Critique

In her essay, Christine Morris addresses an important topic in the study of ethnic relations: the relationship between the written word and the oral tradition. She points out that studies often concentrate on the economic and social effects that the written tradition has on oral cultures; however, the ethics of this process has been ignored in research. Morris examines this aspect of the relationship and argues that the replacement of the oral tradition with the written word is a continuation of western chauvinism that has been the basis of the European conquest of aboriginal cultures in the world. The replacement of the oral with the written is thus a form of colonialism—although very subtle—in its argument to protect and save oral traditions for posterity. But the written word can only supplement the oral tradition; it cannot—and it should not—supplant orality.

To illustrate her argument, Morris looks at the case of the Australian aborigines. Their oral tradition emerges from their close relationship with the land they live on, and therefore, it cannot be fully understood in a written form. Storytelling is part of the land; when stories are separated from their life force and written down on paper, they lose their recreative capacity and become mere reproductions. It is this diametric opposition that best explains the difference between the two traditions. They emanate from two different sources and thus cannot replace each other. In western cultures, values are material and power emanates from material things; written word is invested with extreme importance and has value over spoken words. In contrast, oral cultures place more
value in abstract things and power comes from language—from the capability to recreate abstractions through language. Context is thus essential for the full understanding of oral cultures.

The article gives the reader a good perspective into the Australian aboriginal world, but Morris’s explorations have larger implications as well. What we learn from this article can be applied to other native peoples in the world; closest to my own research are Native Americans and Scandinavian Lapps. There is a similarity in the experiences of these peoples in their relationship with the conquering western culture, and research has much to do in this comparative arena. Morris’s example from Yugoslavia also points to the existence of rural communities that are pockets of oral tradition amidst the industrial world. These communities—like native cultures—maintain an affinity to the land and a sense of place which produce a rich folklore and oral tradition. It is important to remember that we—”products” of western literacy—also come from an oral background, although somewhere along the way we lost our sense of place.

Morris’s argument that the enforcement of literacy threatens the creativity and originality of all oral cultures through its emphasis on the written word as “fact” offers one explanation. When the written becomes important, the land, too, becomes an abstraction that has no value; and it is this detachment from the land that has led to the destruction of the environment. It is thus important to “relearn” the importance of land and to listen to the environment. Oral traditions can help in reestablishing this relationship, but the written cultures need to learn a new respect for the spoken word. The oral and the written need not necessarily be mutually exclusive, and anthologies can help in establishing a respect for oral traditions. But as Morris reminds us, we cannot assume that the written should replace the oral. It is this attitude of superiority that is destructive to oral cultures, not necessarily the written word itself.

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Critique

Christine Morris stimulates, provokes, and challenges some fundamental axioms about culture and literature in her intriguing essay. The absolutism of her position forces readers to critically examine their own ideas about the transmission and preservation of culture. Ultimately, I have some skepticism about the absolutism of her position, but her paper moved me several steps towards her position and caused me to evaluate my ideas on other issues as well.

She makes an excellent presentation for the case that the written tradition is not simply an extension of the oral tradition, but in fact impacts back on that tradition and changes it. This type of dialectical reasoning is a very valuable antidote to the idea that “progress” as defined by those who control the major