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

institutions of culture in modern society is a positive, linear development. It is reminiscent of similar discussions that have pointed out how television has undermined reading, how "colorization" can forever distort a viewer's ability to appreciate a black and white film, how modern agricultural methods have often led to an absolute deterioration of quality of diet of people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, despite the "higher productivity," and how modern medical practice has often made people sicker. These are not just the musings of nostalgia for a heavenly past that never really existed; these are conclusions that have been verified by many who have examined the actual evidence.

The discussion of how the written word concretizes what is essentially a dynamic, living force and strips it of much of its essence is well articulated. This is especially true of a tradition that combines dance and song with words. The writer asserts that such written enterprises are worse than just inadequate, however. They are an extension of colonialism that not only has historically captured the land, bodies, and labor of subjugated people, but has tried to capture their culture, either by stamping it out, or more insidiously by tolerating it while destroying its essence and filling up its form with a content irrelevant, degrading, or further designed to maintain the subjugation. Her discussion made this reader more sensitive to other subtle aspects of that, including, for example, the so-called "American Indian" songs that beginning piano players learn that are obviously the creation of composers in the European tradition. Hopefully, we have all become much more sensitive to the more blatant versions of this which are commonly found in movies and at some tourist attractions.

Understanding all these warnings, the real dilemma is whether it would ever be justified to compile Australian Aboriginal myths, or any essentially oral folklore, into written anthologies. Assuming that it might be possible for a sensitive, probably native writer, to express some of the essence of the culture in that fashion, with all the warnings of its inaccuracies made explicit, would the damage be greater than the benefits of sharing aspects of the culture with outsiders? Or perhaps it could be filmed, but again, that begs the question, since viewing a film can be an especially detaching experience. The writer suggests that "Transferring such stories into a written literature does not preserve them for future posterity; rather it captures them and renders them into the status of a dead, past history, not as it is, a living and vital tradition." Granting that, one still wonders whether those outside the culture should be denied the opportunity to learn something about the culture. But, of course, there is the Catch 22: what is being learned is not accurate and may be a distortion worse than nothing at all.

There may be no easy way to answer the question, especially since the major media and publishing houses are firmly in the hands of those whose primary concern is commercial and who would therefore turn those products into commodities. Somehow, the absoluteness of the position still does not sit exactly right. Beethoven cannot truly be experienced through a two-speaker stereo system with a dynamic range of eighty decibels; he never intended it to

be heard that way; it is a distortion. So, too, are picture books that render a wall-sized Picasso into an eight inch by five inch print, and so are written plays by Shakespeare, meant to be performed before crowds of people who were predominantly illiterate. It is proposed that literates believe "that by reading a book about the rainforest they know about the rainforest. This detached thinking has led to the destruction of the rainforests." But if those of us who care about the rainforests could not and did not read about them, is there reason to believe that the rainforests would be any safer in the hands of those who want to commercially exploit them? We do not have the means to directly appreciate Tibetan village life, or city life in Rio de Janiero, or Eskimo life, or urban life in Chicago or Los Angeles, and even if we did, we would still be outsiders, incapable of fully grasping the culture.

Should the rest of the world be denied the possibility of exploring and appreciating those other cultures? Christine Morris proposes a positive alternative: "The ideal scenario is one in which oral societies are seen as centers of learning wherein literates may learn firsthand how the indigenous population interprets the world; to understand that they belong to their environment, and not, as most believe, that the environment belongs to them." Whether this proposal could strike the satisfactory balance between allowing enough "outsiders" to learn from and appreciate the culture of the Aboriginal people without intruding to the point of disrupting that culture is an unanswered question. Perhaps the extreme proposals offered by the author go too far. Then again, it may be that any position less extreme would open the door to superficial agreement about the need to preserve traditional cultures while "business as usual" continues to damage them; it may be that the very "extremeness" of the position helps one to step back and take those arguments much more seriously, and encourages us to examine the ways that these arguments apply to other contexts.

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