

Media in Transition 5: *Creativity, Ownership and Collaboration in the Digital Age*
Plenary 1: “Folk Cultures and Digital Cultures”

**BEFORE THE GUTENBERG PARENTHESIS:
ELIZABETHAN-AMERICAN COMPATIBILITIES**

Tom Pettitt

The purpose of this short presentation is to draw attention to some “Elizabethan-American Compatibilities”, in both directions: what strikes me as rather Elizabethan about the modern American media, and what strikes me as rather American (or more specifically African American) about Shakespeare. The links are perceived through their respective relationships to “The Gutenberg Parenthesis”.¹

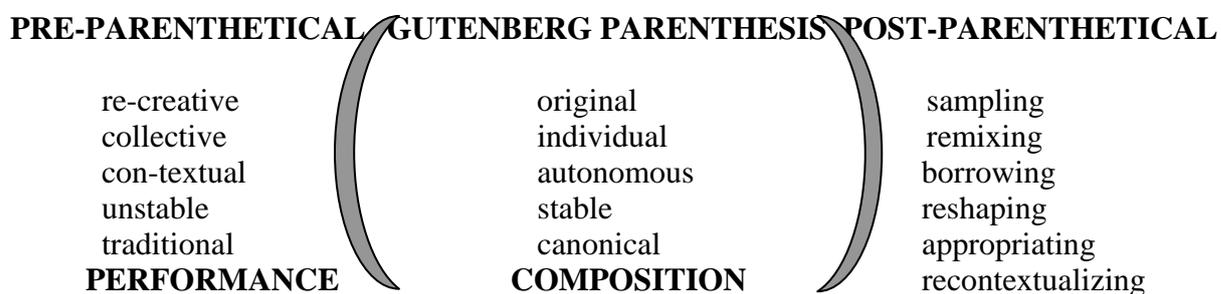
As a couple of the conference papers point out, several of the key terms in the call for papers for MiT5 -- sampling & remixing; borrowing & reshaping; appropriating & recontextualizing -- accurately characterize the way that some university students now think they should write academic essays: constructing (a folklorist would say “quilting”) an essay out of diverse ready-made materials accessed on the internet and manipulated by digital technology. But by the same token, no generation of students I have taught is in a better position than these to fully appreciate Shakespeare, since those same key terms accurately characterize significant processes by which plays were achieved, and by which plays were treated, in the Elizabethan popular theatre.

Accordingly, when my students are reprimanded for plagiarism for doing this, it is a fate they share with Elizabethan dramatists, the most notorious instance being the 1592 attack by university wit Robert Greene on a provocative new rival: a mere player, who considers himself “the only Shake-scene in a country”, and who thinks “he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse” as the university-trained playwrights. (There may already be a hint of something improper in this image, “bombast” being the cotton used to stuff clothes to give

¹ This text reproduces my presentation at the opening “Plenary Conversation” of MiT5, “Folk Cultures and Digital Cultures”, together with material and explications omitted as a result of time constraints, and some additional considerations prompted by subsequent discussions. There is some overlap with the opening pages of my paper contributed to a call session on authorship (which otherwise focuses substantially on Shakespeare), available elsewhere on the MiT5 website.

that characteristically puffy Elizabethan look.) But his methods are underhand; he is “an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers”.²

And just as my students have something in common with Shakespeare, so I have something in common with Robert Greene. We are both speaking from within the “Gutenberg Parenthesis”, a cultural realm where it is felt that cultural products (including stage plays and student essays) should be original, independent, autonomous compositions -- the individual achievement and the individual property of those who create them. And we are both incensed by something occurring outside the Gutenberg Parenthesis, if in different directions relative to where we stand. In some ways ahead of his time, Greene was castigating a Shakespeare who operated within a cultural system -- the Elizabethan popular theatre -- which was still on its way *into* the Gutenberg parenthesis: a popular entertainment business in which sampling and the rest were still legitimate. In many ways behind the times, I am castigating students who are in all other respects being trained to operate within a cultural system -- the digital media -- which is already on its way *out of* the Gutenberg parenthesis: an internet culture in which sampling and the rest are becoming legitimate.³



If “parenthetical” culture is dominated by the original, individual, autonomous, stable and canonical composition, then pre-parenthetical culture is rather dominated by the opposites of these qualities: the re-creative, collective, con-textual, unstable, traditional performance, which as the MiT5 call for papers anticipates, may be another way of formulating the “sampling, remixing, borrowing, reshaping, appropriating and recontextualizing” characteristic of “post-parenthetic”, digital internet culture.

² *A Grooms-Worth of Witte*, 1592, ed. G.B. Harrison, Bodley Head Quarto (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), pp. 45-46

³ Note that “parenthesis” is used here in the strict sense of the (verbal) material enclosed between two brackets, not the brackets themselves; “parentheses” will, accordingly, mean more than one parenthesis.

In true Elizabethan, digital fashion, I have happily plagiarized the term from my rather more book-oriented colleagues at the University of Southern Denmark who are developing a research project on “Print, Book and Cognition” with the Gutenberg Parenthesis as its theme and title.⁴ Since the Renaissance, the communication of western culture has been dominated and in many ways determined by mechanically mass-produced texts, symbolized by (but not restricted to) the printed book, but this is now discernible as merely a phase, discernibly coming to an end under the pressure of developments in relation to the electronic media, the internet and digital technology. The expression is of course in turn indebted to McLuhan’s “Gutenberg Galaxy”, but I am particularly attracted by the way “parenthesis” suggests development over time: a before, a during and an after, with the implication that the post-parenthetical period after and the pre-parenthetical period before may have more in common with each other than either has with the parenthetical phase that came in between: syntactically a parenthesis interrupts a line of thought which resumes when the parenthesis closes.

This notion of our paradoxically advancing into the past has also of course been anticipated by others in literary studies. There is first the overarching theoretical position to the effect that much that we associate with our “post-modern” culture -- the “death” of the author; the breakdown of the distinction between literature and popular culture or between author and critic is actually a reversion to the Elizabethan period when, according to some, the “author” was “born”, “literature” was born as a distinct system within verbal culture (although they still called it “poetry”: “literature” would not be used in the modern sense for another couple of centuries).⁵ More empirically, there has emerged in medieval studies a “New Philology” which acknowledges that when a scribe copied a literary work he subconsciously or deliberately intervened in the text, adding, subtracting, substituting, so that the result is a compromise between what the author wrote and what the scribe felt he ought to have written or what he felt the people he was writing for wanted to read, and that consequently for a given literary work we should not so much seek to re-reconstruct the

⁴ The term was coined by Professor Lars Ole Sauerberg in the context of discussions, ongoing over several years, aimed at finding common ground between scholars of various specializations within the Institute for Literature, Media and Cultural Studies of the University of Southern Denmark: the group is currently formalizing itself, under Professor Sauerberg’s leadership, as “The Gutenberg Parenthesis Research Forum”, and will shortly be publishing a mission statement on a forum website.

⁵ Kevin Pask, *The Emergence of the English Author: Scripting the Life of the Poet in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

original (which is always lost) from the scribal variants available, but rejoice in, and appreciate, this multiplicity of variants, each evidently viable in its local context.⁶

In 1995, Leah Sinanoglou Marcus published an article with the striking title “Cyberspace Renaissance”, suggesting that the collapse of the fixed authoritative text provoked by the internet and digital technology effectively took us back to the Renaissance period, when texts had not yet, not quite, become as fixed and authoritative as they have been in the interim.⁷ From another perspective, Arthur F. Kinney has suggested that thanks to the computer revolution and what it has done to cognition our particular “cultural moment” is particularly well-qualified to understand that in which Shakespeare was working, taking *Macbeth* as a text case.⁸

John Miles Foley has both continued and extended the research tradition of Milman Parry and Albert Bates Lord in the understanding and appreciation of oral narrative (classical, medieval and living) at his Center for Studies in Oral Tradition at the University of Missouri (see <http://oraltradition.org/>), and broken radical new ground in founding a Center for eResearch (see <http://e-researchcenter.org/>). These in turn come together in the *Pathways Project* which is designed (I quote from its website):

... to illustrate and explain the fundamental similarities between humankind’s oldest and newest thought-technologies: oral tradition and the internet. ... Both technologies thrive on morphing ... on open sharing among a broad-based community, and they both lack the concept of the freestanding complete-in-itself item that’s at the very heart of the book-and-page medium. (<http://www.pathwaysproject.org/pathways/show/HomePage>)

To which it can be added that the project itself appropriately operates within the world and mode of IT (which reproduces the world and mode of the OT it [!] studies), so that as well as the conventional scholarly book (or rather a book-in-progress, *Pathways of the Mind: Oral Tradition and the Internet*, which itself will change and grow) there will also be webcasts and podcasts, linked websites, streaming audio and video, blogs and bulletin boards.

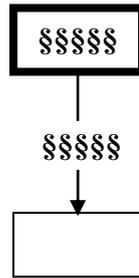
⁶ The agenda-setting work under this heading is Bernard Cerquiglini’s *Eloge de la Variante [in praise of the variant text]* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), emphasizing the endemic “fluidity” of the medieval text.

⁷ Leah Sinanoglou Marccus, “Cyberspace Renaissance”, *English Literary Renaissance*, 25 (1995), 388-401.

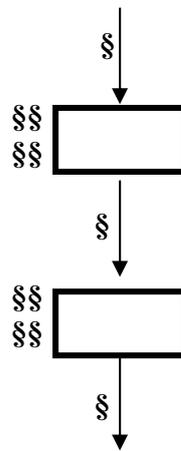
⁸ Arthur F. Kinney, *Lies Like Truth: Shakespeare, Macbeth, and the Cultural Moment* (London: Wayne State University Press, 2001).

What I have done in “borrowing” the Gutenberg parenthesis from my colleagues is of the same ilk as what Shakespeare did to Kyd’s *Hamlet*, or (if that would be overweening) what the traveling players did to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (or a ballad-singer did with a song she heard from her mother): I have to a degree made it my own -- or at least there is a diagram in the Appendix which is offered as proof of having tried. It seeks to offer a systematic review of how verbal material (represented, appropriately by paragraph symbols) gets into a given work (or version of a work or performance of a work), as represented by a box. (The same system would presumably apply to pictorial, musical, or other non-verbal material, but I focus on what I am most familiar with.) A symbol inside a box represents original material created by the author/performer with no indebtedness to other works (as opposed to imagination, observation or experience). A symbol between boxes (in a vertical line) indicates material carried over to a work from its source or from the work to a performance. A symbol beside a box indicates material introduced from other works/performances: strictly speaking a distinction should be made here between material taken from a specific work/performance (what parenthetical attitudes would call plagiarism), and material (“formulas”; motifs; *topoi*; what parenthetical attitudes would call commonplaces or even “clichés”) belonging to a given tradition as a whole.

The place of a given phenomenon in verbal culture in relation to the Gutenberg Parenthesis depends on the relative proportions of these original, carried over and imported materials, and on the relative importance of composition and performance. For me, the difference between the world within the Gutenberg Parenthesis and the world without (be it before or after) is in the first instance the significance accorded to the **composition** of a given work as opposed to its **performance**, and in the second instance the degree to which either process involves the introduction of material from other works/performances. At the theoretical dead centre of the parenthesis, the definitive unit is the *original composition*, which owes nothing to other works (as source or supplier of derivative material) and everything to the individual creator. And its “performance” is the zero-option of the passive reception which amounts to an exact reproduction, typically as a printed text:



At the theoretical extremes outside the parenthesis, the essential unit is the *traditional performance* which both owes something to earlier performances and owes much to other performances.



I am not certain I have put the brackets in the right place, but making the diagram has helped me think about what they mean and where they belong. For the moment, I reckon a tradition of verbal culture is (just) outside the parenthesis when the changes to the source by which a work is achieved are virtually indistinguishable from the changes to which that work is subject in (and in preparation for) performance. And of course any one vertical sequence is a purely theoretical ideal, to which realities will conform only to agree. Hence -- experimentally -- the scale moving out of the zero point -- the centre of the parenthesis -- in each direction: in the course of his career as a playwright Shakespeare probably moved from say minus 2.5 on the scale to minus 1.5. And of course when a given cultural product shifted from one cultural system to another, it shifted abruptly within the scale, a stage-play-as-script just outside the parenthesis, a stage-play-as-cheap-quarto just inside, a stage-play in an expensive folio volume of “works” substantially further inside. Then when the printed text of a play (duly changed) became the script for a performance (inevitably contaminated by the actors’ memories of other plays) it effectively moves back into pre-parenthetical mode.

It is also possible that the Gutenberg parenthesis may not have been the first of its kind (although distinctive in its association with a particular technology for the preservation and transmission of discursive culture).⁹ Græco-Roman classicism, in its orientation towards the notion of one work, one author, one version, displayed characteristic "parenthetical" symptoms different from what came before and after, and something similar may have happened in the phase of Judaic culture which crystallized and canonized Talmudic and other texts. In this broader perspective, to encompass the evidently multiple factors involved, it may ultimately be appropriate to speak of several, overlapping sets of parentheses (rather than the image of a "broad fuzzy bracket" tested in my Shakespeare paper). From one perspective

the book: ()
 is a variety of print: [()]
 which is a variety of text: { [()] }

-- and the exercise could be repeated from other perspectives such as individual as opposed to collective, and named as opposed to anonymous, composition/performance, etc.

And the future, it seems, will be a mirror image of the past, the changes inherent in the shift from print to the cinematic to the electronic media to the digital media reversing the changes inherent in the shift from scribal copying to print, and before that from memorial tradition to scribal, and before that from improvisational to memorial.¹⁰ While we may welcome the freedoms these developments offer, the reminder that they are effectively taking us back into the Middle Ages (even to the "digital feudalism" already invoked to discuss relationships between suppliers and consumers) -- that we are surfing to serfdom -- should give pause for thought.

This then is one of my "Elizabethan-American" compatibilities: if you tell me that the modern media are moving into a post-parenthetical realm where among other things the distinction

⁹ This elaboration was prompted by a highly pertinent question from Peter Walsh during the first Plenary.

¹⁰ "Memoral" is my coinage to designate transmission which encompasses not merely oral performance but the preservation of verbal material in the memory (as opposed to a text), and the retrieval of material, in performance, from the memory (as opposed to reading aloud from a text). I have stopped

between author and performer is getting problematic, and where the term “plagiarism” is disputably appropriate for one composition’s (one performance’s) redeployment of material from others, then I’ll tell you that Elizabethan theatre (in which Shakespeare was both an author and a performer) was a pre-parenthetical mirror-image of where you’re at; witness the perception of Shakespearean critic Douglas Bruster that the way Elizabethan plays “quote” without acknowledgement requires us [us Shakespeare critics who are still within the parenthesis] to consider seriously “how well our notions of property, language and textuality apply to early modern drama”.¹¹

I explore this more closely in my paper at a call session on authorship (the full text of which is also available via the MiT5 website) and will conclude here by hinting at a second Elizabethan-American compatibility, effectively a re-formulation of this conference’s highly perceptive call for papers: one which puts Shakespeare and Americans on the same side of (before) the Gutenberg parenthesis.

Within a given culture not all sub-cultures -- not all cultural systems -- enter the Gutenberg parenthesis at the same time. What the Elizabethans called “Poetry” had pretty well entered the parenthesis by 1600, Shakespeare’s sonnets first published unambiguously as *Shakespeares Sonnets. Neuer before Imprinted*. But this was less the case with the popular theatre, where performance and performers were still more important than composition and author: Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* first published as *An excellent conceited tragedie of Romeo and Iuliet. As it hath been often (with great applause) plaid publicly, by the Right Honourable the L. of Hunsdon his seruants*, and not printed with his name on the title page until the fourth printing in 1622 (and then only on some copies). Before the end of Shakespeare’s career the London theatre was making significant steps in that direction, but the traveling players (with their anarchic clowns) followed much later, the itinerant companies of the American frontier later still.

And there came a time, towards the end of the eighteenth century, when people whose cultural lives were conducted exclusively within the Gutenberg parenthesis could not remember (or imagine) a time when they or their forebears had done differently, and

short of coining “aural-mem-oral” which would go the whole hog and encompass as well the reception of that verbal material by ear (as opposed to reading from a text).

¹¹ *Quoting Shakespeare: Form and Culture in Early Modern Drama* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), p. 4.

accordingly found the culture of people (in their own cultures and communities) who had yet to enter the Gutenberg parenthesis increasingly exotic and fascinating. For a while they designated this pre-parenthetical culture “Popular Antiquities”, then (from about the middle of the nineteenth century) “Folklore”. Both of these now sound a trifle quaint, and of the various alternative options my own preference is “vernacular tradition”, deploying the more-than-linguistic connotations of “vernacular” long familiar in architecture (vernacular style), paleography (vernacular hands) and more recently in “vernacular religion” (as opposed to official doctrine and theology) – and two papers at this conference (by Jean Burgess and Rebecca Ross) indeed deploy this term (respectively “vernacular photography” and “vernacular ... practices”) in what I take to be this same sense.

The (parenthetical) elite’s “rediscovery” of these vernacular (pre-parenthetical) performance traditions (to deploy and translate the decisive insights of Peter Burke¹²), also involved the latter’s transgression of the bracket between the two phases, and the abruptness of the move is strikingly registered in an incident associated with the discovery, collection and publication of the traditional Scottish ballads. In 1800 an Aberdeen lady who had learnt traditional ballads from her mother, her aunt, and a (female) family servant, wrote in some distress to a gentleman whose father had been sent the texts of her songs, having just discovered that a second manuscript had found its way into the hands of another collector:

I was a good deal vexed to think what the odd impression it might make in your eyes, that another should be *in possession* of what you have good reason to believe *was yours exclusively* -- but I hope you will now be convinced that it has come about without any sinister practices on my side [emphasis supplied].¹³

This is on reflection an extraordinary and oddly moving statement: a singer apologizing for recording *her* songs for two collectors, the one accorded the greater right actually inheriting it from his father, like landed property or an old painting. In the parenthetical half of the singer’s mind, clearly, the moment the words of what was a verbal performance are written down as texts they become material documents -- effectively drafts for a forthcoming *book* --

¹² Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978), pp. 281ff.

¹³ Letter from Anna Gordon Brown to Alexander Fraser Tytler, 23 December, 1800, copy in hand of Miss M. Fraser Tytler, Child Papers (MS Am 2349, vol. X, # 85. Houghton Library, Harvard University, quoted here with the kind permission of the Houghton Library.

and parenthetical rules apply. That the songs belong very much to a women's tradition while the collectors/editors are men merely adds to the disturbing connotations of the incident.

In most cases, admittedly – say Scottish ballads; German folktales; Irish superstitions; English legends -- the implication in “popular antiquities” of an inheritance from the past surviving rather than living and developing in the present would be appropriate enough, but within the English-speaking world, African American Vernacular Traditions maintained their vigor and cultural relevance deep into the twentieth century. The situation is effectively and strikingly summed up in the 1969 statement of activist Rap Brown which depicts white and African-American young people being respectively acculturated in ways appropriate to the different adult environments in which they would have to survive: “We played the Dozens for recreation, like white folks play Scrabble”.¹⁴ In our terms, scrabble is for the “white folks” within in the Gutenberg parenthesis, where success goes to the “bookish” student in a world of texts; the dozens (a contest involving the exchange of verbal insults) for African Americans outside the parenthesis where success went to the “man of words” in a world of speech.

To take the most obvious example, the blues, for all its feel of modernity, emphatically qualifies as “pre-parenthetical”, while at the same time proving that not all innovative energy in the English-speaking world had been absorbed into the Gutenberg parenthesis. The blues qualifies as “folk music”, and is one of the last great achievements of “vernacular” music in English. In which connection this may be the moment to note, quietly and respectfully, that “vernacular” has a somberly appropriate resonance in this context, deriving as it does from a Latin term which in Roman times designated a particular category of slaves (born and bred within the empire rather than imported as adults from beyond the frontiers).

The pre-parenthetical quality of the blues is demonstrated partly by the individual song's derivative relationship to tradition and partly by its active transmission; as Jeff Todd Titon put it in his *Early Downhome Blues*:

¹⁴ H. Rap Brown, *Die Nigger Die* (1969), cited in Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness. Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977; repr. 1978), p. 346.

the singers passed the songs on orally; ... they relied on traditional lyrics; and ... the songs show considerable, even deliberate, variation over space and time.¹⁵

Indeed a given blues is prone to instability to the extent that we can query whether the texts concerned are actually variants of the same song, and hence question the autonomy of the individual artwork.

The blues seems furthermore to be particularly at home in the liminal zones at the edges of the parenthesis -- that is within and on each side of the space occupied by the brackets themselves. With regard to the opening bracket, the blues made their first step into it when recorded and issued as "race records", in the process reduced to a uniform length, the text standardized, and associated with a particular singer. On the other hand, as Paul Oliver has pointed out, the record company employees who sought out the singers and recorded their songs were as assiduous as any gentleman folksong collector, and those race records effectively constitute a significant archive of African American vernacular song.¹⁶ But then the individual song, following its dissemination as a phonograph record, as noted by the early student of African American vernacular song, Newman White, could make a retrograde step (into a pre-parenthetical world) in being taken over by singers who were part of a performance tradition which was still sufficiently muscular to subject the song to the re-molding and re-mixing processes characteristic of extra-parenthetical traditions.¹⁷

But this does not just apply to the blues. African American vernacular culture of the twentieth century could boast oral traditions as vital as anything in the English-speaking world, then, or perhaps at any time: secular song; spiritual song; verse narrative (the toasts); trickster tales; preaching and signifying. (And the list would be further increased if we included the Anglophone African American vernacular traditions of the Caribbean.¹⁸) And it is hard to imagine anything more vital (more living and more significant) in modern popular culture than the rock, rap and reggae which have sprung from those traditions, while in the literary field authors such as Zora Neale Hurston (for example in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*), James Baldwin (*Going to Meet the Man*), Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*), Gloria Naylor

¹⁵ Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. xvi.

¹⁶ Paul Oliver, *Screening the Blues* (London: Cassell, 1968. Repr. New York: Da Capo, 1989), p. 10.

¹⁷ Newman I. White, ed., *American Negro Folk-Songs* (1928; repr. Hatboro, Penn.: Folklore Associates, 1965), pp. 389-90.

(*The Women of Brewster Place*) both depict African American vernacular traditions -- sermons, spirituals, blues, the dozens, jazz, and -- more importantly -- also deploy, in the structure and style of their novels and short stories, the idioms and the forms of African American vernacular discourse; of the verbal arts; of traditional sung and spoken folk narrative.¹⁹ It is not just a question of subjects, of matter. If we want a literature that merely *describes* folk traditions in conventional literary idiom we can read Thomas Hardy and William Faulkner. The African American novelists (like the Elizabethan dramatists) give us something else: a literature which uses what Robert Hemenway calls the "aesthetic dynamics" of vernacular tradition, as a result of which we experience something, of the original, traditional, communicative event.²⁰

To the extent it is precisely those African American forms of popular music (like the hip-hop discussed by Craig Watkins) which are leading us out into a *post*-parenthetical phase, we seem to be in the presence of a striking "last in first out" phenomenon in relation to the Gutenberg parenthesis. And this doubly liminal moment, as African American vernacular culture enters the parenthesis, while the media culture of which it is a part exits the parenthesis, is therefore doubly "Elizabethan". An African American inheriting a gift for words from his people's vernacular traditions but who has also acquired a conventional education -- being as good at scrabble as he (or she) is at signifying -- and who is furthermore engaged at the leading edge of modern media developments (which is where the Elizabethan theatre also was in its time), is closer to Shakespeare, is better qualified to match Shakespeare's achievement, than any English-speaking man or woman has been in the intervening four hundred years. Shakespeare's achievement was, as this person's achievement is or will be, directly involved with his position on the edge -- the one edge or the other -- of the Gutenberg parenthesis.

¹⁸ Cf. the highly pertinent title of Dick Hebdige's study of reggae and early rap on Jamaica: *Cut 'n' Mix* (London: Methuen, 1987).

¹⁹ The growing corpus of works on the vernacular roots of a distinct African-American literary tradition includes Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Bernard Bell, *The Folk Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1974); Michael G. Cooke, "Building on Signifying and the Blues", *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century. The Achievement of Intimacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), Introduction; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey. A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices. Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); Thomas, H. Nigel, *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1989).

²⁰ Robert Hemenway, "Are You a Flying Lark or a Setting Dove", in *Afro-American Literature. The Reconstruction of Instruction* (New York: MLAA, 1979), pp. 122-52, at p. 130.

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COMPOSITION

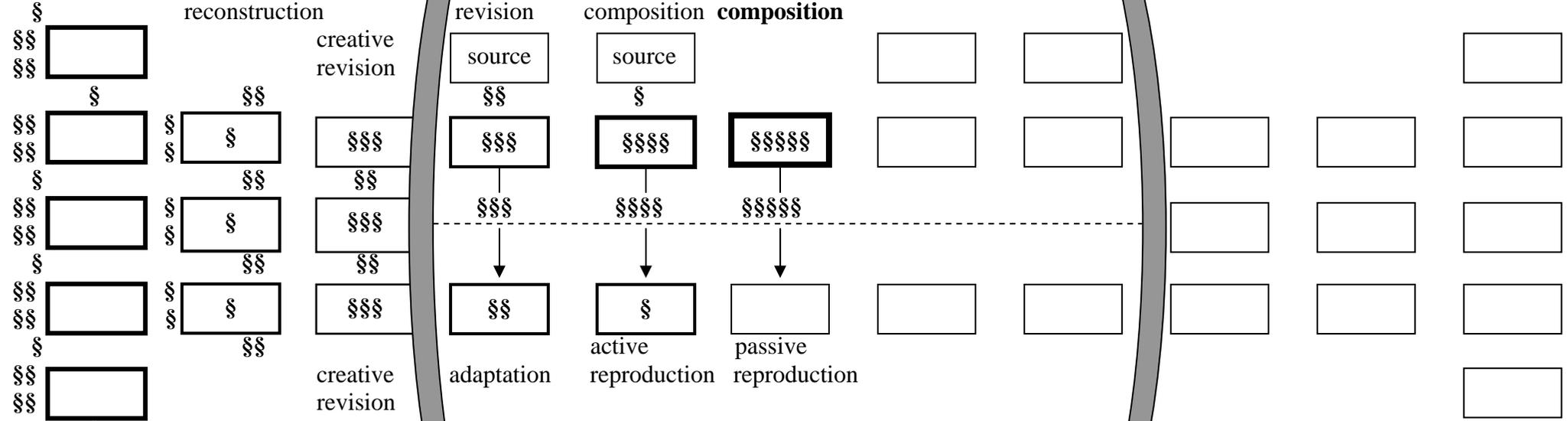
re-composition in performance

traditional reconstruction

creative revision

derivative composition

original composition



re-composition in performance
PERFORMANCE

PERFORMANCE

PERFORMANCE

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CON-TEXTUAL INTERACTIVE

CON-TEXTUAL INTERACTIVE

improvisational memor(i)al scribal print cinematic electronic digital