PERSPECTIVES

For the second appearance of the "Perspectives" section of *Folklore Forum*, the four respondents bring up a range of issues in considering the following question:

What is creativity in everyday life?

Erin Roth

"What I do does have the potential of acting as a catalyst to the greatness of other people."

Charlie Rose, host of PBS' *Charlie Rose* show

I was on my way to a friend's wedding when I discovered the cover article of the in-flight magazine, *Spirit* (Southwest Air, June 1999). Charlie Rose, interviewer extraordinaire was himself being interviewed. Porter Anderson, the interviewer, probes Rose about the book or film he has yet to write or produce that would make him a guest at his own table. Rose effectively dodges the question with his answer about encouraging greatness in others. Anderson is left to conclude that Rose has made a certain sacrifice in his own creativity in order to "illuminate and cultivate the creativity of others." I read with great interest because I immediately understood the sacrifice being made.

As a folklorist I dedicate my time to identifying, documenting, analyzing, appreciating, presenting other's creativity. Even when I'm not directly doing my job, I notice the graceful arching gestures of a white gloved crossing guard as she orders my car to stop, shepherding schoolchildren across the street; or I stop an elderly man at a Casey's somewhere in rural Illinois to ask him about the painted corn cobs displayed in the backseat of his car. For me, being a folklorist is as much a way of viewing the world as it is anything else I do. There is no end to the possibility and display of human creativity.

I was drawn to the discipline of folklore as a way to articulate and capture the essence of what it means to be human—how it is we create meaning in our everyday lives. Through the manipulation and elaboration of words, objects, movement, sounds, and thought, art happens. But what of my own creativity? Admittedly, my own well-executed interview is as much an expression of creativity as is a finely carved relief. As a public folklorist, much of my creativity ends up buried in grant proposal narratives or fieldnotes or lost on side B of an especially good interview tape. My art tends to be expressed vicariously through the artists with whom I work. Is not my work art—my ideas, words, conversations with artists? Is thinking about art doing art?

On a recent Saturday afternoon of fieldwork in the guitar player's living room, I sank deep into the floral sofa, engulfed in a sea of bluegrass music; banjo and fiddle licks transported me beyond that little house in Monrovia, Indiana. A bluesy chord thrown in by the guitar player drew smiles from the entire room. I invited myself to this afternoon rehearsal, there to assess the possibility of including them in a regional tour of traditional musicians. I found myself walking away dissatisfied. Why was that? My dissatisfaction had nothing to do with the lack of excellence of these musicians. It had everything to do with the lack of an artistic outlet in my own life. I wanted to be a part of their energy, play my fiddle or add my alto to their tight harmonies. I am dangerous, I believe, when I deny my own urge to create, when I look to the artists with whom I work to fill my human need to be creative.

I followed a recent thread on Publore (the public folklorists' listserv) with great interest. Sparked by a young woman's query about graduate programs in folklore, responses ranged from a glib warning to not bother pursuing a degree in folklore, to passionate missives that made me fall in love with my chosen field all over again. A few public folklorists expressed resentment and disappointment for what their jobs had become—paper work and endless meetings, often removed from the art that first enticed them into the field. At what point do we allow our work to interfere with our own creativity? Am I aware of the resentment that might be building as I continue to ignore my own art and community? The personality types drawn to the discipline of folklore present an intriguing research question. Who are we and what do we share with one another? I venture to say that many of us are deeply creative, attracted to those who are passionately living out that creativity, and perhaps are frustrated artists ourselves.

At the risk of sounding therapeutic, I am learning to be more mindful of my own need to create. A simple awareness is perhaps all that is called for. And maybe one day I'll be invited as guest interviewee at the interview table.

Kurt Hartwig

Consider "creativity" as the utilization of elements found within a given practice, their persistent combination and recombination into new manifestations. In this vein, creativity and its sibling concept innovation are the same process: aspects of enactment. Consider "creative" as the evaluative marker, as relational and not absolute. It becomes more useful to ask, "how creative is it?" than "is it creative?" In both cases the words undergo a subtle transformation from everyday to scholarly use: from emic to etic. They cannot be assumed to have a necessarily positive value. Some practices may stress repetition, not iteration. Where you begin with creativity affects where you end. How could it not? Discussions of creativity tend to devolve into discussions of the creative, a notion that is seemingly easier to ingest. Where will you locate creativity? Is it an idea or an action, noun or verb? Does this question need to be either/or? The idea or action of being creative: something you have or something you do. "Creativity" is simply not a common word, though, and "creative" is. But still the same question arises, even with the lexical shift. Where will you locate the creative? Perhaps as a description, perhaps as an evaluation.

The creative process, the act of making something, involves a series of decisions oriented toward a specific outcome. Each decision deals with some particular problem, and its enactment imposes subsequent limitations upon the continuing process. The sum of these decisions and actions is combined, more or less well, by some principle of synthesis. Problems may be encountered and dealt with simultaneously or sequentially, perhaps even retroactively. Limitations can either stimulate or inhibit the process. The situation in which these decisions take place, the attitude of the individual toward the activity at hand, and the tools that the individual may bring to bear are all influential. This is no formula for creative action, but a description of several of the interdependent, variable factors that influence the enactment. As the process increases in scope and expands in time, it requires increasing amounts of energy; it becomes more difficult.

Take water as a metaphor. Your goal is to move the water, but without any support you may as well try to move an ocean. Add a barrier to one side and you have an ocean. Add another and you have a river. Suddenly the water can flow. The problem lies in the dams. Focusing energy, channeling it, is brought about by effective use of the parameters or limitations. Problems may be inhibiting or inspiring. Their resolution begins the process once again,

now with further limitations in place that will affect future effort to varying degrees. Likewise, an increase in speed requires an increase in energy.

In this regard, production (creation) can be seen to be simply a very different endeavor than reproduction (imitation), not inherently better or worse. An obvious example is forgery. If we are presented with an original painting by Hieronymus Bosch side by side with an exact replica, which would be the more creative? Bosch had to weigh theme, form, content, composition, color, and so on. Our hypothetical forger had none of these problems, but a host of other ones: how to match colors, how to mimic the appearance and results of deterioration and aging, what modern materials will replicate the appearance or effect of materials now some 500 years old. Solving these problems is by no means a non-creative activity. To place all emphasis on creativity as a generative activity is a fallacy in the making. To prize generation and originality more highly than replication is not a fallacy; it is a cultural norm.

Using creativity as evaluation requires its own distinctions. To distinguish it from innovation, we might say that creativity is resourcefulness that does not shake the foundations of the practice in which it is used. Innovation changes the parameters. Creativity keeps ideas, processes, and subjects fresh. Innovation explicitly reshapes either the means by which we create or the boundaries to which we can extend ourselves. Both of them, once enacted, feed into our perceptions of what that practice is and what it is becoming, how it is changing. When is spontaneous change good? And when is disciplined repetition? (Do not read this as a fixed dichotomy, but as an arguable contrast.) There is no simple or single answer to this, and as with creativity itself, this will depend on a variety of factors: the individual, the situation, the practice, or the change in question. The essential question to ask in exchange, it follows, is whom does change affect? Naturally enough, change itself is never truly good or ill. Rather, as with creativity and innovation, it is only our evaluations of them that mold them into these shapes. This is one place creativity takes us, one set of questions and possibilities.

Maria Troy and Thompson Owen

The Golden Hobby Shop, Open Monday–Saturday
630 S. Third Street, Columbus, OH

Operated by the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department, the Golden Hobby Shop is a treasure trove of senior-citizen craft and handiworks. With seasonal shows and a constantly rotating selection, the shop flashes an impressive display of gray-haired productivity, where the viewer is so

thoroughly enveloped in the leisure life of the senior set that it forms a distinct cultural zone in the City of Columbus. We call it GoHo.

Not intimidated by constraints of originality, mimicry and repetition serve as time-honored virtues of crafties everywhere and are well represented in GoHo. Some ideas are warmed-over schlock cut from the pages of *McCall's* or *Country Time Leisure*, such as a photo album trimmed with lace, or plastic vegetables glued in a basket. Others are old favorites done again and again. (What is the point of improving on the sock monkey?) There are highly-skilled craftspeople producing stained glass, woodwork, hand-knitted sweaters, and quilts. But a fair amount of objects celebrate a marriage of cheap, readily available materials, nifty ideas, and oodles upon oodles of time. You can find coaster sets, pencil cups, TP cozies, bookmarks, coin purses, rain hat pouches, TV guide and phone book covers, magnets, earrings, cufflinks, and so on.

All the objects concern a more or less circumscribed sphere: the home. Every domestic item has been embellished or prettified in some way; household waste like soda cans and plastic spoons have been reclaimed for decorative purposes. And while many items labor to reinforce the appearance of utility, the very abundance of energy and time that goes into their creation belies this seeming usefulness. For example, the exact need for a full-length, frilly dress to cover the dish soap bottle is obscure.

The impulse to utility can be read as a desire to be relevant, to have art work relate to everyday needs. Another dominant creative strategy found at GoHo is to personalize items, not so much by name but by field of interest. One corner is dedicated to Buckeye fans with items in grey and red, the colors of Ohio State University. Other motifs are country living, the holiday of your choice, gardening, Las Vegas gambling, geriatrics, Jesus, and grandchildren. There are among the old standards bits of truly inspired genius (or maybe it is a fortuitous combination of senility and luck?). A series of cloth dolls wittily comment on the foibles of old age, with names of illnesses and discomforts hand-written on various body parts. Near the knees it says "rheumatism," near the butt, "gas," on the head, "bad eyes" or "gout." The "Don't Bug Me" flyswatter properly symbolizes the predicament of old age, where the desire for peace and quiet occludes the deeper desire and incessant search for objects of annoyance and aggravation (the basic strategy of every *60 Minutes* episode). Sewing yarn into the flyswatter ironically effectively nullifies its utility, making it too slow to catch flies and impossible to wash.

Some trite ideas are given a new edge by the sheer quantity in which they have been reproduced. Meant as a yard decoration, a bird house on a six-foot pole has a cat sitting next to it with feathers glued to its mouth area. A caption reads, "What bird?" While this one-liner might be good for a

chuckle, the fact that the artist has made dozens of these—even building a stand in which to display them—pushes this idea into the deep end. More perverse are the Betty Boop figures whose puckered lips, shaky outlines, and sexy clothing epitomize the prospect of dirty-old-man sexuality. As artworks signed by a male artist, the Betty Boop dolls discomfort notions of age and sexuality, especially parasitic trans-generational lust. (But is this lust not always operative, from director-starlet liaisons, ala Roman Polanski, to middle age ad execs launching Calvin Klein campaigns starring a skimpy Kate Moss?)

A range of issues underlie the production of objects at GoHo. Plastic mesh canvas and acrylic yarn are popular material choices here; is this because the sewing needles have large eyes that are easy for aging eyes to thread? Does the concern for cheap materials stem from limited incomes or from pursuit of a mainstream, pop culture aesthetic? Or is there inherent irony in that the generation that touted modern materials and industrial progress in the 1950s is now creating home-spun crafts from acrylic not wool, from particle board not oak? With the exception of a few stand-outs, most of the items at GoHo are incredibly generic. Craft practiced on this level is a mass medium, even when made by less-than-rapid hands. Like the design of Bob Evans, the national chain of "neighborhood" restaurants, craft as local cultural production does not really exist. While quilting bees, knitting circles, etc. are local, the craft magazines these folks look to are national, even international. Craft materials carried in stores are identical from region to region.

One lesson of GoHo is on the level of production, demonstrating how to remain productive, how to find/steal/beg/borrow ideas, and how to find an audience. No longer limited to producing for family, friends, and the occasional church bazaar, these seniors have been liberated to sell their products to the widest possible audience. Seniors set their own prices and the shop adds only a ten per cent operating charge. Artists can negotiate commissions on the side while staffing the counter in the shop. It is interesting to speculate whether the crafts today's young people will make forty or fifty years from now will be anything like the crafts of the generation shaped by the Great Depression and wartime rationing. Thrift and utility are values perhaps more characteristic of a certain generation than a certain age. Will a sock monkey of the future bear a sarcastic expression, appear more wryly detached or obliquely critical? Will they be available as same sex couples or maybe come with rubber bondage outfits? Or will voice-chip activated sock monkey activists down load up-to-the-minute environmental disaster statistics? Only time will tell.

Kevin Pugh

Creativity and Metaphoric Thinking

We learn by relating new knowledge to the things we already know, but how do we ever come up with new ideas? How do new, more complex forms of knowledge arise out of prior forms? This problem is popularly known as the learning paradox (Bereiter 1985), and it is also the central issue in creativity.

One way of approaching this problem is to study how many of the important ideas in human history came about. Such an analysis reveals that metaphoric thinking is likely the key to the learning paradox (Prawat n.d.). For example, Darwin's journals suggest that he did not deduce the idea of natural selection after making long, drawn out observations of nature (as his formal writings suggest), but instead hit upon the idea by making a metaphoric leap between humans selecting for traits in dogs and some force in nature selecting for traits in the wild. Once Darwin made this leap, the development of a theory of natural selection was practically an afterthought—a (relatively) simple matter of figuring out how the metaphor applied and gathering the empirical data to back it up.

Metaphoric thinking not only plays an important role in the development of the big ideas in human history, but also in the development of new ideas by us ordinary folk. An interesting example comes from the work of David Wong (1993). Wong presented some secondary school science teacher candidates with a piston/cylinder device and asked them to explain it. He found that the students were able to develop new ideas about the device and more complex understandings of the device by generating their own analogies.

Thus metaphoric thinking seems to be a key to solving the learning paradox and understanding creativity. Someone may now be wondering: How do we come to use metaphors, or why are some people good at using them while others are not? I don't have a good answer to those questions, but I can point to an important obstacle to metaphoric thinking: Fixation. Fixation means that once we learn the function, meaning, or appropriate context for some object or idea, we fixate on those functions, meanings, or contexts, and don't think about other possibilities. Since metaphoric thinking involves taking one object or idea and applying it to a novel context or problem, fixation is a serious roadblock. In general, we develop more fixations with time because through experience and enculturation we learn what the appropriate functions, meanings, and contexts are. To appreciate how fixated we become, take some time to observe small children. In my opinion, young children are so creative precisely because they haven't developed as many fixations.

For example, when my daughter was about two, she learned to recognize the letter "M." What's interesting is that she began to see M's everywhere–not just written in a book or stuck to the refrigerator, but in bizarre things such as wood grains, scribbles, cracks in the sidewalk, and noodles! All of these discoveries were amazing to me, but they were natural to her. This is because I have developed the cultural understanding that an M is a letter written on something. I never would think to look for M's in wood grains because that is the wrong context for an M.

So to conclude, perhaps creativity is all about seeing beyond the experientially or socially imposed functions, meanings, and contexts for objects and ideas, and learning to think in metaphors.

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