CHAPTER 5

Performance

Think of the last time you attended a musical performance. It doesn’t matter whether you were listening to a punk band or a country singer or attending the symphony or the opera. How were people in the audience dressed? Was there an abundance of black clothing? Cowboy hats? Did the lead singer introduce the other band members? Did the crowd sit quietly or stand and sing along? Did any of the performers say “you’re a great audience,” and did the audience cheer? Maybe you took part in a tradition associated with this kind of event or a particular performer—held up a match, lighter, or cell phone to bring on an encore, wore evening clothes on opening night of an opera run. Was it a good show or not, and how did you know?

The point is that you (as a part of the audience) and the performers created a kind of event together in which you all became part of the others’ experience. Wearing a cowboy hat that matched the lead singer’s could have encouraged a connection between the performers and audience that added to the performers’ desire to put on a good show. Wearing your best clothes to the opera on opening night showed that you were part of the group and understood its rules, and it also may have implied a certain social status.

These features of the show you attended have little to do with the songs the singers or bands performed, but everything to do with your experience. There are many performances going on in our example: the performers on the stage, in their official role as performers, and the many activities you and your fellow audience members engaged in that allowed you to express the traditions, values, and beliefs of the fan group you belonged to. It is this experience of performance and what it means to performers and audiences that matters, beyond what we might think of as entertainment value. In essence, the notion
of explicit and implicit relationships between performers and audiences and the complex dynamics that lead to or stem from these relationships are at the heart of contemporary folklorists’ approach to performance. In the following discussions of performance, we will illustrate how folklorists consider performance in context and think about the relationships among audiences, texts, and means of expression.

What is Performance?

So far, we’ve been talking about people, texts, behavior, and the many ways that folklore communicates, and now we want to consider in depth the moments in which all these pieces come together, enacted through performance. Some performances are easy to spot. Many rituals, for example, begin at a predetermined time and place, and an announcement or other signal opens and closes the performance (think of the processional music at the beginning of a formal wedding and the “I now pronounce you . . .” proclamation at the end of the ceremony). Frequently, performances have clear settings and recognizable structures that indicate to participants that the performance is taking place. Barre Toelken (1996) writes of Native American storytelling sessions, for instance, which take place at specified times (some tales can only be told at certain times of the year) and for defined purposes. A group gathers to hear the tales, and the storyteller takes center stage, so to speak, and narrates story after story, sometimes in a set order.

Most often, though, performances of folklore happen naturally within daily conversations and situations. That may make them less readily apparent, but all expressions of folklore are performances, nonetheless. Suppose, for example, two friends are talking about their classes on the first day of the semester and one brags to the other, “I just know I’m going to get all A’s this term.” The other shakes her head and says in a teasing tone, “Be careful—don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched.” The first speaker chuckles and agrees to be a little more realistic. These two have just taken part in the performance of a proverb.

Performance is an expressive activity that requires participation, heightens our enjoyment of an experience, and invites response. In order for a performance to happen, a recognized setting must exist (participants have to know a performance is taking place) and participants (performers and audience) must be present. The details of the setting and relationships between participants can be quite complex and fluid, but all participants understand that they are engaged in some kind of performance activity. Each of us interprets the performances.
of people in our own folk groups naturally as part of our group's communication process. If group members and audiences are not able to understand and interpret someone's performance, it may not be a successful expression of the performer's ideas. As folklorists, our interpretations may be more complex, breaking down the elements of a performance and using certain language to talk and write about our analysis; however, the roots of these interpretations can be seen in everyday responses to folk performances.

Example: A Proverbial Performance

The proverb example above illustrates one of those familiar, everyday performance events, and here we will look at it in more depth to introduce important terms and ideas that we expand on later in the chapter.

Proverbs, like most other folk genres, can be defined in many ways. Most folklorists agree that a proverb is a short traditional statement, phrase, or saying that conveys some philosophical or wise observation about a situation or about life or human nature in general.20 Proverbs or proverbial sayings are not performed in the sense that a person stands up in front of others in order to recite them; rather, they are most often performed within an ordinary, everyday situation, usually as part of a conversation.

In the example, the speaker prepared her friend for the warning when she shook her head and said in a teasing way, “Be careful.” Her recitation of the proverb, with its carefully chosen text, delivered the message. The laughter and agreement to be realistic showed recognition of the performance and understanding of its content and intention. These actions, or markers—the teasing tone, the delivery of proverbial content, the laughter and comment on the message—all signaled the beginning and end of this performance. (We'll discuss markers in more depth later in this chapter.) The very fact that both participants performed and reacted to the proverb and each other in the way they did reveals a lot about their understanding of the performance contexts and of proverbs in general. So for this example, let's think about what the performance of the proverb means in terms of the text (content), context, cultural elements, and the effectiveness of the performance itself.

Most of us enjoy considering what proverbs mean and how they differ from one another or how they are similar or different from proverbs from other cultures. The text of a proverb is fixed; that is, it doesn’t change much from one performance to another, so it occupies the conservative end of Toelken's conservative-dynamic continuum. For this reason, when we talk about proverbs we often begin with the content of the saying and what it means. The verbal content of a proverb has to be fairly limited in order for it to work; the words
have to be so familiar we have no doubt about why the expression is being used in a particular situation. We typically hear proverbs repeated by others in our community, within the folk groups we belong to.

Proverbs are rarely meant to be taken literally. The warning above, of course, has nothing to do with actual chickens. The proverb performer was cautioning her friend to remember that we shouldn’t assume something will happen before it actually takes place or that we can’t expect to have something until we actually have it. We don’t need any immediate or direct contact with the origins of a proverb in order to use and understand it, although the explanations of origins usually make sense to us when we learn them. Most of us have little or no experience with hatching chickens. Yet, this saying is repeated so often that we can use it appropriately even if we know nothing about chicken farming. Some proverbs come from tales or stories that we know so well we don’t have to recite the whole story for the proverbial saying to make sense. The phrase “crying wolf” is a good example. The whole story, even if we aren’t sure of every detail, is implied in the short familiar phrase (Abrahams 1983, 20–21). In any case, we usually understand the meanings of proverbs because of the many times we have heard them performed and applied. This is why we say the texts of proverbs are usually fixed. What is not fixed, however, is the manner in which we use or perform proverbs. So even though the words themselves don’t change, every proverb is essentially new every time we perform it.

The “counting chickens” proverb might be applied in many cases where someone appears to be “jumping the gun” or maybe even “putting the cart before the horse.” These are similar sayings that have related meanings. Wise farmers know that seeing a dozen eggs in the henhouse does not mean they will end up with a dozen new chicks in a few weeks. The eggs may not be fertilized, or a fox may invade the henhouse and eat them. To “jump the gun” means to start doing something before you should, or before the time is right. It comes from track events, in which runners crouch down at the starting line and wait for the starter to fire a gun before they can jump up and sprint away. Starting before the gun goes off may result in disqualification. So if you “jump the gun” you are acting hastily and risk getting into some trouble. If you “put the cart before the horse” you are doing things out of order and will probably not accomplish what you set out to do. You might not even be able to start; a horse-drawn cart won’t go anywhere if the horse is behind it.

All three of the sayings we have been talking about comment in a slightly different way on the dangers of making hasty assumptions or jumping to the end of a process before going through the first steps. The friend had to sort
through these and many other related sayings to select just the right one to issue her advice. Clearly, however, her choice of proverb to perform at that moment depended on a lot more than the words themselves. Most important may be her decision to use a proverb rather than issue a simple statement such as “you can’t be sure of that” or to use a more direct proverbial warning such as “don’t get your hopes up.” Perhaps she wanted to save her friend from possible disappointment. Using a proverb allows her to soften the blow a bit, shortens the number of words she needs to use, and draws on the wise observations of generations who have come before to add weight to her advice. It also allows her to draw on a shared personal history, perhaps, in which the two had joked with each other before. It may be that the braggart sometimes tends to have unrealistic expectations, and the two friends have talked about this problem before. Perhaps the proverb speaker thought it would be gentler, and probably more fun, to instruct through a proverb than to admonish outright. The acceptance of her advice, signaled by amusement and assent, shows that the message is clear, and no one is offended by the warning.

Expressing all of this important information in a fun, artistic way telescopes the communication without a lot of discussion and shows their close connection as friends and as members of a group that understands a particular set of proverbs. The performer had to think beyond the content to select a proverb that was culturally appropriate as well as textually appropriate.

Every culture has proverbs that express in verbal shorthand important traditional ideas and knowledge based on common sense and experience. Proverbs are frequently culture specific—meaning that they express this knowledge in terms that people from that culture or group will understand. Many proverbs, such as the European American “don’t count your chickens” example, come from agriculture, so they are familiar to most people around the world. But that proverb would not make sense in a culture where no one had ever raised or even heard of chickens. Similarly, “jumping the gun” would not be meaningful to a group that does not hold footraces or does not use guns. Yet proverbs from across the world comment on the same kinds of experiences and express the same kinds of wise observations. A proverb from Guyana, for example, is “Not every crab hole contains a crab.” Crabs are a far cry from chickens, but this proverb makes it obvious that people from rather diverse cultures have developed wise sayings to caution that things don’t always turn out the way we expect or assume they will. In her performance, the friend obviously selected a proverb that had resonance for both people in order to be sure she would communicate her feelings.

Analyzing texts and performances of proverbs in this way, in relation to how members of folk groups use them, allows us to make observations about
what concepts and attitudes are important to the group members in this particular setting. We can also think about how members incorporate specific, local elements of experience into particular expressions of group identity. Looking at proverbs within a context enables us to consider how group members are different and the same, analyze the effects of those differences and similarities, and consider who performs proverbs, where and when, and for what reasons.

We can also consider aspects of the relationships between friends in this example. We know, for instance, that they are friends. That point is significant in understanding why the performer felt comfortable enough in the relationship to choose a proverb. We also know (or have established in this example) that the performer is female. That may have significance, depending on the other person's sex—think for a moment of the different dynamics that might exist in this example if one is male and one is female. Age might also be a factor. We might assume the two are of similar age since it appears they are taking classes together, but perhaps the performer has returned to school after working and raising a family for twenty years and is twenty-five years older than her friend. Now switch it—suppose the performer is twenty years younger than the other. Would the younger person have the right to criticize the older person? Do certain groups have a code of social etiquette that permits a younger person to express criticism of an elder? Does friendship always allow for such flexible roles? Would the nature of performing proverbs permit someone to express attitudes of authority playfully or in a way that would not be acceptable in a more formal situation?

In this description of the use of a single proverb, we can see many of the complex elements that folklorists consider when analyzing performance. The specific words used are certainly important, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the type of folk genre we are studying (for proverbs, as we have said, the verbal text is central). But the words form just one part of this act of performance. We must consider the conditions or context in which a performance occurs, including its participants. Also important are the relationships between the people involved. Our ability to employ proverbs accurately, clearly, and wittily may identify us as effective performers enacting a lively tradition that expresses and reinforces our understanding of the group's knowledge, values, beliefs, and experiences. We can look at the success of the performance by considering how the participants reacted to it and to the other people present and by looking at the aesthetic dimensions of the event.
The Study of Performance

In the nineteenth century and first half or so of the twentieth, folklorists were usually more concerned with the products or outcomes of performance than the performance itself. In the 1970s, Richard Bauman’s *Verbal Art As Performance* (1984) solidified the framework for future studies of performance in folklore. Bauman drew together scholarship from the fields of linguistics, anthropology, literary study, and folklore to create a more unified, theorized understanding of performance in verbal art. His main theme is that verbal communication carries an artistic or “esthetic dimension” (3) that is connected to the specific setting and culture of those participating in the communication. Bauman conceives of performance as “a unifying thread tying together the marked, segregated esthetic genres and other spheres of verbal behavior into a general unified conception of verbal art as a way of speaking” (5). Verbal art encompasses narration of myths, stories, and related genres as well as speech; performance “brings them together in culture-specific and variable ways, ways that are to be discovered ethnographically within each culture and community” (5). And because performance carries an artistic dimension and is perceived to be different from everyday, routine kinds of speech or behavior, it is “marked as subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer’s display of competence” as well as being “available for the enhancement of experience” (11).

What all this means, basically, is that people communicate within specific situations and settings, and these communications are performed for certain reasons and in certain ways that have meaning to the members of folk groups and communities. Performances are usually set off from everyday experience by certain markers—words or gestures that signal when a performance is about to take place and when it ends. This marking off or “framing” (see Goffman 1974) implies the artistic nature of such expressive communication, heightens our enjoyment, and invites critique or evaluation.

Folklorists pay attention to the performed act of expressive, artistic communication—the when, where, with whom, how, and why people communicate. In addition to actual content, words, or actions (texts), folklorists consider literary, linguistic, or physical nuances of those texts (texture); and they study these elements within specific groups and settings (contexts). Performance is easy to see when we look at verbal art, especially oral verbal performances like songs, stories, or sayings, but theories related to performance have been extended to other kinds of folklore, like ritual, custom, and even material objects. As we talk about all these dimensions of performance and performance theory, it is
important to keep in mind that folklore is something we do, not just something we possess. Performance study foregrounds this perspective on the active sharing of contemporary folklore.

Performance Texts

We talked earlier about the concept of text in relationship to many types of folklore beyond just verbal types. Here we will develop that idea in connection with performance and consider how performances themselves form a complex text that we can take part in, observe, and analyze.

It is, of course, undeniable that texts exist, but not in isolation. They exist within groups. People sing songs, tell stories, and share jokes, for example, and the physical properties of those items are certainly real—they have words, sentences, and sounds. But the specific content of those items varies depending on the performer, the setting, the region, and of course the group in which they are shared. Folklorists often collect texts of related items in order to compare how different groups shape and express similar material. Variants of jokes are a good example. In some northern US states, for example, people tell rather inappropriate jokes about “hillbillies” from “the hills” or “hick towns.” The same jokes may be told in southern states with the words “Yankees” and “cities” substituted for the derogatory labels. Analyzing performance enables folklorists to see how and why groups shape and share their traditional forms of expression.

We usually think of stories and songs and other verbal expressions when we think of texts, but as we said in the first chapter, folklorists frequently use the term to refer to nonverbal art and objects, even behaviors, such as rituals or foodways. Performance analysis, as folklorists have used it, examines material and visual arts and practices as well as verbal lore. These items may be what we typically think of as folk objects, like quilts, baskets, or friendship bracelets and can also be common material objects with practical uses, like food, clothing, and buildings. Even connections between objects and their creators can be thought of as a kind of performance.

In some rural communities in Pennsylvania, for instance, many farmers, particularly those of German descent, decorate their barns with colorful designs called “hex signs.” These circular designs incorporate traditional features that symbolize prosperity, health, and protection. For example, many designs show a six-pointed star, which are thought to ensure protection from fire, or the stylized image of birds called “distelfinks” that may bring good luck and happiness. These designs are often prominent in the eaves of the barn roofs or are placed...
in a series of large circles on the front of the barn, sometimes evenly spaced between the loft doors and windows. The hex signs that decorate the eaves are symbols of luck and good fortune but are also expressions of tradition, common decorations that express group identity regardless of the degree of belief that having a hex sign on a barn brings good fortune. Farmers in local communities develop their own ways of communicating through these traditional representations on their barns. We could say we “read” these meanings from looking at the barns.9

To get even a little more abstract, consider how we might read an activity or symbols of activities. Think of a horseshoe, for example, suspended over a doorway—a common rural North American good luck charm. The horseshoe itself is not a performance, but the placement of the object is a marker of the idea that a horseshoe hung with its ends up (so it looks like a U) brings and holds good luck inside the home. At least, the fact that the horseshoe is there indicates knowledge of that tradition. Another example is feng shui, a traditional practice from Asia of arranging furnishings and objects inside a house in such a way as to bring harmony, energy, and spiritual goodwill to inhabitants and visitors. For example, beds may be aligned north to south, with the head at the north. As with the good luck horseshoe, someone who understands the text can read the placement of the furnishings and understand the ideas the home dweller is trying to convey. Even if the person who arranged the objects within the space isn’t there to explain, someone who knows the system will be able to interpret it.

When we read an object or practice in this way, we are in a sense analyzing its performance—what it communicates actively to the world, both within and outside the folk groups that created it (esoterically and exoterically). Through performance we can describe and discuss how such texts evolve and communicate within a group and how groups express their identity through them. The performance approach establishes folklore as current, evolving, and always expressive, regardless of the type of text we analyze.

Texture

Texture includes the literary, linguistic, and/or physical characteristics of an item of folklore, as well as the features of the performers’ presentation or style that affect the performance of a text and the audience’s reactions to it. In verbal texts, rhyme, alliteration, metaphor, and other kinds of figurative devices—basically, anything connected to the way words relate to each other and convey their meanings—are included in texture. Many paralinguistic features—that
is, features connected to language but not actually language—also shape the texture. These would include, for example, a performer’s gestures, particular emphasis, winks, sounds, and facial expressions.

As the description above suggests, the concept of texture was originally identified in and applied to mostly verbal texts. Dundes (1964) acknowledges that texture could be described in other forms of folklore, but little has been done to extend the discussion of texture to customary and material folklore. However, understanding texts as more than verbal performances allows us to see how the idea makes sense. For material objects, texture could be literal texture—the way something feels—rough, smooth, hard, lumpy. We might also think about the textural features of a material object that are related to its creation and the artist who created it. A doll made from corn husks, for instance, may look much like other similar dolls, but suppose one artist uses scraps of her daughter’s clothing to fashion dresses for her creations or tucks a cloth heart under the folds of the dress. These could be interpreted as special textural touches that make these cornhusk dolls unique to that creator (performer) and to a certain group, such as her family or neighborhood. Customary folklore, too, has texture. The performance of “The Star Spangled Banner” at most American sporting events is a recognizable tradition in which the same text, performed in very similar contexts, can change noticeably depending on the creativity of the performer. Someone might sing it in the style of a gospel hymn, an operatic aria, or a pop song. These variations could be seen as details of texture that influence the performance and make this particular text unique.

A challenge folklorists face when considering texture is that it is difficult to separate from text and context. Are rhymed words more part of the texture or text? Is a storyteller’s decision to stress or repeat a phrase part of the texture or are her choices influenced by the context? Is the shade of green in a piece of folk art a detail of texture or text? Because it is so difficult to separate texture from text and context, folklorists are likely to discuss features of performance without labeling the features separately, simply describing and analyzing the entire performance: text, texture, and context all wrapped together.

Context

The physical settings and social situations in which members of folk groups share folklore, as well as the relationships among audience members and performers, make up the context of the performance. Basically, as we discussed earlier, context refers to anything and everything that surrounds a text and
performance. In studying a certain folk text we cannot simply lift it from its context and begin to accurately understand its importance to a particular group. It must be seen within a larger context, as part of a cultural system. In addition, it is necessary to understand that the folklorist’s interpretation of its significance should not be the final word. As the text is an element of a group’s folklore, the group members are the experts on what those items or practices mean, so the folklorist shouldn’t just walk away with a set interpretation and consider her work complete. Folklorists consult extensively with group members throughout the process of fieldwork and analysis in order to understand as clearly as possible the significance of texts within specific contexts. This kind of approach emphasizes the shared, community-based nature of folklore; it is a process that people create and participate in together.

Scholars have described context in many ways. Dundes described it as the observable setting in which a performance occurs (1964). Dell Hymes added a psychological dimension in his description of performance (which he calls “communicative event”) as taking place both within a physical “setting” and a “scene” defined by the psychological and social circumstances surrounding the performance (1974, 55). Dan Ben-Amos identifies two types of context (1993). One is the “context of situation” and the other is the “context of culture.” The context of situation is “the narrowest, most direct context” for folklore (216) and comprises the specific time period in which the performance occurs as well as the details of the place and circumstances in which the event takes place. Ben-Amos describes the context of culture as “the broadest contextual circle which embraces all possible contexts . . . the reference to, and the representation of, the broad shared knowledge of speakers, their conventions of conduct, belief systems, language metaphors and speech genres, their historical awareness and ethical and judicial principles” (215–16).

Ben-Amos’s distinction between these narrow and broad perspectives demonstrates many overlapping contextual spheres: the setting in which the performance takes place, the events and interrelationships between group members and performers that occur during the performance, and the situation within the narrated or performed text itself. Beyond these situational contexts is the larger context in which the entire experience occurs, which has to do with cultural and social factors that shape the group’s experience outside that particular performance.

So understanding context involves more than identifying or recovering texts within particular settings or even analyzing what takes place between performers and audiences during a performance. It also requires “the investigation of how participants, including ‘investigators,’ weave together what they encounter in a situation with what they bring to it through acts of memory.
and imagination” (M. Hufford 1995, 531). In other words, when we consider context, we need to think about what we know before the performance begins, as well as what we learn while the performance takes place.

**Physical Context**

When folklorists analyze context, they typically begin by observing and describing the physical environment of the performance event. It is important to know where the performance takes place, both in terms of geography and the specific setting. The physical environment also includes who is present—performers and audience members as well as any observers (including, of course, the folklorist). Details of the physical appearance of those present or of the setting (for example, sitting at the kitchen table, frilly white curtains on the windows) may also be important. Some folklorists consider online contexts, as types of virtual physical settings that can be observed and described in the same ways as physical offline contexts. In any case, folklorists are interested in the details of where and in what circumstances folklore performances occur.

The physical elements of the performance itself can also be part of the context. These include gestures, changes in tone of voice, shifts in pitch, and rhythm. Frequently, we can record performances digitally or on tape and film, but sometimes we are unable to capture performances on tape, particularly those that are not present in time or place as a performance or are not recreated for the purposes of collection. In these cases, it is important to observe carefully and take accurate notes on the physical elements in order to describe in writing the details of a performance as precisely as possible.

Folklorists need to be aware of anything going on at the time of a performance that may shape or affect it. This may, for example, include the occasion of the performance—that is, why it occurs at a particular time in a particular place. It would certainly be significant to know that a particular ritual is being performed at a designated time during a graduation party, or that a ghost story—telling session takes place on a snowy evening during a power failure, or that cooks are sharing traditional recipes while a family is planning the Thanksgiving Day menu. Family stories recounted about a beloved matriarch might be performed or interpreted differently if the stories are told at her birthday than if they are told at her funeral.

Describing what happens during a performance not only gives us an idea of the action taking place but also gives us some idea of why the actions occur. It is this interpretive dimension of performance, as well as performer and audience responses, that we consider when we observe relationships and interactions among performers and audience members.
The reactions of performers and audience members convey details related to performance, beyond the description of a statement or movement. For example, laughter is a physical activity, so we would report someone laughed. But laughter might also signify a particular psychological state: the person who laughed may be amused, which we typically interpret as a pleasant state, or may be expressing discomfort through nervous laughter. Boos or hisses suggest a different psychological response, as does squirming in a chair or storming out of a room. Elements such as these may suggest the types of relationships that exist between audience members and performers.

Social Context

Broad elements of the performance context include those things that relate to the group, community, and culture within which the communicative expression takes place. In a family situation, for example, part of this wider social context would be the family itself and all of the interactions between family members. Likewise, ethnic background, religious affiliations, occupation, regional connections, culture—all these are social aspects of performers, audiences, and settings that influence the events taking place during a performance. These kinds of social components influence how those present interact and may reflect assumed roles or expectations within the group or community.

As the study of performance has grown more complex, the concept of context as more than just the physical settings or internal characteristics of performance has also become more complex. Inherent in any performance, especially those that are observed, recorded, and analyzed by folklorists (or any scholars), is the reality that relationships among listeners and performers may reflect long-standing socially defined roles or expectations that influence the performance and its interpretation.

Status within the group affects how performers and audiences interact and who gets to perform what kinds of material. In the telling of a dirty joke, for example, adults frequently have a different status from children by virtue of their age. Children might try out such jokes on each other, but in any situation where adults are present, they would most likely be reprimanded for attempting an off-color joke. Teenagers might or might not be permitted to tell an adult-oriented joke in some mixed-age settings, again depending on who is present. Adults can tell jokes among coworkers, friends, or adult family members but avoid off-color material when children are present. An adult has a greater range of options than a child does in recounting such material, but age is still a determining factor—these jokes are for mature tellers and audiences.
Jokes like this are often based on social assumptions about gender, race, and class. To better understand this, consider different environments in which you have heard or shared jokes. Have you ever been in a situation in which someone made a remark or told a joke that made you feel uncomfortable? How did you react? Did your age, gender, or status within the group affect your reaction? If a boss told an off-color joke to a group of employees, for example, the relative power positions within the workplace would be a factor in understanding the performance, as would the gender, ethnicity, age, and perhaps other characteristics of those present. Perhaps some listeners felt offended by the joke, but because the teller was their employer, they didn’t express their feelings openly—but they didn’t laugh, either. Perhaps older (or younger) members of the group laughed, and perhaps males reacted differently from females.

To a folklorist who collected and studied that joke in its context, your reaction and the reactions of the others present would be important in analyzing the joke’s performance and could reveal details about the relationship(s) between the teller and the listener(s). Learning about the nature of those relationships through careful observation and consultation with the members of this occupational group would help the folklorist contextualize and comprehend the performance. The folklorist would try to note facial expressions, comments, gestures, and other sorts of reactions and ideally would ask those present why they did or didn’t laugh or what they thought of the joke. It would also be important to talk with the teller about his or her choices: Why did the boss tell the joke at that moment? What did he or she find funny about the joke? There are many ways to approach this performance, but in this context, the power and status relationships among the group members would obviously be crucial in understanding the place of dirty jokes in this group’s interactions.

Folklorists typically try not to assess the “rightness” or “wrongness” of the performed materials (either verbal or nonverbal), apart from analyzing how group members use, share, and react to them within their physical and social contexts. It may be appropriate to talk about a particular group’s social mores and customs and to consider how certain items of folklore or performances may deviate from or reinforce them, but not in a way that judges those items or performances according to preconceived assumptions or ethnocentric concepts. Because our own worldview influences the way we perceive social situations, such judgments are frequently exoteric (outsider) interpretations. Any evaluations of the propriety of a performed text need to be considered within the group’s broad context, as well as the specific performance contexts, and need to be developed in consultation with performers and other group members.
Recognizing Texts in Context: Performance Markers and Framing

When Bauman says that performance links "marked, segregated esthetic genres" with "other spheres of verbal behavior" (1984, 5), he is touching on another crucial element of context: those actions, words, or other signs that let us know a performance is about to take place, is taking place, and is finished. We often call these signs markers, and they are an important part of describing and analyzing performance. They are the signals that tell the participants to pay attention—something important is happening, something that is set apart from (segregated from) the ordinary (Bauman 1984). These markers "frame" performance in much the same way we would frame a picture and hang it on a wall. The frame creates a social space with clear boundaries in which performers and audiences take part in the artistic and evaluative process. Within that space, fiction, history, story, tradition, art, teaching, all exist within the narrated or performed expressive event outside the normal realms and constraints of reality or time. The frame itself calls attention to and allows us to interpret what happens within the frames, both the text that is performed (narrated event) and the entire performance (the narrative event) (M. Hufford 1995).

Sometimes certain language devices or actions mark the beginnings and ends of performances. Familiar formulaic phrasings, such as "Once upon a time," often used to start a fairy tale or bedtime story, might be used to signal the beginning of structured performances and conversational performances. The fairy tale ending "and they lived happily ever after" might be used at the end of a spoken or written fairy tale to let readers know the story is finished. Some African folktales, for example, begin with the phrase "A story, a story let it go, let it come" or "Another story is coming. Stop talking and listen" and might end with "And so ends my story." (Abrahms 1983, 14–15; see also specific folk tales, 297, 312, 313, 331). Clearly stated verbal markers generally signal to performers and listeners that it is time to pay attention, guide them through the performance, and let them know when it is time to relax or perhaps comment on the performance they have just seen. These kinds of markers are clearly announced and intended to purposely draw attention to the events within the frame. They occur within a situation that is already heightened—that is, different from everyday experience.

Verbal performances also occur within and throughout ordinary experience, and these encounters include clearly marked expressive acts of communication. Even verbal folklore that is not narrative in nature (that is, not a story with a beginning, middle, and end) is typically signaled, or marked, with words or gestures. A proverb, for example, might be introduced with the phrase "You know what they say . . ." or a joke by the phrase "Did you hear
the one about . . . ?” The beginning of a narrative of importance might be indicated by the teller’s looking around the group, being sure to catch each person’s eye, then leaning forward and lowering her voice to a stage whisper. But markers are not always direct or static; we all recognize and use more seamless markers in our everyday experiences. Not all of them are fixed; their form depends on the structure of the performance, not on the structure of the narrative.

As an example of a more conversational performance, imagine a situation in which a group of coworkers is complaining about heavy rush hour traffic. As they gripe about the grinding commute, one person says, “You know what, last Tuesday morning, just as I was getting on the highway, I saw this guy in a red pickup truck who . . .” Because she has gained the listeners’ attention by including a direct address (“You know what”), given localizing details (“last Tuesday morning”), and referred to a sequence of events that involved her (“just as I was,” “I saw this guy”), the others perk up their ears and start listening to their friend’s words in a new way. They now expect to hear a personal narrative about her experience, with a beginning, middle, and end, perhaps with some vivid descriptive details, which somehow comments on the problem of fighting rush hour traffic congestion. The listeners also are invited, by virtue of the fact that the performer has announced a narrative with artistic dimensions, to judge how well the teller recounts her story and whether or not it fits the conversation context and to comment, if they choose, on the narrative. They might gasp in amazement or look puzzled or invite more details, depending on their judgment of the performance.

Performances like the personal experience narrative described above are not always marked by a particular well-known phrase or sentence that tells the listeners explicitly that the story is over, and the signals may not be verbal at all. The signal may be gestural, physical, or tonal—a certain expression on the performer’s face, a wave of a hand, a long pause, or raising or lowering the voice. Performers may also use their own unique signals that are usually phrased or placed in such a way that the listeners understand the frame. These personal markers, even if they do have an idiosyncratic spin, resemble traditional folk-tale endings that comment on the story, such as “And that’s a true story” or “And so the story goes.” They are recognizable as framing devices that set the narrative performance outside everyday conversation.

Some evaluative markers—like laughter at a particular point or at the end of a tale, in which both the performer and listeners announce their agreement that the story (or its performance) was humorous—provide performers with feedback they can use to decide what to say or do next. If audience members
laugh at the end of a story, it may signal both their understanding that the anecdote is finished and their appreciation of the story. The laughter may also signal a kind of approval of the message as well as the skill with which the teller performed the tale: imitated voices, dramatic pauses, the creation of tension and suspense. Their encouragement could give the teller an opening to begin another story (“they like that one; here's another they'll like,” he may think) or, if tellers are taking turns, allow a new teller to begin a story she hopes will be as well received.

Most of our discussion of framing and performance markers has focused on verbal texts, but framing is an important concept in all types of folklore performances. Rituals, as we have already discussed, are frequently marked off or framed by behavioral and verbal cues. Customary behaviors are often framed within everyday experience in much the same way as personal narrative. For example, if someone boast or makes a claim, he or she may then knock on wood to avoid tempting fate into causing the opposite to happen: “I’ve never failed an exam in my life—knock on wood!” This custom arises in response to something that may be said in ordinary conversation, and it has a clear beginning and end.

No matter the type of item being performed, good listeners know how to pick up on the signals that begin and end performances so they know what they should do: pay attention, clap, laugh, get ready to listen to the next story, or perhaps just go home. Good performers, likewise, know how to frame their performances successfully so audiences will be ready to fulfill their active roles as listeners, judges, and perhaps commentators. The frame creates the artistic context that enhances enjoyment and invites evaluation and interpretation.

Reflexivity

An astute folklorist would apply careful reflexive analysis to uncover, to the best of her ability, the impact of her own shifting roles as a performance unfolds. The term reflexivity refers to anything in the performance and surrounding contexts that reflects, looks back upon, or comments upon itself (Berger and Del Negro 2002a, 63). The reflexive dimension of folklore is part of its context.

Folklorists need to be aware of how their own presence during a performance might influence things. Merely having someone from the outside watching and recording or taking notes could affect how comfortable the performers and audience members feel with presenting material, for instance. Taking a reflexive approach in analysis means we need to be honest with ourselves and look critically at the interactions among performers, audiences, and folklorists.
For instance, if a narrative performance takes place within a setting where the performer(s) and audience are all family members, a certain level of openness and shared experience may exist between them that would allow fairly personal, familiar content to be shared without the participants fearing disapproval. However, in storytelling sessions where outsiders (folklorists, perhaps) are present, the teller may avoid content that would be hard to interpret outside the family context. When the folklorist analyzes the features of the performance, she has to incorporate her understanding of how the absence or presence of outsiders might have influenced the performer’s choices. Not doing so will weaken the interpretation because it ignores a critical element that could have had significant impact on the performance.

If the folklorist is herself a member of the family group, it would be relevant to consider how her role as both collector and observer influenced the performance, and even the analysis. Might her family members have treated her differently, in subtle, perhaps unconscious ways that influenced the content or sequences of stories, for example? If she interrupted the performer to ask a question, was that question seen as an unwelcome intrusion by an outsider (in her role as observer) or accepted as a natural part of the flow of telling stories, as it had usually been? Might personal assumptions or biases based on exoteric experience be wrong, or at least incomplete? It is also important to think about the implied assumptions we bring to the analysis of any performance, rather than rely solely on insider knowledge, or even particular interpretations we have learned.

A reflexive perspective offers a critical and interpretive stance that incorporates the researcher’s experience into the analysis. One contribution is the insight personal experience provides. Reflexive discussions from the researcher’s personal point of view as both an observer and participant can enrich the overall interpretations. For instance, a folklorist who is also a member of the group he or she is working with, in a family, perhaps, could explain details that an outsider might miss or could provide clues based on experiences about why certain events occurred in a particular way. On the other hand, being part of a group may mean we are too close to the context to see clearly; that is, we may be so emotionally or personally connected to the group that it may be difficult to be objective or critical. Careful reflexive discussion of the insights, limitations, or problems that may result from our connections (or lack thereof) with the group add value to interpretations and provide an honest assessment of our own roles. This kind of interpretation also opens up possibilities for other folklorists, who may be able to add their own interpretations that fill in gaps or offer alternatives.
On a deeper level, reflexivity itself is an interpretation. Many folklorists study the ways the shifting roles of folklorists, performers, and group members interact to create a complex performance and lead to many layers of meaning and awareness. One such folklorist is David Hufford, who has considered the ways scholars employ personal observation and experience, consciously and unconsciously, in their interpretations of group beliefs and belief-centered practices (1995). Basically, reflexivity blurs the lines among performers, audiences, scholars, and group members and highlights the dynamics of performance.

The awareness of reflexive dimensions in folklore has contributed to methodological approaches to folklore study and ethnography known as reflexive or reciprocal ethnography. This methodology stresses the importance of collaboration in analyzing folklore performances and actively seeks to foreground the interpretations of group members and performers along with the scholarly interpretations of the folklorist. Reciprocal ethnography incorporates the voices of scholars, performers, and group members into published analyses, acknowledging the shared expressive and communicative qualities of folklore performance. (We will cover reciprocal ethnography in detail in chapter 7, “Fieldwork and Ethnography.”)

Emergence

The term emergence as used in folklore studies can be looked at in several ways: in the sense of something new coming into existence; in the sense of something that arises out of (emerges from) a particular performance context; and in the sense that every performance differs from every other, that new texts emerge through performance even if the same material is being performed and the same people are always present.

One way to think about emergence, in the sense of something new forming, is to consider how folk groups form and evolve. We talked about the qualities of folk groups earlier and described the many ways they form, depending on the members' interests and the contexts in which they come together. In this way, we could say that groups emerge within contexts, just as performances do. The folklore groups share changes as the groups evolve together, and new traditions and customs may emerge over time and with members' interaction. High school sports teams, for example, often have traditions and rituals that each group of athletes shares with the team members that follow them. Even if teams do some of the same things from year to year, the specific members of the
group continually change. As a result, a group might introduce a new custom or ritual that emerges as a new tradition.

New forms of folklore have also emerged as the ways people communicate have changed. Chain letters, in which one person sends a letter to a group of others and instructs them to make copies of the letter and do the same or a terrible tragedy will befall them, have been commonly circulated through the mail. Now, chain letters circulate frequently through email and have taken on their own special characteristics related to the method of transmission. Email itself has created or influenced entire categories of expression: emoticons, contemporary legends about employees who accidentally send scathing complaints intended for coworkers to their bosses, and messages in which the sender receives a written or visual “reward,” sometimes the punch line of a joke, only after he or she has forwarded the message to a certain number of people.

The Internet has generated what might be termed whole new emergent genres, which folklorists have begun to explore. Online user profiles, for instance, can be read as folklore texts that present user identities and personas (Westerman 2009). Monica Foote, in “Userpicks: Cyber Folk Art in the Early 21st Century” (2007), looks at avatars, which are icons that serve as conscious expressions of personal identity or moods and have developed into traditional means of establishing and sharing online personas. Another interesting topic is the popular Internet phenomenon of memes, which are ideas, texts, and images that are passed around through websites, social media, and blogs and often rely on fixed structures to communicate complex jokes and commentary. One recent popular meme is “Tourist Guy,” a visual text in which, initially, a figure was photoshopped into a photograph of the observation deck of the World Trade Center, presumably seconds before the plane hit the tower on September 11, 2001. Anonymous Internet users then copied the man’s image into other photographs showing him in a variety of situations and locations all around the world. The series of images became a sort of absurdist joke, copied and adapted by thousands of people. According to Michael Dylan Foster (2010), an unsuccessful attempt to create a similar “Vacation Gal” meme featuring Michelle Obama failed presumably because people simply didn’t like it, partly because it was too conscious an attempt to create a meme. The failure of “Vacation Gal” to catch on demonstrates that in this case emergence required people to accept the text in order to be willing to pass it along into the traditional joke cycle.

Another aspect of emergence is related to traditions that change form over time or have different meanings for different members of a group. Traditions associated with objects, customs, or rituals, for example, may sometimes emerge into narratives and form an important part of a group’s identity. In the Stephens
family, Martine's father's “dinner bucket,” a metal pail in which he carried his lunch into the coal mine, held many meanings for family members. Her father used it as a utilitarian object that carried his food and water. Each day he saved a few pieces of food and a little water, and when he returned home from work, he gave these to his children. The children waited eagerly for these treats, and this family custom was part of the intimate link between them and their father. But the leftover food was also associated with a coal miners’ belief that the children were not aware of: many miners said it was bad luck to finish all the food in the dinner bucket. Miners shared this belief and practice, perhaps as one way to make sure they would always have some food or water in the event that an accident or cave-in occurred and they needed to wait for rescue. Now, Martine’s father’s bucket is a reminder of the family connections as well as an example of a central element of her father’s occupational group. The dinner bucket itself, the custom of sharing leftover food, and the expression of the belief about saving food all appear frequently in her family’s stories about her father. Folklore about a single object (or the object itself as text) can transform as new meanings emerge, so that it may be associated with custom, belief, and narrative. In this case, these emergent meanings have become important features of the family’s definition of itself as a coal mining family in relation to the father’s occupation.
In many groups, folklore emerges in a response to an event. Americans experienced an example of new folklore emerging from experience when the space shuttle Challenger exploded in 1986. Not many hours had passed after the media reported news of the explosion before jokes began to circulate about the event. Many people were at first offended by the jokes and regarded them as being in poor taste; folklorists, however, understood the emergence of these jokes as a response to an experience we had difficulty comprehending. As tragic as the explosion was, Americans began to share jokes that may have helped to express the general discomfort, sadness, and anxiety they felt in the aftermath of the tragedy. Similar jokes emerged after the shuttle Columbia exploded in 2003. Interestingly, the structure of the jokes, as well, was often the same—frequently a question-answer format, with content adapted to suit the particular context.

Another national tragedy that engendered jokes and other forms of humor was, perhaps surprisingly, the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania. Humor related to the events of September 11 focused on American pride and even the ability to recover from the shock
and pain of the events. For many, creating and telling the jokes was a kind of coping mechanism that allowed them to express their feeling of confusion and anger. Bill Ellis (2002) analyzes the verbal and visual jokes that began to circulate shortly after the disaster, discusses how they were shared, and describes how they evolved from expressions of defiance and anger to predictions of triumph over terrorism and assertions of hope and survival. Some were less clearly expressions of attitudes toward terrorism and fell into the sick joke category. The jokes differed from country to country and reflected each nation’s own relationship to the United States as well as its take on the threat of terrorism. These and similar jokes commonly develop after tragic events, particularly, as Ellis points out, when those events are widely reported and heightened by the electronic media (2001, 2002).

These more general or obvious examples illustrate broad types of emergence, showing new folklore coming about as a result of large-scale changes, for example, a change in group membership, in medium of transmission, or in physical or psychological context. Yet, in a broader sense, we might say a text—whether a story, song, dance, ritual, or any other sort of folklore—doesn’t really exist until it is performed. The specific text of that performance exists only for the time the performance lasts. If you have ever attended several showings of the same movie, this phenomenon is probably familiar: you see and hear new things in every viewing, and your experience of the event differs depending on the time of day, the people you go to the theater with, perhaps even your mood. Performers who repeat the same material again and again experience this quality of performance firsthand. Even if the content doesn’t vary much (a play script, for example, or an aria in an opera), performers might emphasize a certain line differently each night or even forget a line and have to improvise. The audience might react with laughter during one performance and with silence at the same point another time. In essence, because the experiences of audiences and performers constantly change and evolve, both from performance to performance and during a single performance, a new text emerges with every performance.

Every performance differs from every other, depending on the context and the group in which the performance occurs (Bauman 1984, 37 [referring to Georges 1969, 319]). Bauman explains that this “emergent quality of performance resides in the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of the participants, within the context of particular situations” (38). In other words, everything that goes on during a performance, everything that surrounds it, affects the nature of the performance. The text itself may change, perhaps as a performer adapts material to suit the audience’s needs or responses. If the audience is restless, a performer may shorten a story,
for example, or if the audience’s attention lags, the performer may insert a few spicy details to liven things up. Albert Lord (1960), in his study of oral epic poetry, said that “the length of the song depends on the audience” (in Bauman 1984, 17). The performance context affects the performer’s choices, and those choices affect the text itself.

Folklore That Pushes the Boundaries

During performance, the relationships between audience members and performers can shift and change. Audiences become caught up in the performance and, for its duration, regard performers in a special way—as being outside the bounds of ordinary experience. In this sense, a new kind of social structure emerges from the performance (Bauman 1984, 42), and this shift in perspective gives the performer a temporary power over the audience. As Bauman says, “When the performer gains control in this way, the potential for transformation of the social structure may become available to him as well” (44). In other words, the usual rules of social interaction don’t have to apply; the performer can say and do things during the performance that would be completely unacceptable outside the performance context.

This is why, Bauman suggests, we sometimes have such uneasy relationships with performers. We admire them, perhaps even revere them, but at the same time we regard them as being outside the mainstream, somehow set apart from the rest of us. As outsiders, they sometimes behave in ways that surprise and shock us. Think of the stories we read in entertainment magazines or see on television about celebrities who trash hotel rooms, steal merchandise from stores, or generally behave badly in public. Or they might be outspoken advocates of particular causes or might, perhaps outrageously or profanely, point out problems they see with the world. A late-night talk show host does a monologue about absurd things the president said or did that day, and while we are laughing, we might also be wondering about whether or not our president is such a good guy after all or whether our political system is really working. Performers show us what it looks like to break or change the rules: they can subvert (challenge and undermine) the accepted rules and limits and reveal the potential that all of us have to push against our group’s standards. As Bauman puts it, “In the special emergent quality of performance, the capacity for change may be highlighted and made manifest to the community” (1984, 45).

On a basic level, this transformative power of performers and performances generates one of the most entertaining aspects of sharing folklore: it allows us to play, creatively and safely, with what is permissible or acceptable within our group’s social and cultural contexts. Singing a parody of a religious hymn, for
instance, opens up an opportunity to have a little fun during what could be a boring church service, or creating an unflattering private nickname for an overly strict teacher may help students vent frustration while eluding punishment. In most ways, this potential for folklore to enable us to question society and authority is positive. As part of the process of forming and expressing identity, folklore frequently tests the limits of what groups accept and perceive as being appropriate and may allow us to question and challenge, even subvert, social norms. Many effective protests against oppressive or unethical organizations and institutions have been launched or supported through folklore. Songs written and sung by labor organizers in the 1930s, for instance, helped to bring issues related to the rights of industrial workers to the forefront of politics and social activist movements. Similarly, political jokes are a familiar way that members of democratic societies express their views, critique government policies and officials, and help to keep political dialogues open and ongoing.

On the other hand, this is one element of folklore and groups that is sometimes uncomfortable for us to consider. It is important to take care not to romanticize groups and folklore, assuming that they are always charming or reaffirming when, as a matter of fact, folklore can communicate negative messages. Folklore can, for instance, communicate negative assumptions about race, gender, and social class, or any group we identify as “other.” Such negative messages are apparent in groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, which teaches members how to function in destructive ways both inside and outside mainstream society. Negative messages expressed in folklore may be more subtle and less formalized, too, such as when groups of children share rhymes or songs that make fun of people from other cultures. Such expressions can seem fairly innocuous—silly songs that poke fun at fans of a rival sports team, for example, or jokes about absentminded professors. But in the extreme, assumptions expressed through folklore about other groups can suggest or reinforce inappropriate and even dangerous attitudes. The belief that groups of young urban men who dress alike and listen to hip-hop must belong to street gangs promotes racist stereotypes about urban culture. “Blonde jokes,” as innocent or funny as they may seem, can potentially reinforce the sexist notion that it’s acceptable to ridicule women or that women aren’t intelligent. The customary idea most Americans learn when they are children that boys shouldn’t wear pink can play into more complex homophobic attitudes. Contemporary legends about Chinese restaurants serving dog meat instead of beef can engender fear and mistrust of Chinese Americans.

This aspect of folklore analysis can cut pretty deep: we have to consider race and gender prejudices and stereotypes, social inequities, hierarchies based on
economic power, and class distinctions as serious topics, certainly. Many of these assumptions are connected with the esoteric and exoteric elements of group identity and expression we discussed earlier. Unfortunately, folklore can have negative connotations mixed in with art, humor, and playfulness; folklore unifies a group and reinforces identity, but not all of a group's shared characteristics are necessarily positive. Some folklore reinforces uncomfortable stereotypes and attitudes that are so deeply entrenched we don’t even recognize that they are part of the worldview of a group.

We are not saying that all folklore like this is inherently bad or always leads to such conclusions; nor are we suggesting that we should not study such texts or groups. All aspects of folklore are legitimate topics of study. But we do need to be aware that we express ideas about others through our folklore and we do, in part, define ourselves by those ideas. Folklore helps us form and express identity in the midst of an always complex, sometimes confusing, social context, in which our sense of who we are is frequently questioned and challenged. Some of the negative elements of folklore are part of this confusing, shifting social palette. Understanding the potentially negative elements in folklore allows us to analyze dynamics within and among groups, recognize the interplay of contextual influences, be aware of our own biases, and engage in more honest scholarly discussions. Astute folklorists incorporate their awareness of these complex challenges into their discussions, don’t shy away from them, and deal with them openly.

Example: Performers that Transcend Roles and Rules

Simply being a performer of folklore may define someone as having an expanded role within a group, and performers often transcend limiting roles within their communities through their artistic roles. By pushing limits, performers can change their own status in a group. A familiar example of the ways performing folklore can change the power dynamic in a group is the case of a high school class clown. Frequently, the class clown is a person who is not considered popular in the usual sense of attractiveness, athletic skill, or economic status. The class clown makes just the right sarcastic remark during the world’s most boring math class or teases the football star at lunch, somehow managing not to get beat up too badly. The clown tests the limits of what is acceptable by being funny or acting out in wild behavior what the rest of the group might not dare to try. While the clown may not be popular—that is, may never be elected class president or date the richest kid in school—he or she, at least while performing, changes status. No longer dismissed as a geek, a nerd, or a brain, by virtue of performing goofy imitations or telling a silly joke, the clown plays an accepted, perhaps valued, role in the group.
The class clown is an example of an important character in folklore studies: the **trickster**. Tricksters appear in the tales of many cultures, and their presence helps to illustrate how folklore performances and performers can challenge or even overturn existing social systems and structures. Some well-known examples of tricksters are Coyote, who appears in many Native American stories; Anansi the spider, who is central in much West African and Jamaican folklore; and Hermes, messenger to the gods in ancient Greek tales, who was also known for his ability to trick the gods. A couple of frequently discussed tricksters from popular culture are the American cartoon figures of the Road Runner and Bugs Bunny. Bugs sometimes gets into trouble and may be fooled occasionally but almost always manages to escape or triumph in the end, a major feature of trickster tales. No doubt you have encountered other tricksters in many familiar texts. What is most important to know about tricksters is that they constantly break rules, test the limits of authority, and push the boundaries of what is acceptable or even possible in society. Tricksters’ antics are entertaining—we laugh at their mistakes and the way they fool or confuse others, and in the process we may learn to see ourselves and our societies more clearly.

In one Native American Coyote tale, for example, Coyote meets a young boy who is searching for a whip-poor-will he has been listening to, so he can watch it sing. Jealous of the boy’s preference for the bird’s song over his own, Coyote asks the boy to listen to his howl and tell him how he likes it. The boy covers his ears, says he still prefers the whip-poor-will, and sets off again in search of the bird. Coyote slyly offers to lead the boy there by a shortcut. The boy agrees, but then Coyote leads him over rough ground, where the boy falls in brush and trips in gopher holes. They reach the whip-poor-will’s location, but by then it is morning, the boy is scratched and bruised (not to mention humiliated when he realizes he has been tricked), and both the whip-poor-will and Coyote are gone. The boy must make his way back home alone, having missed the whip-poor-will entirely. Coyote lies to the boy, fools him, allows him to get hurt, and then leaves him alone far from home—certainly not acceptable things to do to a child—all in the interest of teaching a lesson and getting revenge. Years later, when he is more mature, the boy realizes Coyote taught him important lessons—one of them, to watch out for tricksters like Coyote (see Magoullick 2000 for a discussion of the preceding tale).

Trickster tales like the Coyote story above are prime examples of the way that performances and performers of folklore can subvert or challenge social norms. Trickster performances in the tales playfully and irreverently break taboos or violate rules. Likewise, performing in and listening to performances of trickster tales may act as an entertaining escape valve that allows performers...
and listeners alike to laugh at social restrictions. Barbara Babcock-Abrahams (1975) explains that because the trickster behaves within stories in socially inappropriate or unacceptable ways, he makes it possible for us to imagine escaping the social rules and limitations we face in our real daily lives. And, as Lewis Hyde points out, in addition to crossing socially accepted or imposed boundaries, “there are cases in which trickster creates a boundary, or brings to the surface a distinction previously hidden from sight” (1998, 8). For instance, when Prometheus steals fire from the gods and gives it to humans, he recognizes that a barrier exists between the gods and humanity and then pushes through the barrier. When Anansi, a spider-god trickster in some West African tales, steals all the world’s wisdom and then must release it back into the world after he realizes there is always more wisdom to possess, he first creates a distinction between the wise and the ignorant and then uses newfound wisdom to erase the line. In these kinds of stories, creating and crossing boundaries are certainly related activities, Hyde explains, and so “the best way to describe trickster is to say simply that the boundary is where he will be found—sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there, the god of the threshold in all its forms” (9–10). Tricksters embody the creative, dynamic force inherent in folklore that allows groups to evolve and grow. Trickster tales present us with dilemmas that may stretch our ability to accept people or behavior that falls outside our limits, may enable us to push those limits to a new standard of what’s acceptable, or may, because we react strongly against something the trickster does, reinforce the standards. In the simple act of performance—whether telling, listening, or reading—we, too, can vicariously cross the line of socially acceptable behavior, break the rules, or rewrite the rules entirely.

Aesthetics

Because the text that emerges depends on the people present, folklorists emphasize the experiences of audiences and performers. This analysis extends to the ways in which people evaluate performance. As Bauman said, the marking off or framing of performance creates an expressive event that enhances our awareness and invites evaluation. As the text emerges through performance, the text itself and the overall performance become subject to evaluation. Audiences evaluate the performer’s competence and skill, the text that emerges, the performance itself, and the overall aesthetic effects of the experience.
The study of folklore often involves consideration of embellishments and changes individual performers might make in texts and forms of delivery, as well as their reasons for making them. We can make observations about performers’ voices, gestures, and expressions or consider their stage presence. We can observe audience members’ reactions or responses and analyze what those responses say about their relationships to the performers, their traditions, each other, and their communities. We also might think about how effectively a performer accomplishes the goals of the performance, as performers, artists, and audiences understand them. What, for example, makes a particular performance of a song “good” or “bad”? What makes one painting better than another? What draws listeners into a story? What makes something beautiful?

These kinds of questions elicit responses from the audience to the creative elements, or aesthetic qualities, of a verbal, customary, or material expression or performance. One way of thinking about aesthetics is in terms of what Michael Owen Jones calls the “ohhh-ahhh/ugh-yuck complex” (1987, 173); in other words, when we see or hear an artistic work, we tend naturally to judge or evaluate it, so we react to it, usually with expressions of like or dislike. In his work, Bauman begins by acknowledging the “esthetic dimension of social and cultural life in human communities” (1984, 2) and describes the scholarly use of the term performance as a way “to convey a dual sense of artistic action—the doing of folklore—and artistic event—the performance situation, involving performer, art form, audience, and setting” (4). It is this artistic dimension that, as we have said, invites audiences to respond to and evaluate performances, performers, and creative texts and objects themselves. The artistic elements in folklore get our attention, they interest us, and so we respond to them.

According to Henry Glassie, if something “engages the senses, demanding and gaining the total involvement of the person, it meets aesthetic needs” (1992, 269). Glassie writes that the key to understanding aesthetics is in recognizing how we are affected by the term anesthetic. If we are anesthetized, we feel nothing (269). According to Glassie, “The aesthetic is the opposite. It enlivens the nerves, and when the nerves are excited, when the senses are seeking their own pleasure, leaving no room for boredom, preventing any feeling of alienation, an act is aesthetic and it has met the first requirement of art” (270). Most definitions of folklore refer to the artistic or creative elements of its forms, as in Dan Ben-Amos’s simple definition of folklore as “artistic communication in small groups” (1971, 13). The artistic elements inherent in folklore necessitates a response.

Michael Owen Jones explains that “the aesthetic impulse—a feeling for form and a desire to perfect form—is apparent in dozens of subtle ways in the things we make and do during the course of daily interaction, problem solving, and
the accomplishing of tasks” (1987, 81). We study aesthetics in order to understand and evaluate artistic works, whether verbal, visual, material, or performing arts. Aesthetics is a constant part of the discussion of folklore, whether considering how aesthetics works to shape our ideas of folklore or considering what elements of art stand out most in a group’s judgment or perception of it.

Clearly, there are many problems in evaluating folklore from a mainstream perspective. Applications of rigid rules or evaluative criteria created by mainstream scholars or critics that invite judgments about quality are frequently outsider definitions of what is considered good or pleasing to members of the group and so may create inaccurate or unfair standards that misdirect our analysis of folklore. In order to understand how and why we respond differently to fine arts and folklore and thus evaluate aesthetic qualities in different ways, folklorists have considered the artistic qualities in folklore that distinguish it from fine art. We can distinguish features of folklore that clarify ways that folk groups generally create and evaluate their own artistic expressions.

Living in an Aesthetic World

Step inside the home of Bruce Siple, and you’ll immediately be introduced to the colors, shapes, and objects that Siple loves. As he explains, “I want to live in a house where I see things I like.” Siple displays found objects, made mostly of bright, intensely colored plastic, in patterned installations inside his home. First-time visitors to his home express the kind of “ohhh-ahhh/ugh-yuck” reactions described by Michael Owen Jones (1987) in his work on aesthetics. While Siple says his home rarely elicits obvious ugh-yuck reactions, visitors do sometimes say they could never imagine living in a house like his. In any case, visitors are never neutral—because the place itself is not neutral by any definition or description.

Siple’s work is untraditional in many ways: it’s not decoration; it’s not art hanging on a wall, contained within a frame. It’s art that spills outside the boundaries of our expectations, covering walls and furniture, tables and shelves.

Most of the living room and an entire side room are given to Siple’s displays. In the living room, the coffee table consists of a stack of glass disks of graduated sizes sitting on a silver metal base. On each layer of glass rest precisely arranged, solid-colored red, blue, yellow, and green plastic objects. On the lowest level of the table, tiny cars, buses, and trucks appear to be stalled in traffic behind each other as they circle the table.
rim. Moving higher up the piece, motor vehicles alternate with toy rockets. Oversized, opaque yellow, red, and green whistles intermingle with repetitions of the table itself: clear plastic rings topped with stacked plastic disks and finished off with yellow-orange pen barrels. Items on the small top tiers are more shape and color than identifiable object, until reaching the very top of the work, where a foot-tall orange sippy cup is guarded by a pair of plastic Shriners and a guitar-wielding Godzilla.

This coffee table (which doesn’t really function as a table in the usual sense) is the physical centerpiece of the room, but it’s not the single most dramatic piece in the room. That would be the fireplace mantel, covered with a symmetrically organized array of plastic plates and tumblers, hamster tubes, a variety of animal figures, and other bright items. The side room adjoining the living room is devoted entirely to such visually stunning displays. This room is filled with tall shelves, vertical cases, and other pieces of furniture covered with even more symmetrical collections of bright objects, including toys, pieces of medical equipment, tools, utensils—a nearly endless list of items both familiar and strange to the viewer.

Singling out any theme or category as a focus wouldn’t do the work justice, nor would it bring the viewer a better sense of the meaning of the
The familiar plastic utensils and objects in this portion of one installation take on an abstract aesthetic rhythm and form that transcend their utilitarian functions.

art Siple creates. Visually, Siple doesn’t intend that each piece be seen as a discrete item but rather as an element in a larger composition, echoing qualities of *bricolage*, a process of combining a variety of found items and available materials into a holistic design that means more than the sum of the individual parts. In the act of collecting together bits and pieces of objects from many sources, Siple reflects the spirit of the *bricoleur* in a literal sense; in addition, his combining of elements of art and function by mixing the pedestrian flotsam and jetsam of ordinary life with aesthetic elements like the interplay of color, light, and line fits closely with the Lévi-Straussian concept of cultural bricolage (1971). As Kapchan and Strong (1999) explain, the cultural bricoleur “unhinges forms from their rootedness in history and recombines them in novel ways” (240).

The objects have identities and histories within the social, commercial world; they are recognizable parts of popular culture, mass-produced bits of the visitors’ and artist’s social environments—lunchboxes, pill bottles, curlers, cups, and spoons. Yet these objects are aligned and arranged in ways that form new identities. The concrete *things* in the displays are decontextualized from their original, traditional uses or settings and are recontextualized by the artist—and his guests—as abstract parts of aesthetic compositions, with new identities and histories.
The work is not strictly what most would call fine art or even home decor, nor is it based on entirely mainstream principles, and Siple is not what some would call an outsider artist. Yet like many traditional outsider artists who create visionary environments, Siple expresses an obsessive need to collect, display, and arrange objects inside his home that reflects a fervor similar to that of artists who devote their creations to expressing religious or spiritual values. (See, for example, the work of R. A. Miller and Howard Finster, which we discuss in chapter 3.) Unlike most visionary artists, though, Siple, an avowed atheist, does not conceive a higher purpose (at least not in the religious sense) for his work. But he does, he says, have a strong desire to communicate his ideal of aesthetic form through his art and his dwelling space. When asked about his vision, Siple explained that he sees and creates in some of the displays what he calls a kind of “secular mandala,” an artistic expression of the perfect world—in this case, one based on color, light, form, symmetry, and a sense of whimsy and surprise.

Ultimately, what impresses the visitor most is that Siple’s work is playful, accessible, and open to view and interpret or simply to enjoy as attractive, colorful, arranged collections. The artist is a trickster, playing with, interacting with, and interpreting these familiar items in order to encourage the viewer to do the same, but in new, unexpected ways. The trickster’s role is to act outside the boundaries of accepted taste and decorum in such a way that we react to what the trickster does. As a trickster, Siple does not break serious taboos or challenge ideas of ethical or moral behavior, but his work suggests he intends to catch us off guard, maybe knock us off our sure footing with regard to our concepts of beauty, utility, home decoration, and art. Visitors to Siple’s house contact and cross the boundary between what we label home and exhibit. The marriage of styles, ideas, social assumptions, pop/fine/folk, high class, and lowbrow brings about a new understanding of living room and gallery, art and decoration, play and seriousness and so comments on and challenges traditional assumptions about taste, propriety, and art.

Bruce Siple’s unique perception of the world challenges us to view the things around us differently. In his view, the leftovers of our consumer culture move through our lives like a “constantly flowing river of incidental, overlooked, cast-off” commercial stuff that we just allow to slip away, from objects we don’t use anymore to the packaging that envelops and contains the things we buy. He thinks we see and touch so many ordinary,
mundane things every day that we often fail to notice them and even less often perceive their implicit forms and colors. “Most people look at a cap from a bottle of laundry detergent, and see a cap,” he says, “but I look at it and see something different”—the aesthetic possibilities within and around the cap. He looks at a hamster tube and sees not a part of a pet’s playground, but “a beautiful gesture.” By re-presenting such ordinary, everyday objects as beautiful gestures, by pulling pure light, color, and balance out of our society’s river of castoffs, Siple creates a complex cultural environment based on his vision of the entire world as an aesthetic realm, inviting a response from every person who walks through his front door.

Critic versus Group Consensus

For mainstream or popular arts, we often make judgments about a work’s quality based on the rules or values imposed by a particular school or artistic movement. Fine art is typically evaluated by critics who are acknowledged as the arbiters of taste. Folklore, though, by definition, is evaluated by community consensus, not by an individual with some privileged understanding of what makes art good. In the fine arts, one artist’s new or completely radical expression of a particular idea may often be heralded as a new school or direction in that particular field of art. On the other hand, Barre Toelken says that the artist who creates folklore tends to “reinforce past group aesthetic.” He explains that art can be seen as “a field of tension between conservation of tradition and experimentation, between the solid maintenance of older ideas and the dynamism of new ones.” Artists try to resolve this tension in two different ways, he says. The folk artist, who is “usually allied to culture by ethnic, religious, family, or occupational ties, will tend to resolve the tension in the direction of group consensus.” The fine artist, on the other hand, “will follow the impulse to resolve [the tension] by doing something new and dynamic” (Toelken 1996, 203). Fine art seems to go against the grain, and folklore reflects the group’s values and identity. Toelken makes it clear that neither type of art, fine or folk, is better than the other; they are simply different, with different sets of aesthetics.

Traditionality

Because folklore incorporates traditional ideas and values, one of the ways we can view the aesthetics of folklore is in its connection to traditions. In order to be considered good, examples of folklore need to successfully execute the tradition; that is, they have to express what is lasting and immutable about
that particular genre—its conservative aspects. Food and traditional recipes illustrate this principle well. For example, many families have a special family recipe for meat loaf. Most American meat loaf recipes contain a mix of ground meat, bread crumbs, egg, and herbs, often topped with tomatoes or ketchup and baked in a loaf-shaped pan. If this is what you think of as meat loaf, and a friend served something different that he called meat loaf, you would probably still recognize the dish even if it did not contain exactly the same ingredients in the same proportions. However, what if the loaf were shaped like a dome? Or it did not contain meat, or was made of tuna? Or it had a filling of melted cheese? How far may a meat loaf deviate from a particular structure and still be a meat loaf or still be judged good meat loaf? The quality of your friend’s loaf would have to be evaluated against the standards of the community—in this case, your family’s recipe and preferences. If something doesn’t fulfill the group’s definition of a tradition, the group may not consider it a successful example of that tradition. Your friend’s food may be delicious, but it may also be a lousy meat loaf.

Skill

Skill includes individual expressive details created by artists and performers, within limits agreed upon by artists and audiences, within given folk groups. According to Gerald Pocius, skill is a defining characteristic of art in general, but skill itself is culturally determined and depends on the audience’s or viewer’s determination of how much talent the artist has to have to create a particular work (1995, 423). Skill may also be judged by how complicated the work is and how difficult it was to create (423). Performers themselves define skill based on their understanding of their audiences and their application of their own performance standards (Tallman 1974; K. Goldstein 1991). Audiences judge performers based on how effectively their performances meet the standards of the particular audience or folk group, and the emergent qualities within performance allow performers to place their individual creative skills in front of audiences, inviting evaluation (Bauman 1984).

Skill is crucial in understanding the aesthetics of folklore, but like quality, it cannot be measured in absolute terms. Because folklore arises from and exists within a particular context, it embodies the traditions of the communities that create it. Certainly, then, one way to understand skill is to look at how specific groups evaluate specific objects, verbal expressions, performances, and performers.

Richard S. Tallman’s (1974) work with a Nova Scotia storyteller illustrates how folklorists have approached the study of aesthetics in general and skill in particular. Tallman first of all emphasizes that we can’t consider aesthetics
Recipe Box

*When is a meat loaf not a meat loaf? Do these recipes resemble your family's traditional recipes?*

My Meat Loaf
2 lbs. hamburger
2 eggs
1 1/2 cups bread crumbs
3/4 cup ketchup
1 medium onion, chopped fine
2 strips bacon
1 can (8 oz.) tomato sauce
1/2 tsp. salt

Mix meat, eggs, bread crumbs, ketchup, salt, and onion. Put into loaf pan. Cover with bacon. Pour tomato sauce over the top. Bake one hour at 350 degrees.

Meat Loaf Italiano
1 egg, beaten
1/2 cup cracker crumbs
1/2 cup minced onion
2 cans (8 oz.) Italian tomato sauce
1/2 tsp. oregano
3 cups shredded mozzarella cheese
1/2 tsp. basil
1 tsp. salt
1 clove minced garlic
dash pepper
1 1/2 lbs. ground beef

Combine egg, bread crumbs, onion, 1/3 cup tomato sauce, 1 cup cheese, oregano, basil, salt, and pepper. Mix well and add meat. Mix and shape into a flat rectangle about 10” x 12” on waxed paper. Sprinkle remaining cheese over meat mixture. Roll like a jelly roll and seal ends. Place on rack in shallow pan. Bake one hour at 350 degrees. Remove from oven and drain fat. Pour on the rest of the tomato sauce. Return to oven and bake another 15 minutes.
Cottage Tuna Loaf

1 package (1 lb.) California style cottage cheese
2 eggs, beaten
1/2 tsp. salt
2 cans (7 oz.) tuna
1 cup packaged herb-seasoned bread stuffing
1 cup tomato sauce
1/2 cup chopped onion

Blend cottage cheese, eggs, and salt. Place 1/2 cup mixture in greased 9” x 5” x 3” loaf pan. Mash tuna smooth and blend thoroughly with remaining cottage cheese mixture and remaining ingredients. Place on top of cheese layer. Press down lightly. Bake at 375 degrees for 45–50 minutes. Allow to stand five minutes before unmolding.

without considering context. Because contexts change, it is important to realize, too, that the aesthetic can change and that “the concept of an aesthetic, particularly a folk aesthetic, is dynamic.” In order to get a sense of that dynamic aesthetic, Tallman focuses on one storyteller within one community, because, according to Tallman, “the study of aesthetics is most fruitful when approached in terms of one person’s aesthetic” (121).

Based on his observance of several storytelling sessions and conversations with Bob Coffil, the teller, Tallman identifies several factors that influence Coffil’s selection of tales and his skill as a performer. One of these is his ability to select a repertoire through a process that reflects his “aesthetic response to the broader tradition” (1974, 122). Coffil considered all the tales he had heard
and chose certain ones to tell based on his understanding of the communities' traditional assessment of good stories, and he could create new stories based on the traditional principles he learned from other stories. The performer also showed the ability to fit a story with the context; that is, he knew which story to tell when, based on the storytelling setting, on comments that others made, or on listeners' responses to his stories. Tallman asserts that a good storyteller in this context is one who helps the listener visualize moments in the story, but perhaps more importantly, he suggests that "in order to accomplish this, the performer must have a vivid picture in his mind to tell or describe." Coffil told Tallman that someone might say something that triggered his imagination, "and then I'll picture it, and then I'll tell it" (127). This ability to create images is especially important when telling tall tales, because they are grounded in realism. Thus, if a tale is told as personal experience, set in the real world, its impact depends on the ability of listeners to imagine the incongruous details that help them recognize the fantastic, "untrue" elements of the tale (128).

From his assessment of Coffil's particular aesthetic sense as a performer, Tallman distinguishes some characteristics of the folk narrative aesthetic, which, he says, generally have to do with context, the type (genre) of folklore being performed, the explicitness of the aesthetic (as defined and expressed by the performer), and the degree of skill the community perceives in the performer (which Tallman calls "professionalism"; 122). Tallman's work with Bob Coffil underscores the importance of the performer in understanding, embodying, and articulating the aesthetic that grows out of the community. In a related analysis, Kenneth Goldstein emphasizes the need to consult with performers about their own criteria for defining a skillful performer (1991). He discusses the concept of "bigness" as a way the folk song performers he talked with evaluated a "good" folk song and a "good" performer. Bigness, as the singers describe it, refers to the size of the performer's repertoire—that is, how many songs the singer knows, how lengthy the songs are, how complete the lyrics are, and the forcefulness and expressive qualities of the performer's voice (168).

Obviously, the specific aesthetic criteria Tallman and Goldstein gathered from the performers they worked with may not necessarily apply to all genres or in all cultures or folk groups, but their approaches illustrate a framework for talking about aesthetic responses within a particular community. Because each group may have its own definition of what makes a performer or performance good, we should ask artists, performers, and audiences what criteria they use to evaluate the quality of their community's artistic expression, in order to enrich our interpretation.
Practicality

One distinguishing feature of some folklore texts is that they often (but not always) have a practical role in the community. In fact, as Gerald Pocius points out, art has often been defined as that which is not practical, and this has confused the idea of aesthetics, especially as applied to the study of folklore. Pocius explains, with reference to William Bascom, that “historically, the issue of whether items were useful or artistic was central to the concept of what constituted art. What was considered art was limited to those things ‘with elaboration beyond point of utility’” (1995, 420). Since folklore, in many cases, combines the utilitarian and the artistic, the fine art concepts of aesthetics are not always applicable to the evaluation of folklore. Quilts, pots, bowls, pitchers, and baskets all perform obvious practical functions. A pitcher may be pretty to look at, but if it can’t hold water, it isn’t a very good pitcher. Sometimes, then, one important element in folk art is that it may have to be able to perform its job well. That practical aspect of the folk aesthetic can be considered along with the artistic merits of the piece.

Seeing practicality as a feature of folklore may be contested because it can’t be applied in all cases. Woodcarvings in the form of animal shapes or intricate puzzles, for example, are often created for the enjoyment of creating them and for exhibiting an artist’s skill or creativity. They aren’t utilitarian objects and, in that sense, come closer to fitting the “art for art’s sake” definition. And what about songs, stories, verbal folklore—do they have practical applications or uses? Not on the surface, perhaps, although many folklorists would say verbal lore may have certain purposes—to instruct or describe certain types of traditional behavior, for example. (Keep in mind, too, that even in the case of these more purely artistic items, elements of consensus, traditionality, and skill are evident.) Practicality is not a feature of all types of folklore, but it can be a useful way to understand how some kinds of folklore operate in a community, which makes folklore meaningful to the community in which it is expressed, and how it is different from mainstream forms of art.

The Nature of Aesthetic Response

Even with these very loose parameters of consensus, traditionality, skill, and practicality to guide us in considering evaluations of the art in folklore, it is clear that there is no single set of standards or characteristics that can be applied to all examples of a particular genre, and certainly not from the outside. What’s more, as we have seen, standards differ from group to group and from performer to performer.

Diane E. Goldstein addresses these issues in her evaluation of testimony narratives based on her fieldwork in an American evangelical church (1995,
31). She identifies the significant characteristics that church members use to evaluate the competence and power of a particular narrative performance. She describes an aesthetic of storytelling for this group in this context that she calls a "competence continuum," which acknowledges a "complex system of variables" (32). The two ends of this continuum are marked by simple participation at one end and a moving spiritual impact on congregation members at the other end. In the middle lie "the rules and norms for genre performance which include the constraints and aesthetics of particular genres and events." These would include familiar elements of narrative and linguistic performance, such as the use of metaphor, rhythm, and other verbal devices. There is one higher category of competence, but it is reserved as beyond judgment: "speech which is believed to be directly inspired by God" (35).

In the church Goldstein studied, members call this kind of narrative expression sharing. According to Goldstein, sharing "is seen as an attitude, an experience, an ethic and aesthetic, and ultimately as the reason for all encounters . . . analogous to a sacrament" (1995, 32). Church members value the act of sharing more than they value a well-crafted performance. In this instance, the group's aesthetic has to do with belief and how effectively the narrative communicates spiritual experience. If the narrative doesn't guide listeners to powerful religious experience, it isn't as highly valued, regardless of how well it might fit an outsider concept of an effectively performed story.

Goldstein's example illustrates the connection in folklore between communication and artistic expression and shows the relative nature of art. The notion of relativity extends beyond the fairly simple understanding that what one group considers art may not be considered art by another group, although that is certainly part of the definition. Relativity in this case also relates to the definition of what art is and how it is defined in terms of aesthetic response. As Jones reminds us, our notion of art can encompass the everyday, as long as the aesthetic impulse is evident in viewers and audiences. If art is something we have an aesthetic response to, then anything we respond to aesthetically contains, by definition, artistic qualities.

The members of the evangelical church in Goldstein's study find art in—that is, they respond aesthetically to—the religious testimonies of their fellow members. As Goldstein puts it, the group determines competence "based on the congregation's knowledge of the individual speaker, the speaker's past and potential performances, indications of the grace of God in emergent performance, and perceived motives of narration" (1995, 32). Goldstein explains that members of the congregation know each other well and know how frequently individuals share their experiences and how actively they participate in the life
of the church and community. They value a story by an experienced person, even if it is told clumsily, more than a story by a newer or less experienced person who tells a story with skill. Part of the group’s evaluation of the art of spiritual sharing has to do with whether or not it communicates spiritual experience. In this sense, these verbal narratives have a practical application for church members: to enrich their connection to God. The response is to the teller as well as to the story.

So where does all this leave us in understanding the evaluation of goodness or effectiveness in folklore? Since we can’t rely on a single, overarching standard, we need to look at texts and the group, as well as at the nature of aesthetics, for answers. Michael Owen Jones proposes that the aesthetic denotes “a system of philosophical discourse and articulated principles regarding form.” In other words, aesthetics involves an understood set of standards and a way of talking about those standards as they relate to a text or performance. Aesthetics, not necessarily the artistic object, Jones says, “is the subject for consideration” (1987, 170). Jones approaches aesthetics in terms of responses—that is, the ways audiences and viewers react when they encounter a created object, text, or performance. He provides several useful terms that describe the nature of aesthetics:

- aesthetic attitude
- aesthetic response
- aesthetic judgment
- taste

Jones writes that an aesthetic attitude is a way in which people respond to or are willing to be affected by something artistic. In other words, when we encounter something artistic, we are willing and prepared to perceive it as having artistic qualities and to respond in some way. The concept of aesthetic response is closest to Glassie’s suggestion that the aesthetic “engages the senses” (1992, 269). Jones reminds us that these responses can be either positive or negative. Either will elicit a reaction comprising an “intellectual state and physiological condition” (1987, 172) not expressed in relation to a formal system of criteria—the ohhh—ahhh/ugh—yuck reaction we talked about earlier. More sophisticated than aesthetic response is aesthetic judgment. Jones suggests judgment is evaluative, derived from one’s response, and is actually the expression of that response. When we judge art, we think about how and why we respond and what in the work has led us to that response. As Bauman suggests, audiences judge performances based on the competence and skill of performers (1984). Skill and competence depend, in part, on how well
the performer knows the conventions and expectations of the audience, in terms of what makes a good performance (11). The audience members’ aesthetic reaction, then, grows out of their willingness to be affected by art, their heightened experience of that art, and their judgment of the work based on their group’s criteria.

Underlying aesthetic reactions, Jones argues, is taste. We all recognize that taste is a major influence on one’s response to a creative text. “I may not know art, but I know what I like” is a phrase people often use in prefacing their responses to a piece of art or music, the type of creative text most people readily judge. Those who have a response based on more than taste are often assumed to be critics or experts. Scholars are not immune to this elitist perception and often refer to taste as though it is a lesser form of critique. Jones cites two authors, James West and Dan Crowley, whose work tells us that “the matter of taste is crucial to understanding the nature of aesthetic response and aesthetic judgment. As such, taste should be the primary concern in discussions of aesthetics” (1987, 173).

Simply put, taste is about what we like and what we don’t like. In some small towns and suburbs, for instance, lawn art is very popular. Some residents place life-size concrete or plastic geese on their porches or front lawns, and often they dress these geese in elaborate costumes, depending on the seasons or holidays. Some may be dressed in the uniforms of homeowners’ favorite sports teams. Neighbors and commuters passing through the neighborhoods may look forward to the season when the baby geese begin to carry their schoolbooks and wear rain slickers and boots. These sculptures and their decorative clothing may not suit the taste of everyone in the neighborhood, and some neighbors may disapprove of them. But those who display the geese see them as artistic embellishments to their property and enjoy sharing ideas and patterns for goose accessories.

Personal preferences are obviously less global than aesthetics, but they affect individual expressions of aesthetic response and judgment. Therefore, it is important for folklorists to consider these personal expressions as part of their study of folklore. “What is required,” Jones says, “and what all of us possess as a fundamental feature of our humanity, is a feeling for form affected by multiple experiences and expressed in various ways” (1987, 175). Jones urges us to see that the “high art” idea of the aesthetic is only one piece of the picture and that folklorists should concentrate on studying the “people factor” of aesthetic attitude, response, and judgment. Perceiving aesthetic quality is an activity that audiences and artists perform together. Basically, aesthetics reside in us.
Personal Narrative in Performance

It might be difficult to imagine that an ordinary person’s ordinary story of his or her experiences might be deemed worthy of study. However, this type of story—a personal narrative—is the epitome of folklore in that it is such an everyday, human mode of expression yet is still a creative manifestation of one’s
values, beliefs, and attitudes. Personal narratives are framed and performed artistic expressions, with both a recognizable structure of the performance and sometimes a familiar structure in the narrative itself.

Personal narratives surface during everyday conversations as well as in more distinct storytelling sessions, and their emergence is highly dependent on the context recognized by both the storyteller and audience. Listeners recognize storytelling performances as a mode of entertainment or communication; there is a “storytelling tradition” (Stahl 1977, 18). In addition to knowing that people tell stories, members of an audience recognize the performance markers that indicate or frame a story. When someone turns to you and says, “One time when . . . ,” you know that a story is coming. Such opening markers are part of a typical performance by a storyteller, whether that teller is presenting a personal narrative or a narrative or legend that belongs to a larger cultural repertoire. Stahl suggests that “the tall tale or lie in particular could not be understood without the personal narrative tradition as a frame of reference” (18). In other words, without our familiarity with the markers that set up a personal story, a joke or tall tale begun in a similar fashion would not be effective. Part of the fun of these kinds of verbal performances is that they play with our expectations. We expect a personal narrative to follow such natural or conversational story openings, but the obviously fictional twists clue us into the fact that the teller is doing something different. Our awareness of how a personal experience narrative is set up is what allows us to understand the surprise and get the joke.

Not only does someone telling a story know how to cue the listening audience, a performer is frequently aware of when to tell a story and which story to tell. A person’s awareness of when it is appropriate to share narratives may indicate membership in a group. An effective personal narrative shows a teller’s awareness of performance structure and narrative structure and invites evaluation from its audience. The audience plays its part by evaluating the performance based in part on awareness of this appropriate time and content. The aesthetic response or evaluation allows us to see the appropriateness of the performance context. More simply, the audience’s response to the story and the teller’s own awareness of how well it fits the situation are part of the storytelling performance. Whether the evaluation is overtly expressed by those listening to the narrative or covertly conveyed as a cultural meaning or significance that the performer may be aware of, a story’s “traditional attitude,” according to Stahl’s discussion of personal narratives, is an important feature (1977, 20).

The context in which a personal narrative is shared is an important element of its place in a group’s folklore, and its structure is important, too. A personal narrative may have a clear and satisfying narrative structure that includes the
same type of arc that appears in more literary types of narratives: a beginning, middle, and end; defined characters; and a story that builds to a climax and resolution. In addition to the narrative itself possessing a clear structure, the performance will include markers that frame it as both opened and closed.

A narrative performance can be traditional, and the narrative itself may also be traditional because of its content. Stories can express group and individual identity, one feature that establishes the traditionality of this kind of text. Individuals’ beliefs and knowledge are affected by the people within their social and familial groups, so their stories often reflect these group attitudes. The collective nature of the attitudes and values illustrated in an individual’s stories helps place the stories in a particular group’s tradition. In other words, concepts important to the group are often expressed in personal narratives. An individual story may also become, over time, a part of its teller’s own repertoire. Sandra Stahl explains that a narrative becomes part of a particular teller’s repertoire because it reflects an attitude or concept significant to the teller; it doesn’t simply relate to a single moment’s conversation (1977, 24). Stories that express a teller’s values and attitudes become part of an individual tradition of storytelling, emerging in different situations in which a teller can communicate by performing his or her narrative.

Personal narratives are unique in that they frequently arise within conversations, and this conversational setting creates a different type of evaluation. When these narratives appear as part of conversations, people often feel free to interject comments and interact with the text and performer. Evaluation of the whole performance depends on the group’s aesthetic sense and the performer’s understanding and expression of the group’s aesthetics. The narrative structure and evaluative interjections must successfully follow the pattern, themes, and flow of a conversation. For example, someone tells a story about her bad day, beginning with losing her car in a crowded parking garage at a downtown shopping center. One listener might express sympathy by adding, “Oh, yeah! That mall parking lot is just so confusing.” Another might tell a story about a time when she lost her car, and another might offer helpful hints about how to avoid losing a car in the parking lot in the future. Someone might even say, “A friend of a friend of mine had an even scarier experience than that. She got lost in a parking lot at Christmastime…” and then launch into a contemporary legend. This chorus of responses indicates the appropriateness of the original narrative. Such conversational evaluation is part of a personal narrative performance.

Personal narratives are part of group traditions and express traditional group attitudes. Unlike other types of narratives that are primarily characterized by traditional storylines, plots, and characters, the identifying elements
within narratives of personal experience are found in the attitudes and concepts addressed in the story (Stahl 1977, 14). The group in the above example is taking part in a recognizable activity in which friends vent about lousy days or explain their bad moods by telling stories about their frustrations, big or small. Sometimes one person is the main teller and others pitch in with comments and support, perhaps even stories of their own. This activity is traditional for many groups, particularly friendship groups. As the telling of the bad day narratives continues, performers and listeners share their connections to each other through their stories, express common experiences that solidify their groupness, and express attitudes about those experiences: malls can be scary, Christmas shopping is annoying, and it’s important to have friends to vent to. In this case, the activity of sitting around and sharing stories is valued by the group, and whatever attitudes the group expresses about the events of their lives are also significant.

The narrative itself, the storytelling context, community aesthetics, and the message communicated by the narrative are factors that help us see personal narratives as folklore. It is in the “components of the performance rather than in the stories themselves” (Stahl 1977, 17) that the personal narrative tradition is determined.

Example: A Personal Narrative Emerges

The following transcription of a personal narrative performance provides a detailed illustration of emergent narrative, context, and audience and teller interaction as a folklorist might interpret it. This discussion considers an actual recorded event and uses a more complex approach to understanding the performance of personal narrative in its context.

First, we need to understand the physical setting, part of the immediate situation of the performance context. The performance took place at the Washington, Pennsylvania, home of Charlie and Jerry Stephens, both in their sixties at the time. Seated at the kitchen table were Charlie and Jerry and their daughter Martine, a folklorist who had asked her parents about their experiences as members of a coal-mining family. Here is an excerpt from the transcript of their conversation, in which Charlie tells a story about a workday experience that occurred in the coal mine when he was much younger:

Jerry: The closest group of workers that ever were, were the ones that were in the mine.
Charlie: (interrupting, speaking quickly, with excitement) Hey, Jerry, how about the time—

Jerry: (talking over him)—they’d stick together. They depended on each other for their safety, and they are like, uh, probably the closest group of workers I can think of, outside of, maybe, men in war.

Charlie: There are things . . . like you say . . . significant. (glances at his wife, chuckles) I didn’t tell Jerry a lot of this. (slight pause) This happened. There are guys living could jump me for telling this. Dick Johnson was a—(to Jerry) remember him?—a great big overgrown guy, Jer?

Jerry: (nods) Yes, I do.

Charlie: He was always picking and stuff and I got tired of it—

Martine: (interrupting) He was always what?

Charlie: He was always just insulting you like, you know? He’d come up behind you and go like this (hits the back of his head with the open palm of his right hand)—on the back of your head. And I told him, I said, “Don’t do that no more.” So he done that one day, and man, I hit him and he went down—

Martine: Oh no!

Charlie: And Pete Chunko, Andy Gaynor, Jim Thomas, Steve Thomas, and I think Hal was there. (Jerry and Martine Chuckle. [Hal was Charlie’s brother-in-law])—And I [Dick] jumped up, and I was ready for him. He knew not to come at me. He was bleeding. He said (in a loud, angry tone) “I’m gonna have you arrested! I’m gonna do this! How about that, Pete?” (in a normal tone) And I’ll never forget (laughs), Pete Chunko said (in a sing-song tone), “What are you talking about? I didn’t see anything happen.” (Jerry and Martine laugh) “How about you?” Andy Gaynor said (in an exaggerated tone of false concern) “What the hell did you do to yourself, Dick? You’re bleeding.” (chuckles) And old Hal said, (in a menacing, more serious tone) “What are you trying to do to my brother-in-law?” (pauses, then chuckles, then all three laugh)

The italicized notes within the transcript indicate aspects of the performance that would not be apparent to those who had not been present. It is important to know some of the performance characteristics in order to “get” the situation in the story. For example, when Charlie imitates the voices of the others, he uses
tones of voice that suggest how insincere they were, which makes it clear to the listeners that the other coal miners all conspired to protect Charlie by pretending they didn’t see him hit Dick.

We can also consider the framing signals that mark the performance within its conversational setting. The teller begins by saying, “This happened. There are guys living that could jump me for telling this.” This opening may be Charlie’s particular way of marking his tale, but it is clearly an announcement of his intention to tell a story, and it does sound to the listener like a familiar announcement that a narrated event will follow. His short narrative ends with a comment from a character, and it is the tone of Charlie’s voice (stern and somewhat menacing, a shift from his earlier tone), followed quickly by his own laughter, that signals the end. The listeners are clearly aware the tale has ended (what more could be said?—all the characters have spoken, and the teller himself is laughing at his own story), and their laughter signals their involvement in bringing the story to its close. We know that this is a performance, because it is clearly framed and structured.

It is also important to understand the relationship between those present to understand their interaction—husband and wife confirm shared experience, and the family connections also help us understand the story’s situation. (Hal, for example, was Charlie’s brother-in-law, a notorious hell-raiser, who appeared in many family anecdotes.) The fact that the teller, the listeners, and the folklorist are all family members and that family members are also part of the narrated event make this as much a family story as an occupational narrative, and so the story could be analyzed within both contexts. The daughter’s triple role as a family member, listener, and folklorist may have an impact on the performance—and on her—and certainly on its interpretation. In this context, reflexive analysis is crucial in order for the folklorist to be clear about any biases, special or hidden knowledge, or preconceived assumptions about meanings or significance that could influence her analysis, even unwittingly.

A significant part of this performance is the intersection of the occupational and family contexts. As a member of this family, the folklorist had heard many stories about incidents in the coal mine and at first assumed that Charlie’s narrated event described the closing of the ranks by members of the group against an outsider who did not conform to the group’s unspoken rules of conduct. But rather than assume she knew everything the story meant to the tellers and listeners, she asked questions about the character of Dick Johnson and learned that he was perceived as both an annoyance and a danger to his crew. While the outsider interpretation may have had relevance on one level, the performer and the performance event suggested another reason for telling the story as well as
a more complex level of meaning for the events recounted within the narrative. As they talked about the story and the incident, Charlie explained that “guys like that [like Dick Johnson] got on your nerves, [so] you couldn’t concentrate.” Since underground coal mining involves heavy machinery and hard physical labor in an atmosphere of potentially explosive gases, any behavior that distracted workers from their jobs could result in serious, even fatal, accidents. Furthermore, during the conversation, Charlie’s story follows a comment from his wife that the men in the mine “depended on each other for their safety.” The performer’s comments and the sequence of events in the physical performance context suggest that Charlie and his work crew valued safe behavior so much that they chose to ignore, even cover up, Charlie’s aggressive act toward Dick. In that occupational context, we might interpret Charlie as a protector who kept the crew from potential harm.

In addition to interpreting the possible meaning of narrated and narrative events, we can evaluate the skill of the storyteller and the effectiveness of the performance—its creative, artistic, or aesthetic dimension. This performance is effective because it logically follows a point made in the conversation, it has a satisfying (if simple) narrative structure, and it pleases the audience. We noted before that the story follows a comment in the conversation about mine safety, which opens up the narrative space in which Charlie tells a story about maintaining safe behavior. Those listening appear to express approval of the tale as it goes on and at the end with laughter or expressions of surprise and involvement (“Oh, no!”). Their reactions could indicate they found the way Charlie handled the situation made a successful narrative because he administered a kind of poetic justice that was narratively appropriate. In other words, we usually expect villains in stories to get the punishment they deserve and appreciate it when they do; this teller fulfills that expectation, so the listeners find the story satisfying. The teller also amuses the audience by mimicking voices and emphasizing the exaggerated way the characters defend him while they mock Dick. Charlie’s act works within the narrated event of the story and the narrative event of the performance as well as in the larger context of the occupational group.

Conclusion

The focus on performance in folklore allows us to locate artistic expressions within the groups that create and use them. It shifts us away from a limited examination of fixed, static, flat objects and encourages our attention to the
lively communication that takes place through the sharing of folklore. In performance, we can describe activities that include dynamic changes and allow traditions to emerge. It enables us to understand ourselves as observers and participants, as part of the process of creating communicative art and making meaning from it. Most of all, studying performance helps us see people as an integral part of the folklore they share.