the one hand, they promote mass literacy programs that have been shown to undermine and erode established traditions of oral transmission; on the other, they fund programs that nurture cultural diversity and support the mapping and documentation of endangered languages.

Over the last few years, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has departed from its "one size fits all" model of universal literacy with a "renewed vision" that no longer advocates a "single model."[5] However, we should recall that UNESCO was also the main engine behind the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) that ended on December 31, 2012, a global initiative that bundled together goals for education and literacy with loftier aims such as eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality, and ensuring sustainable development, peace, and democracy.[6] The slogan of the Literacy Decade—"Literacy as Freedom"—represents a widely-

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[4] I am grateful to the editors of *Oral Tradition* for soliciting this submission, and to Lori Garner in particular for her patience and good humor throughout the editorial process. In addition, I am very thankful to the two anonymous reviewers who read an earlier draft of this submission and offered constructive and targeted comments that have helped improve this contribution considerably.

[5] See http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/education-building-blocks/literacy/mission/.

[6] See http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/education-building-blocks/literacy/un-literacy-decade/.

held Freirian belief that learning to read and write *necessarily* results in positive social transformation, situating literacy as the central panacea for all ills (Freire 2005 [1970]:48).

As Bartlett (2009) has shown in her recent work in Brazil, local communities and development actors often have quite distinct ideas of what literacy "does" and how it "works," and may even have mismatched expectations of the benefits and access that it will eventually bring. While the fundamental tenets of Paulo Freire's model of critical literacy appear to hold sway even 40 years after the publication of his landmark *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, some scholars and community members, such as Jorge Gómez Rendón, are imagining programs that would explicitly incorporate orality *into* literacy, rather than seeing orality as an obstacle to be overcome on the way to self improvement and textual emancipation. Such programs would offer (Rendón 2013:118-19):

> a new model of intercultural bilingual education that takes orality as a point of departure for the development of literacy and makes extensive use of available ICTs in order to provide students with socially relevant material and culturally contextualised learning.

In terms of cultural and linguistic diversity, however, UNESCO has also long championed the cause of minority speech forms. The most recent edition of its flagship *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* was released in early 2009[7] and boasts an innovative approach to data gathering and information access (cf. Moseley 2012). The *Atlas* claims that around a third of the 6,500 languages spoken around the globe today are in danger of disappearing forever. With each language lost, a wealth of ideas, knowledge, oral traditions, and history also vanish— all without a trace if the language has not been properly documented or has no established written form.

As with oral literature, so too then with language: the challenges and threats to endangered and marginalized cultures come in many forms. Some are implicit and unintended; others are decidedly more explicit. Well-conceived and important national education programs that advance literacy in the world's major languages may have the collateral effect of undermining local traditions and weakening regional languages. In the name of national unity, some governments still subdue local languages and cultural traditions as a way of exerting control over indigenous populations and strengthening the central state. Globalization and modernization have also exerted complex pressures on smaller communities and have eroded expressive diversity through assimilating cultural practices to more dominant ways of life. At the same time, however, processes of global interconnectedness (between goods, services, and people) can provide a hitherto unexpected level of access to tools and appropriate technologies. As I recently argued in an article for *YaleGlobal* online (2013):

> While the dispersal of speech communities across the globe has led to the demise of some languages, technology popularized by globalization is playing an equally important role in their revitalization. Through the internet and mobile communications, people are reconnecting with fellow speakers using digital tools to revive languages on the endangered list.

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[7] See http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/.

One of the factors that made the World Oral Literature Project possible in 2009, and contributed to its early success, is the degree to which speakers of endangered, poorly documented languages have started to embrace a wide range of new digital media. Many communities whose speech forms were previously exclusively oral have adopted the web—and not only as a virtual "store" for recordings of their endangered traditions, but as a federated, language-neutral platform for the transmission, communication, and revitalization of their oral traditions.

Take *FirstVoices*, for example, an online suite of web-based tools and services designed to support Aboriginal people engaged in language archiving, language teaching, and cultural revitalization projects.[8] Operated by the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council in the Canadian province of British Columbia, the website (http://www.firstvoices.com) hosts 60 community language archives and is home to thousands of text entries in many Aboriginal writing systems, along with sound files, pictures, videos, games, and more recently even iPhone applications. In keeping with established community protocols and well-defined cultural norms, only some of these archival collections are publicly accessible, while others remain password-protected at the request of an individual language community. *FirstVoices* is a compelling example of an effective platform that has leveraged internet technology to enable oral traditions and cultural practices to survive—and even thrive—among increasingly mobile (if digitally connected) communities.

On a more personal level, I have watched videos of traditional wedding ceremonies and funerary rites being recorded on smartphones in London by migrants from Nepal and India. These digital video clips are quickly uploaded to YouTube, linked and "liked" on Facebook, through which they are discovered and then watched two hours later by relatives in remote Himalayan villages connected to the Internet through 3G on their solar- or hydro-powered smartphones. While this all sounds rather extraordinary and even fantastical, what makes it all the more interesting is that the process is remarkably mundane. I have watched as Skype and WeChat have replaced landlines, airmail letters, and even email to become the principal tools sustaining contact and building bridges between dispersed communities of minimally literate speakers who live and work across different time zones.

Nepal was the first country in South Asia to introduce 3G capability on mobile networks through its national cellular operator. This innovation has paid off, with mobile phone "penetration" in Nepal reaching 73% in 2013. Some industry analysts predict that by 2015, Nepal will have as many cell phone subscribers as it has citizens (Custer 2013). Building on the wide access base to hardware and mobile services, cell-based voice messaging systems have seen massive uptake among historically non-literate communities across the Himalayan region. Their success, I believe, derives directly from their minimal or low-text interface, their ease of use, their no-fee service, and—most important of all—their asynchronous nature. When communicating across time zones or from locations where WiFi access and power supplies are unstable, the ability to leave a voice or video message (or a story, a song, a prayer, or a ritual—all of which I have heard) that can be accessed later is particularly useful. And lest these

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[8] See http://www.firstvoices.com/en/about-info2.

technologies are dismissed as marginal concerns, used only by the historically disenfranchised, we should recall that WeChat had 272 million monthly active users in the third quarter of 2013 and is poised to overtake Facebook sometime in 2014 as the world's most widely used digital communication platform (Rapoza 2013; Millward 2013).

Over the last decade, scores of community-based language documentation projects have welcomed an array of digital platforms and tools into their documentation, preservation, and revitalization efforts. Many have prioritized field-based audio-visual recordings and interviews with elders (sometimes even with smartphones and tablets) who still have fluency in the language and knowledge of the oral traditions, while others are actively digitizing older records. A case in point is the Aboriginal Audio Digitization and Preservation Program at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Offering matching funds for equipment and training, its *Toolkit for the Digitization of First Nations Knowledge*—charmingly entitled "Indigitization" (http://www.indigitization.ca/)—supports the conversion of audio materials on cassette to digital preservation formats, thereby promoting enhanced and appropriate access to these recordings for communities, and where possible, the broader public.

Partnerships or initiatives that bring scholars and resources at universities into conversation with communities are ever more important. Some of these collaborations are already challenging traditional understandings of cultural heritage and curation, particularly around issues of "digital return" or repatriation.[9] As I recently argued in an article co-written with two colleagues (Bell et al. 2013), the digital age has intensified and changed discussions of repatriation in ways that are sometimes unpredictable. One such shift is away from legal definitions and assumptions about repatriation to more inclusive notions of digital return and community stewardship. There are ever more stakeholders involved in the circulation of culture, often collaborating in innovative ways to manage, preserve, use, and re-use digitally returned materials in mutually beneficial and creative ways.

Intriguingly, community "archives" of cultural and linguistic content are increasingly designed as undertakings that exist primarily online, bypassing discussions of physical preservation, professional curation, and access (in some cases, to their peril). Such community-led projects are to be celebrated—even if some run out of steam or funding within a few years—as they are usually experimental and often saturated with multimedia connectivity. These online cultural interventions and explorations are made possible by rapidly emerging standards that include Unicode (for fonts), open-source self-publishing platforms (such as WordPress), and free software like HandBrake (an open-source video transcoder) or VLC (a cross-platform media player), along with ever cheaper hardware (cameras and computers) that brings down project costs dramatically. Until recently, few indigenous peoples had access to well-designed, free, and stable tools to assist them in the documentation of their own cultural knowledge, on their own terms, and in their own language. All of this underscores that the digital divide has taken quite a different shape and form to technological divides in an earlier, analogue era.

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[9] See the website of the Digital Return Research Network (http://digitalreturn.wsu.edu) for a discussion of these issues.

The World Oral Literature Project

 While the archiving of audio and video recordings of oral literature through online platforms is a form of cultural documentation and preservation that has been welcomed by many indigenous communities around the world, we must also acknowledge that there is little agreement on how such collections should be responsibly managed, archived, and curated for the future. The World Oral Literature Project (http://www.oralliterature.org), inaugurated at the University of Cambridge in 2009 and co-located at Yale University since 2011, was established in part to address this question by helping to "collect, protect, and connect" endangered oral traditions and widen access to funding, training, and knowledge. The inception of the Project was made possible by the generous support of the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research, and over time additional resources were kindly contributed by the Charles E. Chadwyck-Healey Charitable Trust, Dr. Laura Appell-Warren and Dr. John Warren, the Leverhulme Trust, and the Onaway Trust.

 The Project's Board Members were eager to facilitate partnerships between fieldworkers, museum professionals, performers of oral literature, and community representatives. All too often, funding for such work has focused on providing scholars already well established within the academy with the necessary resources to conduct fieldwork in remote locations, rather than building capacity among community members to do the work themselves. With this tendency in mind, the Project aimed instead to promote ethical partnerships between community members and academically trained linguists, anthropologists, and folklorists. Such a realignment had already changed thinking in some linguistic circles, thanks to the work of Ken Hale (and others), who advanced the "native-speaker linguist" model, so elegantly summarized by Michel DeGraff (2001:100):

> Our work as linguists must also involve our political commitment to social and economic justice in the communities we work in. This political commitment, whenever possible, must involve the training, hence "empowerment," of the native-speaker informant as bona fide native-speaker linguist.

 In four years of active operations, the Project's fieldwork grant scheme has funded the collection of audio and video recordings from nine countries on four continents, with much of the funding going to in-country, community researchers whose travel costs are low and who are often best situated to commit themselves to such work. In addition, Project staff have digitized and archived older collections of oral literature as well as contemporary recordings that were "born digital" where the fieldwork was externally funded by other sources. At present, these collections represent a further twelve countries, amounting to over 400 hours of audio and video recordings of oral traditions now hosted for free on secure servers on the Project website. These resources are used by students and researchers of world history and culture in the classroom, by

the wider public, and more recently by writers and printmakers such as Nancy Campbell[10] and Melanie Challenger[11] as an inspiration for artistic projects.

The World Oral Literature Project's strong focus on cooperation and understanding ensures that source communities retain full copyright and intellectual property rights over recordings of their traditions. Depositors grant the Project a non-exclusive license to host the material, a permission that can be revoked or changed at any time. A non-negotiable premise of our work is that we neither pay for content nor charge users for access. The inclusion of extensive metadata, including contextual details relating to the specific performance of oral literature alongside its history and cultural significance, allows researchers and users from all disciplines to connect with and experience the performative power of the collection. We have made good use of increasingly sophisticated digital archiving techniques that permit the retrieval of granular metadata from specific recordings. Whether through a simple Google Maps interface or our searchable list of recordings, our website provides many ways into our online holdings, allowing us to connect our archive to a broad community of users and researchers.

Embodying Orality through Digital Archiving

The World Oral Literature Project online collections range from songs, chants, and speeches in Paiwan and from other minority language-speaking groups in Taiwan in the 1950s to African verbal arts recorded on digital devices in the twenty-first century. We are fortunate to have particularly strong collections from Asia, many of which offer powerful illustrations of how digitally archived collections can directly assist in the revitalization of community practices. Between 2009 and 2011, local artist and researcher, Dr. Madan Meena, worked together with Victoria Singh from the Kota Heritage Society to record a 20-hour ballad about the life and adventures of Tejaji, the Snake Deity, sung by the Mali community (an occupational caste who traditionally worked as gardeners) in Thikarda village, Bundi district, Hadoti, Rajasthan, India. Through a careful, complex, and collaborative documentation of Tejaji customs and traditions,[12] recordings were transcribed and translated from Hadoti into Hindi and English, and distributed as both a book and DVD in the region. The combination of the attention generated by the recordings and the publication of the book has renewed interest in the Tejaji oral tradition, with performers, apprentices, and community members now using the public archive as a benchmark and reference point.[13]

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[10] Campbell's artist's book entitled *How to Say "I Love You" in Greenlandic* is as much a romantic narrative about an endangered speech form as it is a lesson in linguistics. Hand-printed and beautifully composed, it sells for £450, with £50 from the sale of each copy donated to the World Oral Literature Project to support our fieldwork grants program. See further http://www.nancycampbell.co.uk/books/how-to-say-i-love-you-in-greenlandic-an-arctic-alphabet.

[11] Challenger's prose and poetry uses a series of songs from different regions and cultures (some drawn from World Oral Literature Project archives) as the point of departure for an extended discussion on the origins and contours of human cultural diversity.

[12] Dr. Madan Meena spoke about the challenges of the work at one of our annual workshops, a recording of which can be found at http://sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1092101.

[13] See the online collection at http://www.oralliterature.org/collections/mmeena001.html.

Similarly, a yearlong project initiated in 2009 (and led by Dr. Kevin Stuart, Dr. Gerald Roche, and Dr. Tshe dbang rdo rje) that aimed to train five local researchers to digitally document oral literature from five locations in the northeast Sino-Tibetan frontier has grown into a much larger and more sustainable cultural training program. Not only did the initial project result in a valuable collection of recordings of oral traditions,[14] but it also helped catalyze an ambitious online platform for sharing resources across the Tibetan plateau. The website http://PlateauCulture.org now includes geocoded images, articles, place summaries, and bibliographic sources to illustrate various strands of culture, life, and history from the Himalayan region.[15] Contributors to the portal are mainly students, members of local media projects, or local and foreign teachers and scholars, and the program now boasts a successful participatory photography project and regularly publishes *Asian Highlands Perspectives*, an increasingly prominent journal that focuses on oral traditions. Many of the journal articles now incorporate recordings from our archive into their text, and Dr. Gerald Roche has continued to make excellent use of participatory methods—initially developed by Robert Chambers within the context of development studies—for the practice of cultural preservation.[16]

The majority of our contemporary collections are "born digital," meaning that traditions are recorded using digital devices in the field and transferred over the web (through file transfer protocols or cloud storage solutions) to the World Oral Literature Project from the fieldwork site. This method provides immediate back up and storage for the researcher, and results in faster archiving and dissemination of critically endangered customs. From our offices in Cambridge and New Haven, we upload these new collections to the Cambridge University Library digital repository,[17] DSpace—a managed environment with a commitment to forward migrating digital assets when formats change so that uploaded collections, along with large amounts of associated linguistic and geospatial metadata, are securely and safely archived. In addition, we host audio and video recordings on the University of Cambridge Streaming Media Service.[18] This platform allows for more immediate and simple streaming of audio-visual content in a variety of formats, making the materials accessible to all audiences with varying speeds of internet connection, including those connecting to the web from rural or remote regions on cell phones, tablets, or basic computers.

A benefit of direct online archiving for communities is that materials can be easily returned in accessible formats—whether on DVD, CD, or hard disk—to be used in education and cultural revitalization programs. Younger community members are increasingly finding that their introductions to oral traditions are being mediated through digital media that in turn can help to inspire interest in cultural heritage because it appears attractive and modern. Acting on the wishes of our Project partners and grantees—as tailored to the needs of each specific community

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[14] See the online collection at http://www.oralliterature.org/collections/gyulha001.html.

[15] See http://www.plateauculture.org.

[16] See the lecture at our workshop on this approach: http://sms.cam.ac.uk/media/756717.

[17] See https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk.

[18] See http://sms.cam.ac.uk/.

—we believe that this approach harnesses the power of technology to the enthusiasm of the young. In this way, online digital platforms can support communities in their efforts to revitalize their traditional knowledge systems and oral cultures.

Collaborative Learning: Workshops and Partnerships

Training workshops and conferences convened by the World Oral Literature Project provide an important opportunity for fieldworkers and community members to be exposed to emerging best practices in culture and language documentation, and to share their experiences with a wider group of academics and independent scholars. The Project has held three annual meetings to date,[19] the most recent of which was a workshop in 2012 entitled "Charting Vanishing Voices: A Collaborative Workshop to Map Endangered Cultures."[20] At the event, participants explored both the World Oral Literature Project's existing database of language endangerment levels and a range of new tools and technologies for collaborative work.[21]

Our first two workshops were recorded and archived online for free streaming and download.[22] Many of the presentations have been viewed over 1,500 times by users all over the globe with an interest in techniques of cultural documentation. Panels at our second workshop were focused around the theme of what happens when new publics consume, manipulate, and connect with field recordings and digital archival repositories of linguistic and cultural content, as their involvement raises important practical and ethical questions about access, ownership, and permanence. These issues are reflected in a current trend among funding agencies, including the World Oral Literature Project's own fieldwork grants program, that encourage fieldworkers to return copies of their material to source communities, as well as to deposit collections in institutional repositories.

Increasingly, as this short contribution has shown, the locus of dissemination and engagement has grown beyond that of researcher and research subject to include a diverse constituency of global users such as migrant workers, indigenous scholars, policymakers, and journalists, to name but a few. Participants at all of our workshops have explored key issues around the dissemination of oral literature, reflecting on the impact of greater digital connectivity in extending the dissemination of fieldworkers' research and collections beyond traditional audiences.

Openness, Access, and Connectivity

The free online dissemination of published materials is a key aspect of the World Oral Literature Project's pledge to wider access and greater connectivity, and we are firmly committed

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[19] For links to abstracts and videos from past conferences, please see http://www.oralliterature.org/research/workshops.html.

[20] See http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/1685/.

[21] See http://www.oralliterature.org/research/databaseterms.html.

[22] See http://sms.cam.ac.uk/collection/756550 and http://sms.cam.ac.uk/collection/1092005.

to a dissemination model that overcomes the constraints of traditional publishing. While alternative models of academic publishing that make use of online open-access platforms are well established in the sciences, aside from a few notable exceptions—*Oral Tradition* being one of the most prominent—the humanities and social sciences have been slower to adapt to the affordances of digital dissemination. The Project publishes an Occasional Paper series of case studies and theory relating to the documentation and archiving of endangered oral traditions.[23] Hosted as PDFs on our website and co-hosted through other platforms with partner organizations, these papers can be downloaded for free or printed on demand from anywhere with internet access. To date, we have published six occasional papers and have found this to be an effective model for making material immediately available. Many of our titles have been downloaded over 2,000 times since they were hosted, and some have been translated into other languages and reprinted in books and journals across the globe.

For larger and longer manuscripts, we have launched an unexpectedly successful partnership with the Cambridge-based Open Book Publishers to create affordable paperback, hardback, HTML, and PDF versions of new titles and out-of-print classics in oral literature, bypassing the problems inherent in conventional academic publishing (such as remaindered copies through overprinting, high unit cost, and poor global availability). The innovative approach adopted by Open Book Publishers makes the dissemination of such unique literary traditions that incorporate original field recordings possible for the first time. This method of digital publishing has the distinct benefit of wider global access to scholarly content and rich online supplementary material. Authors are not restricted to the page, but can incorporate a wealth of audio, video, and photographic material to support their texts. Open Book Publishers have a commitment to open access that dovetails with our Project's mandate to widen the dissemination of knowledge, ideas, and access to cultural traditions. Connecting with a broader audience—one that was historically disenfranchised by the exclusivity of print and the restrictive distribution networks that favored Western readers—further facilitates the protection and reinvigoration of cultural knowledge.

The first release in our World Oral Literature Series with Open Book—a new edition of Ruth Finnegan's 1970 classic *Oral Literature in Africa*—received considerable media attention in September 2012.[24] Project staff worked closely with the author to generate interest online, and together we raised sufficient funds through the crowd-funding website Unglue.It to make the book available for free in PDF and ebook formats for all users.[25] Through our partnership, we were able to realize Ruth Finnegan's dream that her work be available at no cost to all citizens and scholars in Africa. Since the republication of her *Oral Literature in Africa* with Open Book, Finnegan has embraced on-demand digital publishing and has become a prominent advocate for open-access scholarship in general.[26]

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[23] See http://www.oralliterature.org/research/occpapers.html.

[24] See http://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/97/.

[25] See https://unglue.it/work/81724/.

[26]   See   http://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/open-access-taking-academic-publishing-out-of-its-ivory-tower-2335862.html.

2013 saw the publication of four more books in the World Oral Literature Series: *Storytelling in Northern Zambia: Theory, Method, Practice and Other Necessary Fictions* by Robert Cancel,[27] a revised edition of Lee Haring's *How to Read a Folktale: The* Ibonia *Epic from Madagascar*,[28] *Xiipúktan (First of All): Three Views of the Origins of the Quechan People* by George Bryant (with linguistic work by Amy Miller),[29] and an edited volume by our project staff entitled *Oral Literature in the Digital Age* that grew out of the formative discussions at one of our annual workshops.[30] More books are in production and are expected in 2014, and each publication is fully searchable, readable, and in most instances freely downloadable from the publisher's website. All of the manuscripts make extensive use of online digital content through stable handles and URLs that are embedded in the online book and link straight out to our rich audio and video collections.

Looking Forward

Public support for communities struggling to protect their endangered oral traditions and languages is an important factor in maintaining political engagement with cultural diversity, and media coverage extends the activities of the World Oral Literature Project to wider public domains. Our presence in print, online, and on air has helped generate visibility for the cause of protecting endangered traditions and a greater familiarity with the collaborative methods that we advocate.[31] In turn, we believe that this exposure can help to foster a sustained interest in approaches to documenting oral traditions that are respectful, non-extractive, and aimed at cultural sustainability.

By participating in community events and working with artists and authors who have been inspired by recordings of oral traditions, we are extending knowledge of other cultures beyond the confines of ivory towers and the silos of the academy. Working from the assumption that a deeper understanding of cultural diversity can enhance empathy for others and in turn discourage prejudice and stereotyping, our extensive outreach programs encourage interaction with materials created by indigenous communities themselves.

The three verbs *collect*, *protect*, and *connect* encapsulate our aims.[32] Collection is the gathering and documentation of oral literature in the field, not in an acquisitive manner, but in a way that is responsible, collaborative, and predicated on trust. Protection is its archiving and curation—doing the best we can to ensure that these unique cultural materials are maintained,

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[27] See http://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/137/.

[28] See http://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/109/.

[29] See http://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/141/.

[30] Turin et al. 2013. See http://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/186/.

[31] Learn more about our public outreach by listening to some of our interviews and webcasts available at http://www.oralliterature.org/info/news.html.

[32] These verbs are drawn from the mission of the New Zealand Film Archive (http://www.filmarchive.org.nz/).

migrated, and refreshed as new technologies become available and older technologies become obsolete. The connection is made when collections are returned to source communities and when they reach a wider public in print and online.

Reflecting on the theme of this special issue of *Oral Tradition*—archives, databases, and special collections—this short contribution has focused on the part of our work that "connects." Quite simply, the World Oral Literature Project exists thanks to the technical underpinnings made possible through widely available and cost-effective information technology and the philosophical imperative to see information and knowledge shared. To find out more about the project, please visit http://www.oralliterature.org/.

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