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3 THE TRANSMISSION OF CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE

John H. McDowell

The transmission of children's folklore naturally falls within the broader question of the transmission of folklore in general. Every conceptualization of folklore must contain a theory, whether explicit or implicit, regarding the transmission of folklore, since folklore is universally recognized as an inherently social phenomenon. While these issues have not always received the attention they deserve, folkloristic theories of transmission nonetheless abound in the literature. To gain a grasp on these theories, I suggest the following two categories: theories viewing folklore transmission as a superorganic, mechanical process; and theories emphasizing its serendipitous and emergent character.

Folklore transmission viewed as a mechanical process figures prominently in those theories of folklore taking their inspiration from the philological roots of our discipline. Jakob Grimm, in his studies of Germanic and Indo-European languages, identified systematic laws of phonological shift that operate, for all intents and purposes, outside the immediate arena of concrete speech events. The Grimm brothers considered folklore "only a higher and freer speech of mankind," and hypothesized that laws similar to sound shift laws could be discovered to account for the persistence of traditional items and their variants through time and space (see Crane 1918). Their theories accounting for Märchen as broken-down Indo-European myths are perhaps the main fruit of this orientation. The realm defined by their compelling aphorism, *das Volk dichtet*, "the people, as a whole, composes poetry" (Kittredge and Sargent 1904), transcends the sphere of grounded human interaction.

This superorganic orientation persists in the work of the historic-geographic folklore scholars. Kaarle Krohn (1971, 98) argues that "it is the mechanical laws of thought and imagination that prevail in the rich variation of oral tradition." In a sequence of chapters entitled "The Influence of

Faulty Memory,” “The Impulse Toward Expansion,” and “Laws of Transformation,” Krohn discusses a series of “laws of thought” capable of producing the observed differences among variants of a migratory folklore item. But these laws are strictly conjectural, founded on the examination of texts, rather than on the examination of living folkloristic “cultures.” Folklore transmission, in this frame of reference, becomes an impersonal process to be inferred and reconstructed on the basis of exclusively philological evidence. The status of these “laws of thought” is quite analogous to that of Grimm’s laws of consonant shift, founded on the impersonal forces of language change.

Krohn sought to embody the “mechanical laws of thought and imagination” in two models, portraying the spread of folklore materials in the manner of waves on the water emanating from a central source of disturbance, and in the manner of a stream welling forth in a certain direction. C. W. von Sydow rejects these models, introducing elements of an alternative theory of folklore transmission. Retaining the same essential goals as those held by Krohn, von Sydow introduces the concepts of *active and passive bearers*, *mutation*, and *oicotypification*. “The dissemination of a tale,” von Sydow contends, “is desultory to a high degree.” “Only a very small number of active bearers of tradition equipped with a good memory, vivid imagination, and narrative powers do transmit the tales. It is only they who tell them. Among their audience it is only a small percentage still who actually do so. Most of those who have heard a tale told and are able to remember it, remain passive carriers of tradition, whose importance for the continued life of the tale consists mainly in their interest in hearing it told again” (von Sydow 1965 [1948], 231).

The commitment to folkloristics as a philological inquiry is evident in the key construction here, “the life of the tale.” Yet at the same time, von Sydow delves beyond the impersonal forces of language and culture drift to enfranchise the individual performers and audience members in his general theory of folklore transmission. Krohn had spoken of bilingual border populations, and “temporary visits by hunters, fishermen, craftsmen, merchants, sailors, soldiers, pilgrims, and other wanderers” (Krohn 1971, 59), but von Sydow’s concept of active and passive bearers locates folklore transmission directly in the immediate context of the folklore performance.

Von Sydow introduces the term *mutation* to refer to specific alterations of narrative materials as storytellers constantly reinterpret a narrative tradition. The language he uses here creates a juxtaposition between the superorganic framework of folklore transmission, and a more situated, hu-

man-oriented approach: "An original motif may be superseded by a new mutation, but a new mutation may also yield to the older form, being unable to assert itself at its expense. If a motif is particularly popular, this very fact may induce various narrators to mutate it in different ways" (von Sydow 1971, 234). The process envisioned here is still somewhat mechanistic, yet the term *mutation* admits an element of caprice, since the precise moment and direction of a mutation cannot be foreseen with any certainty. The concept of mutation presupposes recognition of the immense range of potential inherent in any act of folklore transmission.

One possible result of mutation in the folklore transmission process is "a certain unification of the variants within one and the same linguistic or cultural area on account of isolation from other areas," a result referred to by von Sydow as *oicotypification* (von Sydow 1971, 238). He observes that oicotypification might result "from the circumstance that one mutation has prevailed over the rest so as to become the oicotype of the tale within the area concerned" (von Sydow 1971, 238). In this manner, the demands of scientific generalization are reconciled with recognition of the autonomy of each individual instance: the individual cases, autonomous in themselves, nonetheless are thought to pattern into configurations describable in terms of scientific laws. In the end, von Sydow remains a voice of loyal opposition within the camp of philologically inspired folklorists.

In recent years, folklorists have developed approaches to folklore transmission amenable to the groundwork laid in von Sydow's critique of overly mechanistic models of transmission. The work of these scholars readily incorporates von Sydow's notions of active and passive bearers, locating folklore transmission within finite communicative contexts, and mutations, pointing to the unique, unpredictable quality of any given instance of folklore transmission. Perhaps the key word is *emergence*, indicating a fortuitous result achieved through the continuous interaction of all relevant components in a given folklore performance. According to Richard Bauman, "The concept of emergence is necessary to the study of performance as a means towards comprehending the uniqueness of particular performances within the context of performance as a generalized cultural system in a community" (Bauman 1977a, 37). The theory of folklore transmission residing in the performance-centered approach is one concerned with "the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of the participants, within the context of particular situations" (Bauman 1977a, 38).

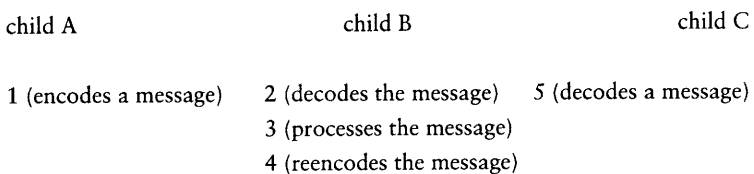
In a theory centered on the creation and re-creation of folklore through performance, the term *transmission* becomes extremely problem-

atic. The very notion of the “item” of folklore, with its demonstrable “life history,” is no longer entirely tenable. The folklore text, formerly thought to embody the empirical foundation for folklore studies, becomes, in this light, a pale and in many ways a misleading reflection of the performance it purports to record (McDowell 1982).

If it is no longer possible to hold that folklore is “transmitted” in the manner of a mechanical signal, then how are we to speak of that critical moment when folklore enters into an interactional format, finding articulation in the speech or action of one individual, yet leaving a trace in the short- or long-term memory of another, eventually to spring forth as a performance that in some sense repeats the original? How are we to account for the persistence of form and content in folklore over time? And what constraints, or patterns, can we identify in the extensive capacity of performers to shape and reshape folkloric routines that have entered their repertoires? These are the central issues in the construction of a modern theory of folklore transmission, a theory intended to address the stable, generalizable aspects of the process in question, as well as its more capricious, serendipitous aspect.

The domain of children’s folklore is a good place to begin formulating such a theory. The world of the child is in some sense more contained, and thus more accessible to study, than the multifarious world of the adult. In the child’s realm, we can often specify with some precision the sources of the routines we observe, and thereby gain a better handle on the processes of transformation and preservation operative therein. In short, the child’s processing of folkloric materials can be taken as a microcosm of the process of folklore transmission in general, and, as such, can provide some provocative clues of relevance both within and beyond the realm of children’s folklore.

What is it, then, that happens when one child performs a folkloric routine in the presence of another child, or group of children? Speech act theory, with its emphasis on perlocutionary effect (Austin 1962), would suggest isolating one complete interactional node as the focus of our analysis, but we must go one better, to incorporate the arrival of a “repeatable” message to the position of a third individual:



This model draws attention to five discrete moments in the process of folklore transmission. The first moment, when child A encodes a message, initiates a string of events culminating in the arrival of that message to a third child, who then proceeds to decode it. Clearly, the boundaries of this model are arbitrary, but we may nonetheless utilize it as a tool for identifying the basic structure of one finite instance of folklore transmission among children.

STAGE ONE: CHILD A ENCODES A MESSAGE

In the initial formulation of the message, child A draws on previous experience in the world to produce a message containing the kinds of features we identify as folkloric. While there is no consensus on this point, we can generally mention features such as provenience from a common store of communicative resources lying outside the official, institutional channels; possessing a formulaic quality, something I have referred to elsewhere as an accessible rhetoric (McDowell 1979); and in some way betraying a grounding in the ethos of some finite, operative human community. In short, child A produces an item of folklore.

The inspiration for this initial action need not proceed from a folkloric source. In many instances, children do draw on these folkloric resources, the forms so richly documented by Opie and Opie (1959) and elsewhere. Yet even the briefest exposure to children's folklore reveals the almost amoebic ability of children to incorporate extraneous materials into their expressive competencies. Along these lines, I would mention two particularly important tributaries: materials proceeding from the folkloric repertoires of adults, yet suitable for child consumption (for example, fairy tales, riddles, nursery rhymes, and lullabies); and materials proceeding from popular culture sources, of major importance in the expressive behavior of contemporary children (Sutton-Smith 1971a).

When adult folklore or popular culture is assimilated into the realm of children's folklore, changes take place that are most revealing of childish attitudes and concerns. These extraneous materials undergo a sea change, to eventually display the contours of perception and conception characteristic of the child's mind. The distance between the original material and the child's revamping of it thus stands as an indication of the difference between the child's cosmology and that of the adult. Consider the following narrative, produced by an eight-year-old child of Mexican descent:

Hey, you know that little girl, she had a, she had a mother but the mother was witch, and the mother had said:

“Go get apples and don’t give anybody one.”

So that lady had turned into a witch, and she went up there, and she said:

“Can I have an apple? I haven’t eaten for years and years.”

And she goes:

“OK.”

So that lady had eat it and turned into her mother again, and she said:

“Didn’t I tell you not to give anybody an apple?”

“Mom,” she said, “she never eat for—”

Then her mother had killed her.

Then her little brother had pulled her hair:

“Brother, brother, don’t pull my hair;

Mother had killed me for a single pear.”

And then he ran and go called her father. Then her father pulled her hair, she said:

“Father, father don’t pull my hair;

“Mother had killed me for one single pear.”

And her father killed that lady.¹

There is a strong sense of the presence of the Märchen in this story. The pattern of interdiction-violation, the poetic couplets, and the familiar motive of the informing corpse, all testify to an origin in the adult fairy tale corpus. Yet this is a rather odd performance by adult standards. The shift from apples to pears is unsettling, and in general the plot is too skeletal, rushing to the denouement without fully exploiting the available sources of tension and ambiguity.

Abandoning the adult perspective momentarily, the most remarkable aspect of this story is its manifest assimilation to the world of the child. The child is placed in the center of the action, the protagonist of a story developing a cruel and fatal conflict: Either the child denies food to a starving person or the child transgresses the command of her mother, thus to pay the ultimate price. The transformation of the mother into a witch is a telling, indirect portrait of the ambivalence inherent in mother-daughter relationships, as well as the ultimate extension of the nightmare wherein all familiar things crumble before our eyes into strange and evil forces.

A similar adaptation of external materials to the consciousness of the child can be observed in reference to popular culture. Consider the popular ditty associated with the cartoon figure Popeye. The original text, so far as I can recall, is as follows:

I'm Popeye the sailor man,
I'm Popeye the sailor man,
I'm strong to the finish
'Cause I eats me spinach,
I'm Popeye the sailor man.

Now consider the following two parodies of this ditty, the first ubiquitous among North American schoolchildren, and the second found among children of Mexican descent in Texas:²

I'm Popeye the sailor man,
I live in a garbage can,
I eat all the worms
And spit out the germs,
I'm Popeye the sailor man.

Popeye nació en Torreón	Popeye was born in Torreon
Encima de una sillón,	On top of a toilet seat,
Mató a su tía	He killed his aunt
Con una tortilla,	With a tortilla
Popeye nació en Torreón.	Popeye was born in Torreon.

Two features are especially striking in these transformations. For one thing, the content of the original message, an instance of exemplary behavior in respect to eating habits, is radically altered to produce a message subversive of standard, adult-imposed decorum. Each parody creates a fictive world that stands as a miniature rite of rebellion, a vision of a counter-factual world inhabited by worm-eating garbage-can residents, and tortilla-wielding aunt killers. The exemplary Popeye is converted into an anti-Popeye, exhibiting filthy and murderous qualities obviously anathema to the conventional etiquette.

The second feature of interest here is the scope given to the child's poetic muse, which reverses the dominance relationship between phonological and semantic elaboration obtaining in adult verbal creations (Sanches and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1976). In these parodies, the semantic thread is a bare one indeed, subservient to the phonological attraction of such lexical items as *worms/germs*, and *tíaltortilla*, *Torreón/sillón*. In reference to style as well as to content, the parodies transform the original material into vessels expressing the child's sensitivities.

STAGE TWO: CHILD B DECODES THE MESSAGE

The communications we are concerned with are primarily lodged in the verbal and kinesic media, and thus are perishable upon performance. The words spoken by child A, or the folkloric activity performed, vanish rapidly as a physical presence, leaving behind only a trace in the memory of those who were witness to them. Under these conditions, the decoding of the message must, of course, be a precipitous affair, without recourse to a permanent or perduring record. As a result, there is no guarantee that the message encoded by child A is the same message after decoding by child B. Imperfectly perceived material, or material not familiar to the recipient, may be assimilated into gestalts (frameworks) already present in the mind of child B.

In the section titled "Wear and Repair During Transmission," the Opies (1959) provide a number of characteristic examples, including the delightful recasting of the old hymn:

Can a woman's tender care
Cease towards the child she-bear?

A great many studies in folklore have shown how traditional materials adapt in this fashion to their new environments, and, indeed, this is one of the sources of "mutation" recognized in the theories of von Sydow (1971). In the absence of a written record serving as a check to this process of mutation, there exists in every instance of folklore transmission the possibility for text modification due to spontaneous assimilative processes. The child's world, so little affected by written constraints, offers an excellent field laboratory in this respect.

STAGE THREE: CHILD B PROCESSES THE MESSAGE

In the model directing our discussion, there ensues a period, however brief or protracted, dedicated to the activity of conceptual processing. The message has been received and decoded by child B, perhaps already in modified form due to the rigors of instantaneous registration of a perishing stimulus. At this point, the message as received must be digested, that is, broken down into information units compatible with the child's concept of the world and his or her aesthetic proclivities. The assimilative processes initiated at the moment of message reception are accelerated, as the new information is stored through association with familiar archetypes. Theories relating to this stage have been quite celebrated in the history of folklore studies, and include such prominent constructs as Max Müller's *disease of language*, and the irrepressible construct *faulty memory*, to be found in the writings of

Kaarle Krohn (1971), among others.

Alan Dundes (1969a) has noted, I think quite correctly, the degenerative bias in most of these constructs. It is just as plausible to cite the creative, generative dimensions of this message-processing stage. We have already seen, in reference to materials received by children from outside sources such as adult folklore and popular culture, that these assimilative processes refurbish the materials received, endowing them with their inimitable fidelity to the outlook and expressive preferences of the communities in which they circulate. The exuberant and unbounded give-and-take of children's play ensures the continuous reworking of traditional materials; yet strikingly, children have shown themselves to be among the most dedicated supporters of tradition, as folklorists have often noted. A theory of folklore transmission must allow for each of these possibilities, the retention of traditional models, and the piecing together of new models out of traditional materials.

STAGE FOUR: CHILD B REENCODES THE MESSAGE

Any theory of folklore transmission must at some point take into account the moment of composition, generally occurring without the use of artificial aids to the memory such as scripted texts or plans. Folklorists have developed important perspectives, such as Albert Lord's theory of composition during performance (1960), and Ruth Finnegan's alternative model of rehearsal and performance (1977), with its greater weight on memorization as a factor in folklore transmission. The work of Parry and Lord and their followers indicates that in many folklore traditions a type of spontaneous poetic composition takes place, a process comparable to linguistic performance (capable of creating an unlimited number of novel utterances on the basis of internalized linguistic structures), but operating at a higher, extra-sentential, poetic level.

Children's folklore performances amply exhibit the effects of both rote memorization and improvisation on the basis of traditional models. In the verbal genres capable of stimulating a field of discourse, that is, a sequence of related items, the children frequently first exhaust their store of traditional items, and then move on to novel items, spontaneously composed on the model of familiar traditional items. The following sequence of interrogative ludic routines, taken from a riddling session among middle-class North American children, illustrates some facets of this process:

1. What did the big chimney say to the little chimney?
2. What did the Aggie say to the other Aggie?
3. What did the three Aggies say to the other four Aggies?

4. What did the rug say to the floor?
5. What did the dead penguin say to the live penguin?
6. What did the rug say to the floor?
7. What did the ten Aggies say to the one Aggie?
8. What did the one Aggie say to the zero Aggie?
9. What did the blue whale say to the duck?
10. What did the whale shark say to the great white?
11. What did the live duck say to the other live duck?
12. What did the baby say to the cradle?
13. What did the blue whale say to the great white?
14. What did the (burping noise) say to the great white?
15. What did the uhhh say to the great white?
16. What did the burp say to the great white?
17. What did Spiderman say to Ironman?
18. What did the Martian say to the human?
19. What did the man say to the store?³

The pace of this session was so rapid that the children did not pause to provide answers to the questions posed. The traditional items here are numbers one, four, and six, and they establish the framework for the surrounding and subsequent improvisations. These models provide the canonic form, What did the X say to the Y? as well as the following set of rules for acceptable formulations:

1. The question specifies two entities in conversation.
2. Neither of these entities is normally included in the category of speech participants.
3. A motivation for dialogue must exist, either in the form of a shared identity (little chimney, big chimney) or habitual proximity (rug and floor).

Using this traditional framework as a point of departure, the children collectively undertake an excursion through the orders of their cosmology, coming to rest on such improbable conversants as humanoids (the Aggies, numbskull figures in Texas popular culture), animals (penguins, whales, ducks), inanimate objects (cradle, store), physical processes (the burps), and conceptual constructs (the zero Aggie). This riddling session can be viewed as a virtual symposium on childish ontology, isolating as it does a set of entities contrasting on the values *material*, *objective*, *animate*, *human*, *age of reason* (McDowell 1979). This riddling excerpt not only demonstrates the important enculturative dimensions of children's folklore, but suggests as well

that scholars anchored to a perspective enfranchising only the transmission of traditional texts may well be missing most of the point in regard to children's folklore.

STAGE FIVE: CHILD C DECODES A MESSAGE

The small transmission circuit we have been concerned with here is complete with the arrival of the message to the position of child C in the model. The form and content of this message may remain unchanged throughout the entire process, so that the message encountered at stage one is identical to the message encountered at stage five. By the same token, one or more of the transformational devices we have mentioned might intervene to create a radically different message. Both results are possible; the text of the message is emergent in the context of child-to-child communication. A large number of factors, including the mood of the interaction, the capacities of the performers, the form or genre of folklore involved, and the rhetorical purposes of the performers must be taken into account in investigating the relative stability or lack of stability of messages in the crucible of folklore transmission.

The foregoing analysis would suggest that only by attending to the appearance of folkloric routines in finite, particular situations can we adequately project the destiny awaiting an item of folklore moving through minimal transmission circuits. Some kinds of folklore, for example, what the Opies (1959) refer to as the "Code of Oral Legislation," and children's rhymes and ditties, are retained in standard versions as far as possible, since they are valued by the children for their instrumental and aesthetic properties, respectively. The performative efficacy of phrases like "Finders keepers, losers weepers," or "Sticks and stones will break my bones/but names will never hurt me," depends in large measure on the verbatim repetition of the formula at the appropriate moment. Yet even in respect to these forms, children will produce free and fantastic parodies or recastings, as the spirit moves them. In other genres, such as riddling, the juvenile peer group may attach little value to the precise repetition of a traditional item, placing as much or more importance on the ability to formulate spontaneous improvisations along the line of items conveyed through oral tradition.

In the realm of children's folklore, then, we must rethink the notion of tradition, a concept much used but perhaps not fully understood in folkloristic discourse. In the first place, tradition must be conceived of as persistence through time and space, without any a priori constraints on the *duration* of the time involved, or on the *extension* of this physical space. Children's folklore does produce those fabulous instances of repeatability

over long stretches of time and across immense geographical expanses that have always captivated the folklorist and the folk. Think, for example, of the well-known hand-clapping rhyme, “Patty Cake, Patty Cake,” attested as far back as 1698 in D’urfey’s comedy *The Campaigners*, which portrays “the affected tattling nurse” speaking as follows to her sucking babe:

Ah Doddy blesse dat pitty face of mine Syls,
and his pitty, pitty hands, and his pitty,
pitty foots, and all his pitty things, and
pat a cake, pat a cake baker’s man, so I will
master as fast as I can, and prick it, and
prick it, and prick it, and prick it, and
throw’t into the oven. (Opie and Opie 1952, 341)

The counting-out rhyme beginning with the line, “Eeny, meeny, miney, mo” constitutes an even more striking example, since by and large it is children alone who have been responsible for its perpetuation, and as Henry Bolton (1888) has shown in his classic study, it is of great antiquity and widely distributed throughout the European diaspora.

By the same token, there can be little doubt that many of the folkloric traditions of children are much less long-lived, and at the other end of the spectrum, could be better characterized as local and transitory. Within a neighborhood gang, for example, forms of folklore may thrive for a time but then perish as the children mature and their families move on to other residences. The items of folklore performed in this context may not enter the folklorist’s most narrow construction of tradition, but they are certainly perceived to be traditional by those who create and maintain them. The world of children’s folklore draws attention to the inherent relativity of the concept denoted by the words “persistence through time and space.”

Further modification of the folkloristic construction of tradition centers on the notion of repeatability. When traditional items function primarily to guide innovative folkloric production, as in the riddling session considered above, then we should speak of a traditional competence rather than a set of traditional items. What persists through time and space, in these instances, is the capacity to formulate appropriate folkloric items, as much as the traditional items themselves. Longitudinal studies reveal the gradual acquisition of competence in the traditional forms of children’s folklore, whereby narratives are given artistic shape and poignancy, and riddles eventually incorporate authentic kernels of linguistic or conceptual ambiguity (McDowell 1975). Exposure to children’s folklore tends to redirect the

folklorist's focus onto the persistence of traditional modes of self-expression, and the transmission, not necessarily of traditional items, but of traditional competencies.

The present discussion of the transmission of children's folklore has served primarily to complicate the notion of "the transmission of folklore" in general, and that may be its essential contribution to folkloristic dialogue. The drift of the argument has been in the direction of discrediting the conventional preoccupation with the transmission of particular folklore items. Individual items of folklore do occasionally persist through time and space, and therefore must in some sense be "transmitted" from one person to another. But I would suggest that this result is one possibility among many, and not really the privileged member of the set. It is just as likely that the item of folklore will perish, either through neglect or through transformational processes operating at the various moments of encoding, decoding, and reencoding of messages. The term introduced by von Sydow, *mutation*, if taken seriously and carried to its logical conclusion, adequately captures the character of these events.

Viewed in this perspective, the concept of "the transmission of folklore" can be interpreted as a metaphorical instrument appropriate to a particular historical moment in the evolution of folkloristic theory. Its roots lie in philology, perhaps most concretely in the mechanical process of producing a new manuscript by copying an earlier one. It conjures up images of a superorganic process, a perpetuation of "items" with their peculiar "life histories," quite external to the everyday communicative exchanges of ordinary human beings. There is no question that this serviceable metaphor has usefully informed folklore studies, by enabling a systematic hermeneutics of that one possibility it attends to, namely the preservation of a message intact, or only moderately changed, as it filters through finite communicative networks.

But the robust world of children's folklore forces the folklorist to confront the creative potential of every folkloric transaction, the capacity for new forms and items to emerge from traditional competencies. These creative factors are regenerative rather than degenerative, facilitating the continuous emergence of folkloric materials freshly coined in response to the experiences and needs of their hosts. It is this facet of folklore that lends the materials we study their authenticity and vitality, as trenchant markers of individual and community identity. The folkloric messages that persevere intact over time are nonetheless revalidated with each performance as suitable vessels for the expression of local concerns. And of equal importance, innovative messages are formulated, as traditional items and competencies are adapted to these same requirements.

These considerations lead to the suggestion of a neutral term, perhaps the *activation* of children's folklore, to refer to the processes set in motion as traditional competencies enter into finite communicative settings among children. Within this constellation, transmission intact or in recognizable variants would remain as one possible outcome, but the folklorist would be alert to the creative, transformative potential of all such encounters. A theory regarding the activation of folklore is necessarily grounded in particular instances of situated human intercourse, and retains an essential bias toward emergence as its central paradigm. Two rather different sorts of children are envisioned in the "transmission of children's folklore" and "the activation of children's folklore." In the former instance, the child (and, by extension, every human being) serves primarily as a repository and conduit for the exchange of traditional items possessing a destiny all their own. The items are literary, but there is no process of literary composition, save for the romantic notion of "the people as a whole composes poetry."

In a theory of the activation of children's folklore, the items recorded may or may not evince significant literary value, but the child emerges as the genius of composition, a complex cerebral and sentient locus of a serious effort at self-expression and communication. This latter perspective drives folkloristics in the direction of an aesthetics of the ordinary, a grounded theory of artistic composition engaged with the fundamental human requirement of self-realization through artistic performance. In the end, the child (and by extension, the human being) projected by this paradigm is a much more interesting figure, one immersed in real-life contingencies, and not a mere cipher in a superorganic device.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. I recorded this narrative in a peer-group setting, in Austin, Texas, during the spring of 1974. The child who performed it had a large repertoire of Märchen-like stories drawn from traditional Mexican sources. For more details on this item and the other children's folklore included in this paper, see McDowell 1975.

2. The English variation on the Popeye ditty was widely distributed among Austin schoolchildren in the mid-1970s. Chicano children performed both the English and Spanish parodies, setting them to the familiar Popeye tune.

3. This riddling session was recorded among Anglo-American school children in Austin in 1974, as a part of the Texas Children's Folklore Project, supervised by Professor Richard Bauman. Four children were present, two girls and two boys, all aged six years. Interestingly, it was the girls who performed the three traditional items, while the boys collaborated in producing the freshly coined items.