



Blueprints and Circuits of Collective Authorship: Autopoietic Systems and Media Networks in Oral-Formulaic Theory

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Abstract: The research on traditional oral composition conducted by Milman Parry and Albert Lord, presented in Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, has been influential in, among other areas of study, the development of theoretical approaches to performance in the field of folkloristics and the formation of ideas about orality and literacy underpinning significant conceptual innovations in media theory, but the suggestion of this paper is that the reception of their work has generally missed the important mechanistic and nonlinear dimensions of oral composition elucidated by their findings. Employing analytical models not usually brought to bear upon Parry and Lord's work, especially theorizations by Niklas Luhmann and Friedrich Kittler, this paper undertakes a reexamination of *The Singer of Tales* as well as some of the genealogies of scholarship in which it is embedded to propose an interpretation that foregrounds the emergent systematicity constitutive of oral tradition. Beyond a reconsideration of their treatment of collective oral authorship, the articulation of a systems theoretical reading of their project shows that Parry and Lord describe a communicative network for the reproduction of a traditional form that is routed through individual performers and bypasses any capacities that might be understood as creative or intentional. In doing so, it indicates both possibilities for the reassessment of folkloristics as a resource for media analysis and a new configuration for the cooperative mutual engagement of Luhmannian systems theory and Kittlerian media theory.

Keywords: oral-formulaic composition; media technology; folkloristics; communication systems

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Even Homer's rosy-fingered Eos changes from a Goddess into a piece of chromium dioxide that was stored in the memory of the bard and could be combined with other pieces into whole epics. "Primary orality" and "oral history" came into existence only after the end of the writing monopoly, as the technological shadows of the apparatuses that document them.

— Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (7)

It would be hard to find a tidier illustration of the interrelation of defining human capacities and defining technology than the fact that at a moment when understandings of speech, writing, and their importance to cultural production were being reoriented, a new device had to be designed and deployed to complete the task. Between 1933 and 1935 the scholar of epic poetry Milman Parry and his assistants assembled evidence that the foundational texts of Western literature could not have been expressions of individual creative genius or autonomous thought: 3,500 aluminum phonograph disks. Parry and his research team traveled throughout Yugoslavia documenting the South Slavic oral epic song tradition by making sound recordings of performances. They carried with them a specially commissioned electronic sound recording apparatus equipped with two turntables and a switch for its operator to alternate between them enabling continuous and uninterrupted recording (Lord, 2003 [1960], p. x-xi). This was necessary for Parry's project because the performances he needed to record often went on for hours and the generally available technology at the time could only enable audio recordings of a few minutes in length. These recordings, as well as related transcripts, served as the data on which Parry elaborated his case for a new understanding of authorship.

Parry's immediate objective was to prove by analogy his argument, made on the basis of his study of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, that the works attributed to Homer could not have been created by a number of consciously inventive authors, let alone by a single one. He was convinced that *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* had been composed as products of an oral tradition. Situated in the context of a debate over how many Homers there had been, a debate in which self-conscious literariness was presumed as a condition of authorship, Parry realized early in his research that the more important question was about mode of authorship when he observed that ornamental adjectives in the poems seemed to work more toward the metrical requirements of the form than toward narrative purposes. Whether a horse was called black or graceful or whether a ship was called symmetrical or hollow was often arbitrary in relation to plot, but always appropriate in relation to the number of syllables needed for its position in a line. By a similar observation, he found that the same was true for the many epithets associated with important figures in the poems (for example, many-counseled Odysseus or divine Odysseus or much-enduring divine Odysseus). The poems, he theorized, were composed through a process of inserting units of preexisting content according to their rhythmical convenience and in relation to their larger content requirements. Over the course of several years of study, Parry pursued this logic through findings that were increasingly intricate and formal to the conclusion that the poems had been authored according to a formulaic system for arranging existing elements according to established rules.

Parry's explanation for these findings was that as participants in an oral tradition, the authors had practiced a compositional model in which they created their poems without a great deal of planning or reflection and that this compositional process was mainly a task of arrangement in the moment of composition. Scholar of oral tradition John Miles Foley quotes Parry from an essay written in 1930 in which he seems to have already reduced the author function in Homeric works to an almost technical station. Parry argues, "Without

writing, the poet can make his verses only if he has formulaic diction which will give him the verses all made, and made in such a way that, at the slightest bidding of the poet, they will link themselves in an unbroken pattern that will fill his verses and make his sentences” (Lord, 2003, p. 30).

After Parry’s early and unexpected death, his student Albert Lord’s twenty-five year process of realizing his teacher’s research agenda produced the basis of oral-formulaic theory and opened up possibilities for rethinking creative originality in the study of vernacular culture. The fieldwork Lord presented in *The Singer of Tales*, the culminating text of Parry’s research, demonstrated the extent to which the concept of originality in authorship was inadequate to discussing the operations of the oral tradition of sung folk epic performance. Lord writes,

The truth of the matter is that our concept of “the original” of “the song” simply makes no sense in oral tradition. To us it seems so basic, so logical since we are brought up in a society in which writing has fixed the norm of a stable first creation in art, that we feel there must be an “original” for everything. The first singing in oral tradition does not coincide with this concept of the “original.” We might as well be prepared to face the fact that we are in a different world of thought, the patterns of which do not always fit our cherished terms. In oral tradition the idea of an original is illogical (Ibid., p. 101).

Performers of oral epic poetry produce new variations with each performance and each performance is an original demonstration of the formulas in action with difficult-to-predict results combining elements into new arrangements according to the requirements of form. It would not be right, however, to call this an improvisatory process because it is not as if these performances could be called spontaneous in relation to some prior, more predictable backdrop, such as when jazz musicians solo over the mostly fixed chord changes of a composition. It would not even be strictly correct to call a particular performance a singular example of the form. Rather, and here I go past what Lord might have explicitly argued but certainly not further than his reasoning could have led, the tradition is only its operations.

My goal here is to show that Parry and Lord’s discovery that oral tradition functions through a kind of emergent systematicity provides a basis for rethinking not only the ways in which this particular tradition of expressive culture is produced but also the relationships of the individuals involved to anything that might be called creativity. To understand the full consequences of the work Parry and Lord did with oral tradition, it is necessary to disentangle it from some of the established history of its reception. In part, this is because there continually reemerges an attachment to some form of the notion that expressive culture, whether of groups or individuals, is driven by a need to reveal the uniqueness of inner reality. In folklore studies, where this tendency is historically entrenched, the destabilizing implications of Parry and Lord’s findings were managed by shifting authenticity from texts to performances so that basic notions of human expressive capacities would not have to be comprehensively revised.

While one of Parry and Lord’s central moves was to challenge the construct of the author-genius, at least insofar as classical epic poetry and oral cultures were concerned, in some ways, their reception had the effect of increasing attention to the creative talents of individuals. Within folkloristics, the development of oral-formulaic theory was an important factor in the discipline’s turn away from item-centered approaches and the historic-geographic method with its focus on texts without embodiment, suspended outside of any lived cultural context.

1 Authenticity and Mediation

Authenticity is the quality that seems to invest folklore with value in the sense that it indicates a direct connection to the primordial and to what is essential or original in human sociality and artistic production. It is necessarily set against the imagined falseness and artifice of modern life. Though it was not explicitly formulated as a problematic until the 1990s, it names a category around which folklorists have cordoned off their territory. As Regina Bendix has shown by tracing the historical development of the discourse on authenticity, its position shifts with changing conceptions of vernacular expressive culture and changing ways of defining the people who produce it.

The construction of national identities undertaken as part of the project of Romantic nationalism included an idealization of “the folk,” figuring their creative output as expressive of the primordial nature of cultural communities. This entailed placing authenticity in a pure, organic, and non-modern rural social world that could serve as a direct conduit to national spirit. The more “scientific” understandings of folklore that followed this conception, Bendix explains, did not, despite superficial reorientations, abandon the search for authenticity as “spiritual essence” (Bendix, 1992, p. 106). Rather, the development of formalized research methods institutionalized the persuasions of Romantic nationalism and reified authenticity to make it scientifically measurable. The forms of folklore scholarship that emerged subsequently aimed to pursue authenticity by collecting and studying items of folklore removed from the social contexts in which they had been produced. These specimens served to demonstrate the organic evolution of their genres or the growing degree of deformation characterizing texts according to the widening spread of their distribution and distance from their ur-forms. Such approaches to folkloric material recapitulated Romantic nationalism’s organicism and primordialism in the register of science.

Parry and Lord’s project was a principle juncture in the turn away from item-centered approaches to folklore toward performance theory. In narrating this shift, Bendix identifies the delegitimizing effect their work had on the idea that static, decontextualized folklore texts could serve as suitable material for analysis, or that such texts could even be considered genuine example of their genres. She writes,

[T]heir recognition of oral-formulaic composition, their discussion of the apprenticing of young poets, as well as the individual predilections and styles of different poets fostered an interest in the dynamics underlying expressive culture and deemphasized, or even negated, the notion of fixed or permanent folklore texts. . . . If it was not text, social class, or anonymous composition that made something genuine folklore, but the process and context in which the text came into being, then authenticity, too, had to reside elsewhere. (Bendix, 1997, p. 195).

It came to reside in performance and, more broadly, in tradition as process instead of object, but this reorientation did not transform the basic theoretical apparatus of the study of folklore in the dramatic ways it could have. Authenticity was simply relocated. Therefore, while the advent of the performance-oriented approach opened up the possibility of a newly conceived model of authorship foregrounding social processes instead of the inventiveness of individuals, one of its actual effects was increased emphasis on the talents of individual actors as demonstrated in performance contexts (Hafstein, 2004, p. 309).

In appropriating Parry and Lord’s discoveries about the differences between oral and literate cultures, some media theorists recognized that *The Singer of Tales* was about how writing and speech-based technologies shape their “users.” My argument is that by some

routes Parry and Lord can be followed past this point to the realization that, as useful as they might be, notions of a linear, directional influence between technologies and humans do not capture the larger circuitry of oral composition. A systems approach to Parry and Lord's project reveals that this circuitry cannot be properly understood as a vehicle for the creativity of individual singers. As a system, the tradition of oral epic poetry bypasses intentionality and makes use of the singers for the continuation of its own operations.

The influence of Parry and Lord's work on Marshall McLuhan's theorizations of media and technology is acknowledged less commonly than its importance to the trajectory of folkloristics, but it is much more widely-distributed. The prologue to *The Gutenberg Galaxy* begins with the statement that the book is "complementary" to *The Singer of Tales* because Parry's project, McLuhan explains, "with reference to the contrasted forms of oral and written poetry is [in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*] extended to the forms of thought and the experience in society and politics" (McLuhan, 1969 [1962], p. 9). McLuhan grasped the crucial point that the oral formula was not just a way for illiterate singers to express themselves but was actually a form operating prior to their ability to express themselves. It comported with his assertion, underlying his larger argument, that "[t]echnological environments are not merely passive containers of people but are active processes that reshape people and other technologies alike" (Ibid., p. 7). According to McLuhan, modern society was undergoing a major shift on the order of the earlier one from orality to literacy and was, in fact, entering a period that resembled orality to a much greater degree than it resembled anything from the era of print. Electronic media, he thought, was reintroducing the dominance of speech over writing, rolling back the forms of modern individualism that print had enabled, and bringing into existence his "global village," a kind of media-enabled tribal culture. For McLuhan, print literacy, with its forms of thought and sociality, was a historical gap between two kinds of oral culture.

Much like his teacher, McLuhan's student Walter Ong was convinced of the return of oral society in the form of what he termed "secondary orality," and he further developed the distinction between oral and literate cultures. Citing Parry and Lord, Ong outlined what he viewed as the implications of orality and literacy for the inner lives of individuals and the functioning of groups and demonstrated a strong commitment to the primacy of speech and hearing.¹ In short, Ong's work seemed to propose that orality is a condition that is somehow more fully present than literacy can be. For Ong, then, orality has only been temporarily interrupted by the fragmentation brought about by print.

But, as Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz point out in their introduction to Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, "Such a framing . . . implies that the (re)discovery of a past orality will affect the perception of our present literacy, since every exploration of the dynamics of orality is a renegotiation of the limits and boundaries of literacy and its associated media networks" (p. xii) while the discovery of orality actually points toward more general issues around "the materialities of communication" (p. xiii). To take this point a step further, it should be recognized that commitment to a historical sequence by which the development of human consciousness moves through the pattern of orality – literacy – secondary orality likely holds that there is something essential specific to orality that is lacking in other communicative modes. Such an assertion is implicitly primitivist as well as phonocentric and involves much the same kind of projection of an idealized sociality prior to modernity described by the concept of authenticity. It indicates an imagined form of

¹ In *The Audible Past*, Jonathan Sterne calls the belief that what is heard is somehow more real than what is seen "essentially a recapitulation of the spirit/letter distinction in Christian spiritualism." He explains that the status Ong gives to the aural in general is literally the result of his religious orientation as a Jesuit priest.



untechnologized communication prior to mediation, “[a]s if,” in Kittler words, “so-called face-to-face communication could do without rules or interfaces, storage or channels . . .” (p., 93).

There is no apparent logical need to insist that the history of media has unfolded in such a way that society before writing and society after writing demonstrate a simple pattern of symmetry even if it is the tools of the latter that make it possible to see the details of the former. In fact, the very insight that current media inflect what and how it is possible to think about historically removed media indicates that any apparently transparent view on the past might need to be examined for undetected mirroring effects. As Kittler puts it,

Understanding media — despite McLuhan’s title — remains an impossibility precisely because the dominant information technologies of the day control all understanding and its illusions. But blueprints and diagrams, regardless of whether they control printing presses or mainframe computers may yield historical traces of the unknown called the body. What remains of people is what media can store and communicate. What counts are not the messages or the content with which they equip so-called souls for the duration of a technological era, but rather (and in strict accordance with McLuhan) their circuits, the very schematism of perceptibility (1999., p. xli).

Questions about what technologies do for or to people are not as good as questions about the functions of humans within larger technological scenarios. For Kittler, it is incorrect to discuss humans as autonomous entities apart from or prior to technology. An understanding of humanity has to be built on an understanding of the technologies in which they are positioned. Accounts that move in the opposite direction are in error. So Kittler is not concerned with media in the sense of mediation in relation to human-to-human communication. Uninterested in anything that might be called a message in itself, he is concerned with the design and development of the larger machinery through which information moves, a position that recalls an explanation Lord gives of the trouble with trying to reduce an oral epic poem to a primary, stable text: it is like “pursuing a will-o’-the-wisp.” Any effort to try isolating the message, to try to ascertain what is really meant, only yields “something that never existed in reality or even in the mind of the singers . . .” (Lord, 2003, p. 101).

2 The Causality and Emergence of Communication Systems

Investigating “the world of thought” revealed by Parry and Lord without building into the analysis a notion of the individual performer as the origin point of that which is expressed, without missing the circuits in favor of the messages, calls for the use of a framework adequate to the observation of oral epic tradition as a form simultaneously activated through human beings and irreducible to the initiatives of individuals. Émile Durkheim’s modeling of social phenomena is helpful for this aim, even if not an obvious choice for an inquiry such as this.

Evidently, while studying in Paris, by way of his immersion in French structuralism, Parry was influenced by Durkheim. Among other suggestions, the point has been made that tracing Durkheim’s specific influence on Parry reveals a link between the former’s traditional society/modern society distinction and Parry’s conception that oral cultures and literate cultures are distinct in the kinds of thought they instill.² The binary, synchronic distinction

² See Thérèse de Vet’s article “Parry in Paris: Structuralism, Historical Linguistics, and the Oral Theory.”

between traditional societies marked by mechanical solidarity and modern societies marked by organic solidarity does fit well with the synchronic binarism of the orality/literacy distinction but a particular – and perhaps particularly idiosyncratic – reading of Durkheim opens further possibilities. While the case has also been made that Parry's emphasis on collective authorship can be connected to Durkheim's social determinism,³ there is room to see Durkheim's social determinism as peculiarly non-deterministic. To be clear, this is not to suggest that my discussion of Durkheim is corroborated by any particular historical or biographical information (it is not) but rather to explicate his model in a way that draws out its bearing upon a reevaluation of Parry and Lord's project and its consequences for theorizing oral tradition.

For Durkheim, "social facts," are the basic units of analysis for the scientific study of society, and the logic of their operation provides an entryway into his understanding of social causality. In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim provides a general definition of social facts: "Here, then, is a category of facts which present very special characteristics; they consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him" (Durkheim, 1982 [1895], p. 52). Here social facts are described as limitations or requirements imposed on the individual even while they are carried by or within the individual. Accounts of any particular social fact's origin or function, then, should not make recourse to the behaviors of any individual human being.

All social phenomena, in Durkheim's view, are social facts that can themselves only be explained with reference to prior social facts. They cannot, therefore, be accurately described as results of mental or biological processes or any activities attributable to individuals. They maintain their defining features regardless of the particular human beings of which they happen to be composed. This does not mean that individual behaviors are inconsequential to the formation of social facts. Individual behaviors are the very forms of social facts as they "assume a shape, a tangible form peculiar to them and constitute a reality *sui generis* vastly distinct from the individual facts which manifest that reality" (ibid., 54).

This conception of society *sui generis* suggests a causal logic that is distinctly non-linear. For Durkheim, society's development tends toward internal differentiation and organizational complexity, but it does not change by forward motion through a sequential chain of occurrences. As argued by R. Keith Sawyer in his essay "Durkheim's Dilemma: Toward a Sociology of Emergence," Durkheim's portrayal of change and internal movement in society indicate that he should be read as an emergentist. Explaining that emergence, in the sense in which the term is used by philosophers of mind, is central to Durkheim's project, he provides a usefully concise functional definition in his summary of the concept: "emergent systems are complex dynamical systems that display global behavior that cannot be predicted from a full and complete description of the component units of the system" (Sawyer, 2002, p. 228).

Sawyer shows that without applying this concept it is difficult to see the coherence in Durkheim's assertion that society is simultaneously more than just the individuals who are its components and produced from nothing more than the activities and interactions of individuals. As Durkheim puts it: "Society is not a mere sum of individuals," and at the same time "Social things are actualized only through men; they are a product of human activity" (1982, p. 129). In order to integrate these positions, it is necessary to maintain that, in the analysis of society, causation cannot be understood as fully external or fully internal to

³ As in John Peradotto's "Bakhtin, Milman Parry and the Problem of Homeric Originality."

individuals. They can be found in the very systematization of society. It is in the relative positioning and functional interdependence of social facts that social phenomena exist. Society is emergent in and from the dynamic systematicity operating within it.

It is unsurprising, then, to find that it is no great leap from Durkheim's social facts to Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's concept of the autopoietic system. While Maturana and Varela explicitly limit the explanatory reach of autopoiesis to the domain of living organisms and would likely object to any direct application of their model to non-biological content, here it elucidates social phenomena by way of Durkheim's embrace of the organismic analogy. Taking as an example Maturana and Varela's discussion of the living organism in *The Tree of Knowledge*, autopoiesis can be mapped onto Durkheim's theorization of social facts while avoiding contradiction.

Autopoiesis describes the recursive self-production of operationally closed systems. For Maturana and Varela, the special status of "living beings" comes from the peculiar fact that what they are is what they do. "What is distinctive about them," they explain, "is that [in living organisms] organization is such that their only product is themselves, with no separation between producer and product. The being and doing of an autopoietic system are inseparable, and this is their specific mode of organization" (Maturana & Varela, 1998 [1992], pp. 48-49). The autopoietic system can be described as a particular form of emergence even while Maturana and Varela develop an epistemological framework for it that is more elaborate than the one required for emergence generally.

There is agreement between Durkheim's treatment of individuals as the materials from which social facts are instantiated and Maturana and Varela's description of the relationship of particular components to the overall organization of systems. The interacting components of autopoietic systems continually bring into being and enact the operations that produce them. The particular identities of the components involved are, therefore, unimportant to the continuing operations of the systems of which they form parts. In this respect, Maturana and Varela's conception of autopoiesis echoes Durkheim's assertion that individual human beings are not proper units for the analysis of society. Summarizing Durkheim's thinking, Lewis Coser articulates the larger point: "Any social formation, though not necessarily superior to its individual parts, is different from them and demands an explanation on the level peculiar to it" (Coser, 2003, p. 130).

Approaching Parry and Lord's discoveries by taking the oral epic tradition as a field of autopoietically self-reproducing social facts provides a scheme that makes coherent the form's perpetuation through traditional practices without locating determinative factors at the level of the mental activity of the singers. In the same way that social facts are constituted by the interrelations of other social facts and at no point reducible to individual actions, part of the logic of the tradition of oral epic is that it is constituted from elements that cannot, whatever the scale is at which one happens to observe, be traced to a source in the inventiveness of any particular performer. In describing the learning process of young singers in the tradition, Lord writes, "He must make his feeling for the patterning of lines, which he has absorbed earlier, specific with actual phrases and lines, and by the necessity of performance learn to adjust what he hears and what he wants to say to these patterns" (Lord, 2003, p. 37). What is new in any particular performance, even if the song is ostensibly original, is always the result of the working and reworking of extant formulas. The consequences of this process feed into the production of new formulas, but this has to be interpreted in view of Parry and Lord's findings that notions of artistic originality are entirely foreign to the practice of oral epic. Furthermore, singers employ older, established phrases when they are available and make new ones only when they are forced to by circumstance and the demands of the form, demands that are themselves internal to the tradition. It is

clear that the generation of new formulas should not be attributed to creative feats executed inside the minds of singers (*ibid.*, pp. 43-45). It would be more appropriate to designate the singers collectively as the modality of the tradition than to call them carriers of the tradition. The tradition is, in a sense, routed through the singers, but its continued self-reproduction is enabled by the maintenance of its organization at the level of social activity, and, as Niklas Luhmann insists, social systems are always and only constituted by communication.

Extending Maturana and Varela's concept of autopoiesis into analysis of material under the purview of social theory, Luhmann shows that operational autonomy, integral to maintaining the distinction between any system's inside and outside, is as much a definitive feature of nonliving systems as it is of living ones. Thus, social systems, which, for Luhmann, are defined by the autopoietic continuation of communicative operations, do not intervene into mental processes. Any system of cognitive activity is only able to remain what it is on the basis of the entirely recursive self-reproducing operations that maintain its organization. Its integrity is entirely dependent upon its ability to preserve the boundary between its internal organization and its environment. Likewise, mental processes remain exterior to social systems. Social systems and human minds do not participate in each other's operations, let alone contribute to each other's composition. Radically separated, they function as environmental factors for each other.

Luhmann thus not only rejects the idea that human beings have access to the mechanisms that determine how social phenomena occur, but also undermines the common sense notion that human beings can communicate with each other, declaring famously, "Humans cannot communicate; not even their brains can communicate; not even their conscious minds can communicate. Only communication can communicate" (Luhmann, 2002, p. 169). This conclusion follows clearly from the realization that while mental, biological, and social systems are interrelated, they encounter each other not by intersecting, but by registering each other's output as external perturbation to be processed by means of recursive systemic operations. Human bodies and minds are necessary for communication, but they remain outside of it because of the obvious fact that they are not themselves communicative processes.

Despite conventional understandings to the contrary, communication is not a process of transmission. Communication does not entail the movement of messages or anything else from one human brain to another. This point underlies a description of the mode of communicative operations that extends to all social systems. Human beings do not participate in the economy or the political system, and it is just as clear that they do not participate in the continuation of traditional practices or the production of expressive culture.⁴

In objecting to the systems theoretical reading of Parry and Lord's project that I am proposing, one could find support in Lord's assertion that the singers are "composers" (Lord, 2003, p. 13) and his emphasis on their relative degrees of skill. In view of his interest in the discipline and compositional flexibility demonstrated by the singers, it may seem a flagrant misuse of Lord's book to find in it a program for denying that oral epic is driven by agency on the part of the singers. Parry and Lord, it could be argued, finding that they needed to dispense with the universalization of literacy's model of authorship, did away with "originality," but identified the source of some degree of authorial agency in the individual singers. Such an argument might assert that oral-formulaic theory describes a temporal and spatial diffusion of authorship across the many singers in the tradition and that this is central

⁴ Hans-Georg Moeller notes that, for Luhmann, both "transmission" and "expression" should be avoided because "[t]here are no senders or receivers and nothing is transmitted — at least not mentally or physically" (Moeller, 2012, p. 132). Luhmann himself writes that "[t]he metaphor of transmission is unusable because it implies too much ontology" and misses the logic by which communication only occurs insofar as an utterance "is picked up" when "its stimulation is processed" (Luhmann, 1995, p. 139).



to a conception of the necessarily collective endeavor of oral composition. Lord's contrasting of the artifice of modern creativity and the internalization of the form achieved by the singers, may seem to emphasize that singers cultivated in the tradition possess authorial abilities that while, incapable of facilitating the production of anything entirely new, allow them to spontaneously compose by remaining within the bounds of their form while nonetheless bringing about variation by demonstrating their unique, signature creative styles. This might be argued on the basis of Lord's explanation of exactly how oral authorship is accomplished through the novelty introduced in particular performances. Lord documents the ways in which the epic songs change through time precisely as the result of specific additions and adaptations presented by individual singers in performance, a fact that might seem to elevate the authorial status of particular singers. Furthermore, statements such as Lord's declaration that "[s]inging, performing, [and] composing are facets of the same act" (ibid., 13), might be taken to suggest that the reproductive apparatus of tradition works as a tightly integrated whole located inside the singers.

To a significant degree, the difference between the approach demonstrated by such an argument and my own analysis is the gap between an interpretation foregrounding the behaviors and interactions of individuals and one foregrounding systematicity. Of course, a proponent of the former option has Lord's numerous and detailed discussions of individual singers as evidence that Parry and Lord quite clearly treat individuals as units of analysis in carrying out their work and that to do away with the importance of the individual singers long after the findings of the project have been solidified must be a distortion. It is, however, important to remember that Parry was, in the first place, motivated by a desire to build upon his earlier work on written texts. Praising the endeavor as a rigorous application of scientific method, Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy explain in their introduction to the second edition of Lord's book, that the design of Parry's research was "the formulation of a method for *testing* [his] hypothesis" (ibid., p. viii). The project was, from the outset, intended as a means of supporting his argument about the Homeric works, an argument about authorship. To take from it conclusions about performance per se is not inappropriate in view of the wealth and depth of the material on the subject it supplies, but it is also to take the research on terms not entirely its own. For Parry himself, performers did not enter into his research as constitutive elements. To the contrary, Thérèse de Vet, in tracing the underexamined genealogy of oral-formulaic theory, has shown that, Parry's work in Yugoslavia was framed by structuralism's emphasis on "integrated logical systems" (De Vet, 2005, p. 267).

What transpires in performance does deeply interest Parry and Lord, but their examination of the material gathered during performances is oriented toward analysis of the ways in which oral tradition operates, not toward anything intrinsic to the singers or their behavior. As sites of the tradition's self-reproduction, the performances are what allow the patterns by which the songs develop to become visible. The tradition, observable across a multiplicity of performance events, is this development. It becomes observable only when performances are related to each other. To discover the patterns by which oral epic poetry evolves requires tracing the relations constituting this dynamic multiplicity. The tradition is activated in the system that is made visible by this tracing. The spontaneous creativity demonstrated in performance is a feature of the system's operations.

The point is not that the individual singers are somehow illusory. Rather, in their specific capacities as performers of the tradition, they are best understood as emergent properties of the tradition's systematicity. It is in this sense that individuals remain entirely on the outside of the tradition. They do not form it or guide it because, as individual human beings, they have no access to it. Homer himself, Lord writes, is not "immersed" in the tradition. Insofar as what is important about Homer is his facility within the form of oral epic

demonstrated in the output attributed to him, “[h]e is the tradition; he is one of the integral parts of that complex . . .” (Lord, 2003, p. 147). He is not integral because he is Homer; he is integral because of his role in the structure of the tradition.

3 Authenticity and Mediation

The imprint of structuralism on Parry’s theorizing is evident in Lord’s description of the formulaic system as operating by means of a grammar that functions as a system of substitution by which the formulas are arranged and rearranged. Lord argues that the system works in the same way any language does, functioning as a “grammar superimposed . . . on the grammar of the language concerned” (pp., 36-37). It is, therefore, not operationalized any more self-consciously than language is in ordinary speech. Lord is quick to assure the reader that in actual practice, the performances of the songs do not produce the mechanical-seeming impression given by the abstract model he outlines, writing,

Any thorough grammar of a language notes exceptions to “rules,” dialectical differences, “irregular” nouns and verbs, idioms – in fact those divergences from systematized rules that arise in usage and in the organic change constantly in operation in a living spoken language. If we analyze oral epic texts that are recorded from actual performance rather than texts taken from dictation and normalized to some extent, we can observe the oral poetic language in its pure state with its irregularities and abnormalities arising from usage. Then it is clear that the style is not really so mechanical as its systematization seems to imply (p. 36).

This statement resonates with Parry’s initial impetus to undertake a study of oral composition. It was his attention to oddities in the texts, such problems as seemingly inexplicable repetitions and appearances of apparently arbitrarily conjured descriptors that gave him a route into the workings of the formulaic system. While Lord rehearses structuralism’s distinction between a total underlying system of signification and its concrete, particular manifestations, he also points to the unformalized heterogeneity that is “poetic language in its pure state.” The suggestion made here is that the variations produced in local instantiations of the tradition are not fully subordinated to the tradition’s larger structure. The structure does not generate songs as though by a simple mechanism that performs the same series of motions every time it is activated, producing novelty only because of deviations caused by random changes in conditions. Rather, deviation is itself the generative force of the tradition’s perpetuation. As Luhmann helps to show, this deviation always occurs within particular conditions of constraint.

It is important to stress here a point that follows from Parry and Lord’s larger argument: because the songs evolve through a multiplicity of episodes that may vary widely in their social contexts but could all be described as events within the tradition, there is no back stage to the performance of the tradition. There is no ulterior level where ideational content is inserted or problems of form solved. Every change is made in a situation of unpredictability.

The performance contexts of traditional oral epic Lord illustrates suggest a spectrum of continual interference with the construction of poems. This interference emanates from general disorder around performances and, most consequentially, from audience behavior. The settings in which performances occur are given to varying levels of disruption. This disruption, the disordered complexity that is the environment to the tradition’s system,



influences the temporal development of poems. The greater the disorder against which the formulaic system has to work, the more the poet is required to deploy “dramatic ability and narrative skill” (p. 17) to communicate through the interference. It is these kinds of in-the-moment demands that propel the development of new features within the tradition. Competent performance of the tradition is defined by the achievement of the system’s successful autopoietic self-reproduction in resistance to entropy and the complexity of performance contexts, which may include not only highly unpredictable activity but also concurrent attractions vying for audience attention.

Even as the structuralist premises in Parry and Lord’s approach are carried forward in their interpretation of oral epic as a grammatical construction, it is clear that the integrity of the tradition is not borne by the model of the grammar itself. The contingencies of performance deserve to be given a significant amount of attention. They are formative of both the internal organization and temporal development of the tradition. Structuralism’s emphasis on static and purely relational systems does not capture the unstable material configurations of oral epic poetry produced in circumstances of significant variability. Introducing his own concept of structure, Luhmann explains that structuralism’s insistence on prioritizing “invariant structural features” limits the scope of analysis of systemic change to a system’s “own features or the features of its environment” (Luhmann, 1995, p. 281). Parry and Lord’s description of oral epic as fluid and contingent evades explanation by either option, but is consistent with the account of structure Luhmann articulates from the perspective of his theorization of autopoietic systems.⁵

For Luhmann, systems such the oral epic tradition demonstrate “temporalized complexity” meaning that they must “allow elements only as events” and use them as “the starting point for forming structures” (ibid., p. 286). The operations of such a system are not based on a foundation of invariance, but on the ability to preserve internal organization by continually connecting one event with the next and thereby maintain systematic operations through time. Because a system’s temporality is determined by each event’s necessary passage from present to past, structures have no ability to become stable formations because their elements can never be made static, but they continue their autopoiesis through “the reproduction of events by events” (p. 287). This is accomplished by means of actions selected in anticipation of myriad possible unforeseen scenarios and the future actions they might require. A “structure of expectations” must emerge to manage the complexity presented by the unpredictability of events to come. At the same time, this structure cannot be permitted to limit by too great a degree the range of options available to the system in its contingent futures. As evidenced in the fluidity of oral epic poetry, the flexibility of a system requires that the capacity of the system to select from among possible future actions be preserved by the continued production of novelty as a mode of perpetual destabilization.

In the development of traditional oral epic, variation among performances produces deformations of the tradition that are at the same time the results of contingency and the means by which contingency is reintroduced to the system. A surface-level interpretation of the structure of oral tradition described by Lord could lead to the conclusion that the singers are equipped with an array of prepackaged formulas that, within the structure of the poems, are juxtaposed with newly formed components generated spontaneously in performance. This is correct at a certain level, but it does not account for the nuance of compositional practice because these prepackaged formulas are actually used to create increased

⁵ To avoid confusion, it should be noted that in this particular discussion, structure is not defined according to Maturana and Varela’s distinction between structure and organization.

flexibility by facilitating the process of substitution at diverse scales. According to Lord, at high levels of competence, a singer is better described as having a “pattern” than a mechanical technique for “shuffling about” stable components:

Although it may seem that the more important part of the singer's training is the learning of the formulas from other singers, I believe that the really significant element in the process is rather the setting up of various patterns that make adjustment of phrase and creation of phrases by analogy possible. . . . He must make his feeling for the patterning of lines, which he has absorbed earlier, specific with actual phrases and lines and by necessity of performance learn to adjust what he hears and what he wants to say to these patterns. If he does not learn to do this, no matter how many phrases he may know from his elders, he cannot sing (p. 37).

To be a singer at all requires enacting both established expectations and unpredictable manifestations of deviation. Here Luhmann's point that “chance . . . is the counterpart of necessity” helps to clarify the logic of the compositional process. He writes that “a system is fully concretized only at the level of its elements” and, he goes on to explain that these elements “always contain an aspect of surprise, are always new combinations of determinacy and indeterminacy” (Luhmann, 1995, p. 291). In the context of performance, formulas are deployed and altered to fit the needs of the moment when a singer dispenses with established but less streamlined or otherwise cumbersome bits and imports new ones as replacements. If a particular result serves its purpose well, then it can be recalled later on and become itself a prepackaged formula within the performer's bank of resources. A new component that works especially well becomes integrated into the traditional repertoire at the point at which it is taken on by other performers who hear it and then appropriate it for their own collections because they find it useful, and so on.

The tradition, however, cannot perpetuate itself by simply allowing a few excellently adapted elements to increasingly dominate performances. If the tradition were a process of creating and replicating monoliths, then it would require mere memorization. Systems use redundancy to guard against entropy, but redundancy should not be mistaken for stability. That performance events can never be identical with each other is constitutive of their status as events. For Luhmann, redundancy contributes to autopoiesis by allowing a system to assign a single function to multiple elements and thereby increase security by decreasing the likelihood that the survival of the system will depend upon the performance of a single element. Lord suggests that the better and more experienced singers are the least likely to seem to be rearranging sizable prepackaged formulas and the most likely to demonstrate a nuanced, subtle style of introducing novelty. Newly altered formulas actually function as newly formed opportunities for broadening the range of selections possible during performance. Their circulation itself amounts to a diffusion of contingency throughout the system and demonstrates Luhmann's point that “[u]ncertainty is and remains a condition of structure” (ibid., 288).

The correspondence between Luhmann's theorization of structure and Parry and Lord's account of oral epic composition is not a coincidence. They are linked by a common epistemic orientation symptomatic of the media conditions Kittler associates with Lacan's concept of “the real.” It is important to note that when Lord designates “organic change” in the practice of oral epic poetry as characteristic of the tradition's true form in contrast to the mechanism of the formulaic system's grammar, he attributes the ability to observe it in its “true state” to the phonograph he and Parry used to record performances in the tradition. For Kittler, it is exactly this sound storage technology that first enabled perception of the real because “[t]he phonograph,” he writes, “does not . . . filter voices, words, and sounds out of

noise; it registers acoustic events as such. Articulateness becomes a second order exception in a spectrum of noise" (Kittler, 2002, p. 23). What the phonograph "hears" is sound without the selection processes necessitated by listening. In this way, the phonograph, for Kittler, brings about an end to the era of the "symbolic," a period defined by the passage of communication through the signifying media of writing. Meaning loses its priority in the presence of the real, which is always disordered beyond the coherence symbolism may seek to impose. This shift both downgrades the priority of meaning itself by undermining the logic of signification at its basis and reveals the possibility of new kinds of objects for analysis.

Luhmann's argument for beginning the analysis of structures with observation of elements as they really are evokes Kittler's description of the content of the real as that which media can reveal but never make representable. He writes, "the theory of self-referential systems cannot be reduced to an epistemological (and certainly not a semiotic) starting point. It begins by observing its object. Epistemological questions are bracketed for the time being" (Luhmann, 1995, p. 281).⁶ The first move in the study of autopoietic systems bypasses the signifying schemes structuralism finds in both its own analytical apparatus and the objects subjected to it. Luhmann begins with a situation in which nothing is ordered and not even the boundary between knowledge and object is drawn. For Kittler, this is "the waste or residue that neither the mirror of the imaginary nor the grid of the symbolic can catch: the physiological accidents and stochastic disorder of bodies" (2002, p. 15-16). This, for Luhmann, is the level at which observation makes its intervention.

This position is the same one that enables Parry and Lord to avoid the pitfall that Luhmann finds in structuralism's preoccupation with models at the expense of investigating what "elements really 'are'" (Luhmann 1995, p. 279). Lord evokes the fully non-symbolic dimension of the real in asserting that the material of oral epic performance cannot possibly be adequately documented by means of writing. Texts produced in dictation processes, he insists, are not "those of normal performance" (p. 128). In effect, dictation, Lord suggests, brings into performance a disruption that disables the study of oral performance in its true state, or as Mitchell and Nagy write in their introduction, its "natural environment" (*ibid.*, p. x). This is because the procedural requirements of dictation interrupt the traditional mode of composition and can only yield "special" cases, not "normal performance[s]." It is, Lord implies, only by means of the technologically achieved transparency of the phonograph that the full reality of oral epic poetry becomes accessible. The examination of performances as they really are, as Kittler's "acoustic events as such" enables Parry and Lord to break, however implicitly, with the supposed absolute distinction between invariant abstract structures and concrete instantiations. Parry and Lord's project, then, is a crucial node at which the era of the real enabled by the phonograph opens up onto the study of traditional expressive culture, revealing that contingency is a necessity in the composition of traditional epic poetry.

For Kittler, the era of the real is "the epoch of nonsense" (2002, p. 86) because it establishes a new referential logic that decenters the intentionality of the conscious mind, a shift illustrated by the role of sound recording in psychoanalysis. For early psychoanalysts, the recording of flows of speech regardless of meaning demonstrated unconscious activity hitherto inaccessible even as it simultaneously showed the impenetrable mysteriousness of what it documented, leaving puzzles and phantasms, patterns never fully reducible to meaning. This idea of a subconscious production of associations mediated but never

⁶ He does, unsurprisingly given his interest in "blind spots," hasten to add that such a starting point is one among countless and equally contingent possible starting points for observation.

ordered at the level of explicit signification appears in Lord's description of the "[o]vertones from the dim past" carried by the apparently illogical pairings in certain formulas.

Outside of contributions to metrical requirements, indirect chains of association explain the effects and functions of, for example the noun-epithet pairing "drunken tavern." It can be interpreted as neither literal nor decorative, but should be understood as having significance that is "vestigial, connotative rather than denotative" (Lord, 2002, p. 65). "Drunken tavern" only fully makes sense to a listener who has traced it back through numerous variations of a particular story, but, even from such a position, the listener can only appreciate the full effect of its use in context by grasping that its importance is not attached to its capacity as a signifier. Lord explains that "ox-eyed Hera" (p. 66) and "bright-eyed Athene," epithets for the goddesses, are repeated in multiple versions, not only for "invoking her by her name," but also for the purpose of "epiphany" and "prayer in the hope of its surer fulfillment." Lord uses these observations to make a larger point about the tradition as a whole, writing,

Its symbols, its sounds, its patterns were born for magical productivity, not for aesthetic satisfaction. If later they provided such satisfaction, it was only to generations which had forgotten their real meaning. The poet was sorcerer and seer before he became "artist." His structures were not abstract art for its own sake. The roots of oral traditional narrative are not artistic but religious in the broadest sense (p. 67).

From a certain viewpoint, this may seem to be a rather primitivist articulation of the position that it is not what traditional performance means that matters, that it is instead worth examining for what it does, for what it enacts and produces in the social world in which it is situated. This interpretation does reflect the status of Parry and Lord's work as a crucial move toward performance theory in folkloristics, but it should be noted that Lord does not take the step of describing performances in the tradition as heightened, transformative, or illuminating moments for the social world of the singers. Lord's division between "aesthetic" and "magical" purposes seems to turn the focus away from any locatable social result of the tradition and to minimize its potential for self-conscious revelation. A possible analysis of the magic Lord refers to could point to symbolic or ritual work accomplished through the tradition for the sake of practical results observable in social effects, but this would find little support in the text. Lord's evocation of a poetry-sorcery working in the service of "magical productivity" moves in the opposite direction from such an understanding, pushing his interpretation of the tradition further out into "nonsense" rather than grounding it in any symbolic regime or practical purpose.

4 The Self-Observation of Performance

The conceptual framework of the performance-oriented approach to the study of folklore shares features with some of the points drawn out thus far about systematicity and structure in oral epic poetry. In view of the fact that some folklorists, beginning with Richard Bauman, the early leading proponent of the performance approach, acknowledge Gregory Bateson as importantly influential to the formation of their understandings of performance, it is unsurprising that the systems theoretical reading of *The Singer of Tales* undertaken in this inquiry is consistent, up to a point, with their thinking.⁷ Synthesizing findings from diverse

⁷ This marks an area of overlap between theoretical genealogies. Bateson's ideas about metacommunication underpin the position, basic to the performance-centered approach, that messages contain information about how



areas of research, Bauman moved past the concern with static texts that had been a long-standing preoccupation for folklorists by grasping that forms of vernacular verbal art were made up of events, not items, and that they were constitutively emergent and dynamic.

In his programmatic essay “Verbal Art as Performance,” published in 1975, Bauman credits Lord with demonstrating the “unique and emergent quality of the oral text, composed in performance” (p. 303). A text without context makes no more sense than does an autopoietic system without an environment, so there can be no clean break between a domain of vernacular performance and the cultural networks surrounding it. Forms of creativity emerge in the midst of social life and are made comprehensible to members of a social group when “performance frames” are “keyed” by means of specific metacommunications signaling to a community of initiates that a performance situation is being established and alerting them to their responsibilities as audience members.

Performance events, within this conception, are specially circumscribed situations, removed from ordinary communication. In order to succeed as communicative interactions, performances have to make sense with reference to the specific coordinates of the metacommunicative signs that mark the spatial and temporal limits within which they can occur. Performances are themselves “signification about signification” and, therefore, grant an elevated perspective of the first-order communicative systems constituting culture. Accordingly, Bauman asserts that “performance may be seen as broadly metacultural, a cultural means of objectifying and laying open to scrutiny culture itself, for culture is a system of systems of signification” (Bauman, 1992, p. 47). This mode of self-observation, it is then supposed, can be found at the level of the individual performer when a role becomes a “means of taking the role of the other and of looking back at oneself from that perspective.” The view opened up by this mode of self-reflexivity, according to Bauman, makes available “dimensions of consciousness of consciousness” (p. 48).

It should be noted, however, that the other in this case must be able to read the metacommunicative signs that make a particular performance understandable and functional as a means of observation in the first place. This other must, therefore, already be embedded in the system of systems of signification that is home to the self. The same reasoning must apply to the “metacultural” self-mapping of culture by means of performance. The larger suggestion here seems to be that, through performance events, cultures possess the ability to become self-transparent.

Positing a similar idea, Durkheim, in his conclusion to *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, describes a kind of self-transcendence through self-knowledge emergent in the recursive processes through which individuals relate to each other and to society and that is also a manner in which society relates to itself. In Durkheim’s view, the ways in which humans are able to think about the world are always already social. The categories through which humans think are at once descriptions of society and the enabling condition of social cohesion. The result of this circular arrangement at its highest level is Durkheim’s concept of collective consciousness, “consciousness of consciousness . . . outside and above local contingencies” (Durkheim, 1995 [1912], p. 445). Society, according to Durkheim, achieves ultimate understanding by practicing self-understanding, becoming an entity both irreducible and beyond the sum of what composes it.

For Durkheim, this formulation is supported by an anti-individualist theorization according to which society, from social facts to collective consciousness, is only constituted from elements that exceed the particularities of individual human beings. In the performance-oriented approach, such a justification is excluded by the valorization of

communication should proceed in a given social context so that events can be understood as occurring within particular frames determining social roles, norms of conduct, and rules for communication.



performers as carriers of possibilities for social transformation. Bauman's idea that performances are "reflexive instruments" that make themselves objects of their own perception and allow for "self-conscious manipulation" of communicative systems (1992, p. 47) is a furtherance of the notion of political agency he ascribes to performers in his initial presentation of his agenda for folklore studies. Suggesting that performance can be instrumentalized in the service of social change by exploiting the power invested in the role of the performer, he argues that, positioned at "the center" of a social structure coalescent in the performance event, "the performer gains a measure of prestige and control over the audience" that illuminates the potential for the given social world to be otherwise than it is (1975, p. 305).

Aside from the fact that whether or not giving this kind of control to someone positioned in a "center" is something to be enthusiastic about is a matter hinging entirely upon exactly who might succeed in achieving centrality (a concern that is, perhaps, easily elided by folklorists in their tendency to focus on populations without large concentrations of power), the largest problem evident in Bauman's idea of the perspectives and possibilities opened up by performance is that it fails to deal with a contradiction internal to his proposition of a metacultural map rendering for culture the totality of its own scheme. As Luhmann makes clear, any observing system is subject to a gap in perception that is itself the necessary basis of perception and, therefore, the self-observation of a system is always necessarily partial observation.

A significant part of Bauman's vigorous promotion of increased ethnographic engagement on the part of folklorists is his commitment to the idea that performances cannot make sense without reference to the specific metacommunicative framing devices that make performances legible to participants that, indeed, make them possible as bounded, heightened cultural events. In Bauman's view, it is incumbent upon folklorists to gain knowledge of these framing devices so that performances might be interpreted with reference to them. In this way, it becomes possible to decode performances.

But it must be recognized here that insofar as access to this knowledge puts an observer inside the proper metacommunicatively drawn frame, such an observer is, in a limited epistemological sense, also inside the cultural system in question. This positioning is, it seems clear, necessitated by the performance-oriented approach to folklore because in order to even begin to understand how a performance is functioning, it must be observed from within its own boundaries. From anywhere else, it will seem disorganized; it will seem not to be a system at all. What appear as systematic operations from within must appear to be disordered activity from without, or, put otherwise, noise. The larger point here is that, from its very beginning, the argument that folklorists should put away their written texts and take up the study of performance demonstrates, from its premises forward, that performance is contingent upon who happens to be looking at it.

Bauman's understanding of the production of performance as emergent would seem to account for this contingency. Unpredictable variation is one of his basic features of performance and it is certainly this aspect of it that underpins his placement of the possibility for social transformation in performers. At the same time, his position that performance makes culture fully perceivable to itself and, therefore, capable of informed self-manipulation, does not take full account of the paradox of observation that makes the achievement of the total perception of systems by themselves impossible. Luhmann's most basic claim about observation is that it "means making a distinction and indicating one side (and not the other) of the distinction" (2002, p. 85). Following this through Luhmann's reasoning has consequences for how the self-observation of systems can be understood:



To elaborate on its self-description remains one of the possibilities an observer sees and can, if required, actualize. But even then it will just change its frames, cross the boundary between self-reference and hetero-reference; it will mark itself as a thing among others or as an observer among others. Switching frames, proceeding from form to form is the normal way of observing operations . . . [I]f an observer . . . wants to observe and describe the continuous deframing and reframing of frames, the autopoietic operation of observing systems (including itself), it will end up with paradoxical formulations. It would have to say that the different is the same; that the distinction between marked and unmarked is one distinction among others; that any distinction is a unity; a frame that separates two sides and can be used to connect operations only at one side (at the positive side, at the inner side of the form) and not at the other side. The other side remains included, but as excluded (2002, p. 86-87).

The foundational distinction of observation is, at any given point, both already drawn and already invisibilized in the effort of self-perception. From the position defined by any particular distinction, the act of making the distinction is only observable by means of another distinction, and so on. To claim true self-knowledge would be to claim that a plurality is also somehow a unity. This is why all ability to observe is dependent upon inability to observe.

Bauman realizes that the establishment of frames for performance enables recognition that the given social order is not a necessary social order. This conclusion follows from his description of culture as an object for itself. What Luhmann makes clear, however, is that if this metacultural perspective were looped through Bauman's "system of systems of signification," it would not yield culture's self-transparency. Quite to the contrary, it would demonstrate the paradoxicality of culture's self-descriptions.

5 Conclusion: mapping tradition's nonlinear evolution

In returning to Kittler's prescription for finding "the historical traces of the unknown called the body" in "blueprints and diagrams" (p. xl) two suggestions are apparently highlighted. One is that this advice is not considerably more technologically deterministic than the results of Parry and Lord's research as presented in *The Singer of Tales* have proven to be. The circuits the text traces are just made of different materials. The other is that Kittler's insistence that it is impossible to fully grasp the workings of media indicates a notion of the limits of perception that seems consistent with those entailed in Luhmann's concept of the paradox of observing systems.

Geoffrey Winthrop-Young describes a failed effort, initiated by the editors of a German journal, to synthesize Kittler's media theory and Luhmann's systems theory into a vast, overarching philosophical proposal. The idea was that Kittler would provide an account of the material content of media while Luhmann would explain society's communicative processes. Winthrop-Young sums up the project as an attempt create a theory "made of up of a combination of Kittlerian hardware and Luhmannian software" (Winthrop-Young, 2000, p. 1). While there are numerous points of disagreement between these theorists, the main reason the fusion was not achieved, he argues, is that, from the outset it was obstructed by a basic contradiction between Luhmann's position that communicative operations only occur when particular communications are picked up and passed on by observers and Kittler's idea that what it is to be an observer is itself determined by media. The problem, Winthrop-



Young argues, is that Luhmann's thinking cannot be detached from his commitment to an "instrumental account of technology." Kittler, meanwhile, the argument goes, understands observers as ultimately subordinate to technological development.

Winthrop-Young brings into his discussion Luhmann's concession that the relationship between technology and communication needs to be addressed in its particularity, that it should not be assumed that technology fits his concept of autopoietic systems. How he would finally have made sense of this issue had he chosen to do so remains unclear. For the present purpose, what is important to ask is not whether it possible to show that the machines Kittler describes are unexplainable by systems theory. Instead, the question that should be asked is what comes into view when these two schemes are examined on the same level, when it is not assumed that they can disqualify each other by pointing to alleged weaknesses in each other's treatment of specific material.

It is important to note, I think, that for Luhmann, there can be no autonomous entity in the social system for Kittler to hold responsible for the instrumentalization of technologies. While observation is the condition of a social system's emergence, there is no agent locatable inside the system itself from which observation emanates. Because the social system is a distribution of functions, there is no way for it to reach out into the environment to manipulate media technologies. The only way in which media technologies could be instrumentalized would be by communicative operations relating to them as environmental features and using them in the service of autopoietic self-reproduction. In this scenario, media technologies would be used in the same way as the psychic systems or biological systems used by communication. At this point, it becomes unclear what the goal might be of arguing that technology is made instrumental in Luhmann's scheme because once the idea is introduced, it has to be acknowledged that instrumentalization is characteristic of communicative operations in general, regardless of whether they are carried out by means of brains or silicon. This is not to suggest brains and silicon must behave similarly. The point is that how they behave should be understood with reference to systemic functions.

One of the noteworthy features of Parry and Lord's work easily overlooked when its importance is indexed to its influence on the performance-centered approach is that its presentation of the arrangement of elements in oral tradition illustrates a scenario congruent with this point drawn out by putting pressure on the Luhmann-Kittler disagreement. Pursuing their project for determining what oral tradition might mean for authorship, Parry and Lord documented the process of systemic self-reproduction and distribution across brains, bodies, and verbal and ideational devices and showed that when there is no longer a determinate "user," the operations of tradition themselves are opened up for analysis. At the same time that it undermines the idea that authenticity is located in texts, *The Singer of Tales* also challenges the notion that oral tradition can be understood on the basis of linear pursuit of external ends. In this way, far from reducing expressive culture to dull automatism, bringing a systems perspective to the analysis of oral tradition actually allows new kinds of examination of dynamically generative processes. It also opens up new dimensions of highly unpredictable interrelations.

Lord's language does signal the impression that the practices he documents transpire in a world removed from modernity, and insofar as the specifically oral character of the mode of authorship he articulates is presented as literacy's other, he seems to reassert authenticity even as the broader design and execution of the project put it into question. But to take such observations as indicative of the limits of the book's potential contribution is not only to interpret it in a way that misses its model for its vocabulary, but it is also to minimize its possibilities for helpful participation in the continuing development of knowledge about media and communication. This possibility is unlocked when it is opened up to conversation



with theories from which it might usually be considered quite distant. Unexplored media-technological dimensions of oral tradition can be examined by translating the difference between text and context into the difference between system and environment. This suggests that systems theory might serve as an effective accomplice in reengaging some of the seemingly analytically depleted works embedded in the history of folkloristics.

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