

Rigor and Remembrance:
Two Ways of Being in Time

by

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ABSTRACT | Both oral tradition and guild history deal deeply with the past, yet they deal differently. In this paper, I explore how the perspectives and practices of traditionbearers and historians create entirely different temporalities. While history focuses on causality in linear time, oral tradition is connected to mnemonic space and springs cyclically from spatial images. While a work of history is a unit of knowledge produced by scholars, a performance of oral tradition is constructed fluidly in realtime through an interaction between performers and audience-participants. Finally, while historians seek to address gaps of knowledge in an ongoing debate by building rigorous arguments about the past, traditionbearers engage in a continual, contextual creation of collective memory. Neither endeavor can tell the whole story of what came before. Neither history nor oral tradition is the sole voice of truth or fact. They offer, and necessitate, different ways of being in time.

KEYWORDS | history, oral tradition, folklore, temporality

The temporalities in which we live affect every aspect of our lives. Our relationships with time shape who we know ourselves to be, where we perceive ourselves within the world's story, and what to carry forward with us from the past. These are important realities—yet they are also, often, like the water we swim in, invisible to us. We may take for granted that our notions of past and present are simply how things are. But the way we interact with time is not universal. It is situated in place and culture (Haraway 1988).

I have never not been interested in time. Since childhood, I've marveled at how the past persists in place; how endings are wrought by change and death; and how the present has never arrived, and will never go. So, as a graduate student of anthropology and history, I was at once intrigued by the strange overlaps between formal historical writing and oral folk tradition. We are, all of us, influenced by both. In school, we're taught to look at time as a string of events, whose facts trickle down to us (faithfully or not) from the work of professional historians; and we continue to reference this framework though our lives, as we consume the news or reflect on social problems. At the same time, we interact with the past in other ways, too, through the folkways of our communities. Maybe this means trading memories with neighbors on a porch. Maybe it involves traditional performances of sacred myths. Maybe it's the unspoken experience of seeing layers of stories in the walls or the hills around us. In these instances and others, one's folkloric concept of time is often very different from the academic.

You'll notice, I'm drawing no hard line here between informal folk storytellers (the porch storyteller, for example) and Indigenous traditionbearers (such as the performer of a sacred myth). Obviously, there are important differences here—but there are also important similarities. Oral tradition encompasses a vast spectrum of narrative

modes: which are, on one hand, as diverse as the cultures that practice them; but which, on the other, share elements of community, orality, and performance. When I use the term *oral tradition* in this paper, I'm referring broadly to the narratives of any folk group that tells and retells stories about the past in an embodied social setting. While I'm at it, I should also say that although the word *history* is often taken to mean any past event, when I use that word in this paper, I'm referring to the Western academic discipline of history-making. It is a popular subject. In any bookstore, shelves bristle with titles, and every title has its thousands of readers—but the work it takes to produce these narratives (the methods and norms by which a historian generates disciplinary knowledge) is much less visible. This work is what I mean by *history*.

Now, does it make any sense to compare the two? Depending on your frame of reference, to set oral tradition and guild history side by side may feel offbeat. After all, history is an academic discipline: a systematic way of generating knowledge about the world. Oral tradition is a folk practice: a part of the world being studied. One is a method. The other is a source. When I floated the premise of this paper to the historian who mentored me during my graduate studies, she saw it as a category mistake.

But academic history is a culturally specific endeavor, and to set it apart from every other human foray into the past would be to privilege one way of knowing over another. There is no categorical holiness to history. We could just as well say that categorically, history is a form of folklore: a customary tradition, practiced by a community of peers, expressive of a particular set of styles and standards. Rather than closing it neatly off into its own category, I embrace history as one of many possible ways to approach the past. Its rigor is an expression of its culture, not a claim to absolute truth. History is a source of different knowledge, not higher knowledge. Where

it comes to understanding our place within time, oral tradition also speaks. Like history, it is a living knowledge system with epistemological worth.

Moreover, it constitutes a different temporality. Both guild history and oral tradition deal deeply with time, but they deal differently. The first is linear, temporal, bounded, distanced. The other is cyclical, spatial, boundless, and immediate. In these ways, they stand in perfect opposition to one another, yet their overlaps are surprising. Both practices generate stories about the past. In both, knowledge is solidified, revised, textured, and transmitted. Both are dialogic, with many voices and views converging to co-create the story; and both depend on competent tellers—vetted scholars or skilled performers—who are accountable to collective norms and standards, and whose narratives are received and critiqued by rings of community. But their approaches are different, as are their works, as are the meanings that dance and beckon from the stories they tell. In this paper, I will show how the perspectives and practices of academic history differ from those of folk and indigenous remembrance. We may not always notice the temporalities in which we live, but they are profound, and worth noticing.

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Look closely at a work of history, and you'll probably find it involves five themes: context, causality, contingency, complexity, and change over time (Andrews and Burke 2007). Of these five, change is typically the historian's primary concern, and causality, their primary question. At its most basic, the discipline could be summed up in three words. *Something changed. Why?*

Of course, what follows from there is anything but simple. A spark of interest in the historian's mind becomes an intensive survey of secondary sources, followed by a

plunge into the archive: the heart of the work. Whatever material may be found, the historian performs an exhaustive reading of it, combing through every shred of available evidence, listening for its pulse, its patterns. They solidify a tightly scoped research question: investigating some change, affecting some aspect of human life, within some precisely bounded period of time. They articulate how their work differs from previous scholarship and why it matters. They construct a rigorous argument to support their answers. Every step in this process demands disciplined thinking, sustained effort, and a good deal of creative energy.

It also requires the construct of linear time. To study causality and change is to presuppose a string of events, in which: first, something is yet to happen; next, does happen; and third, has happened. Indeed, this is the dominant framework. The image of causal events, arranged along a complex path, emerging at some point from the fog of prehistory, is baked into how most of us think about time, at least in the abstract.

But it is not the only framework. Our experience of time is not strictly linear. Memories occur to us and reoccur. Seasons roll around a wheel, days and weeks and years repeat, holidays and holy days call us back to our touchstones, and the places in which important events happened become themselves objects of memory. Oral tradition is connected to mnemonic space, and springs cyclically from spatial images (Shetler 2007, 20). The stories we see in the world around us provoke, remind, and bear witness (Basso 1996). The events we tell and retell remain active among us. In this sense, the past is not behind us, at all. The past is eternal, because the past is present in everything.

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To the layreader, works of history may read as absolute truth. But among

historians themselves, they reflect a search and a dance (Getz and Clarke 2016). Conclusions are contestable, and contested. Narratives are challenged, textured, and revised; archives are explored with both earnestness and skepticism. Despite a lingering smokescreen of objectivity, there is no last word here. Oral tradition is also a dance—here, again, there is no last word—but its functions are different. While the historian seeks to address gaps of knowledge by building rigorous arguments about the past, the traditionbearer engages in the continual, contextual creation of collective memory.

Nowhere are the differences more evident than in the stories they each generate. History's product is ultimately a fixed unit of knowledge—a paper, a book—whose ideas will surely be challenged by future works, but which is not, itself, subject to change. The output of oral tradition could not be less like. It is “a meaningful process rather than a bounded object” (Handler and Linnekin 1984, 287). Its product is an event, constructed in realtime through the fluid interaction of performers and audience-participants. “Stories don't stand still,” wrote Euroamerican oral historian William Schneider (2002, 127). Like language itself, they are rivers of change, which die if they stop moving. They are told and retold, adjusted to meet new and changing needs, adapted by tellers and listeners in the continual act of transmission. According to Grand Ronde Cultural Resources Department Manager David Harrelson, every generation applies the guiding principles they've inherited to the time in which they live (McCumber 2022, 92). In so doing, I would add, they determine which stories get told or forgotten, which details remembered or let go, which meanings lifted up or reinterpreted. What we have is what was transmitted, and what was transmitted is what was needed.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the history paper and the oral performance invite very different relationships with time. The events of history are

witnessed at a remove, “with the concerned distance that comes from knowing intimate details of the lives of people who are not family,” as the Haitian-American historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot put it (1995). Most of those who write and read history do so in solitude: the historian, combing through archives; the peer reviewer, anonymously typing a response; the layreader, enjoying the text over a cup of coffee. Folk performance, by contrast, happens close-up, in a flood of sound, sight, sense, smell. If history speaks from a distance, oral tradition is a total immersion.

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I mentioned that history can sound objective, like an unobstructed view of time. It is not (Trouillot 1995). But given its rigor, its distance, and the dominance of its temporality in the popular mind, it’s easy to believe that history’s authority is total. It’s easy to suppose that a fixed unit of knowledge is also a finished unit. It’s easy to feel certain that a historical perspective is simply truth—even if the historians themselves would disagree.

This being the case, it’s also easy not to notice the alternative temporalities of our own experience: those that exist outside of history’s paradigm. In oral tradition, the past emerges not in a line of events, but as cyclical and spatial. Its stories are not written but embodied; not distanced or fixed, but springing forth in the presence of others with performances that cannot be captured in any fixed form (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1988, 7-8).

These distinctions are not superficial. We understand time differently in each light; its depths are illumined by mirrors of difference. In history, stories of the past are mosaic tiles, to be cast, glazed, and set into the context of a larger scheme. Their heft,

their density calls for space and slowness. They are not wings on the air; they are not the stories of performance, embodied by tellers and listeners whose laughter, interruptions, corrections, silences, and amens reinforce or redirect a flight in motion. In the stories of history, time is a vast temple of intricate brickwork, ever being examined, reengineered, and expanded upon. In the stories of performance, by contrast, time is both as old and as ephemeral as a summer night.

In either case, these concepts of time are not preexisting truths, but products of culture, and their influence on us runs deep. In history, we identify ourselves intellectually in a sweeping context of social and political developments. Time is abstract, to be contemplated from a distance. In oral folk tradition, we are immersed in cycles of place and community; our experience of time is spatial, relational, made of memory. Neither history nor oral tradition encapsulate “reality” in any absolute sense; they are themselves, rather, the result of our mutual collaborations with reality. They offer, and necessitate, different ways of being in time.

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