

Review Fair Use Copyright!

POSTHUMAN FOLKLORE

TOK THOMPSON

UNIVERSITY PRESS OF MISSISSIPPI / JACKSON

knowledgments

have helped refine my research. They made
s volume.

the following chapters were previously pub-
as follows: chapter 1 as "Folklore Beyond the
Understanding of Culture, Communication,
klore Research 55; chapter 2 as "The Ape that
ative, and the Human-Animal Divide" in
s "Listening to the Elder Brothers: Animals,
Native versus non-Native American Myths
rtu) 75; chapter 5 as "Beatboxing, Mashups,
st Century" in *Western Folklore* 70; chapter 7
anny Valley: Androids, Souls, and the Future
olklore 78; chapter 8 as "What Does it Mean
Troublemakers and Us" in *Narrative Culture*
ter 6 was previously published in "Netizens,
able Right to the Internet" in *Folk Culture in*
namics of Human Interaction, edited by Trevor
ublications for their assistance in shaping the
o reprint.

thanks to my wife, Cecilia Marie Thompson,
or their patience and understanding during all
le to spend with them. This book is dedicated

INTRODUCTION

Posthumans and Us

Posthuman Folklore is a book on posthumanism, and a book on folklore. More clearly, it is a book on the intersections between the two. Following this dyadic model, "posthuman folklore" refers to two connected things: the folklore regarding posthumanism, and folklore from beyond the human. On the one hand, I will be looking at folklore that does not stem from the human, challenging the commonly held notion that folklore is a human-only enterprise. And on the other hand, this is also a book about people's everyday expressions, showing how posthumanism is not mere academic sophistry, but rather that it is increasingly being recognized and enacted by widespread vernacular performances by everyday people in their everyday lives.

In a sense, both ideas are contained in the word *folklore*: folklore can refer to both the stuff itself (the folklore), and the study of the stuff (the discipline of studying folklore). What makes this work unique is the emphasis on posthuman folklore. Posthumanism is an important theoretical corrective sweeping the many disciplines in the academy. Posthumanist approaches include cyborg studies, artificial intelligence studies, human-animal continuum studies, and epistemological and phenomenological studies in questions regarding identity, agency, and action.¹

Though longstanding in the humanities, posthumanism as a philosophical corrective has caused re-evaluations of major categorical distinctions, and provided new avenues for research.² Such moves are not isolated from society, but rather reflect the increased interest in artificial intelligence and cyborg

human-machine interfaces. At the same time, developments in animal and plant studies have also increasingly impacted assumptions of “humaniqueness,” and have documented the strong overlap between intelligence and life itself.

In considering the advances in artificial intelligence and cyborg culture, and the remarkable cultural and mental worlds of nonhumans, posthumanism complicates longstanding views about the uniqueness of human intelligence and culture. What makes us *us* has suddenly become a pressing question.

The book begins with the thread of animal studies: ethology (the study of animal thoughts and behaviors) recognizes that nonhuman animals have abilities and traits that were previously assumed by Western science to be uniquely human. Such posthuman moves challenge the categories of Western academic knowledge, which have long reinforced the binary of “human” versus “animal,” as in the separation of the “sciences” from the “humanities” or the separate of “anthropology,” the study of the *Homo sapiens sapiens*, from disciplines that study the behavior of nonhuman animals. Faced with new data, these categories increasingly appear problematic. Animal research has revealed that capuchin monkeys have a sense of fairness, and an expectation of equal rewards for equal labor³ while octopi, more closely related to snails than to humans, are playful and intelligent creatures, and can learn how to solve puzzles by watching other octopi, resulting in “octopi cultures” of shared behaviors and traits⁴. Fish use tools.⁵ Plants remember, and forests communicate experiences and memories in vast floral webs, including cooperation with other species, and the use of spores for communication.⁶ Animal—and, “animistic” per Graham Harvey’s work⁷—studies have had a profound impact on reorienting scholarly discourse towards acknowledge other intelligences in the world. In turn, humans are becoming much more aware of their own animality—or perhaps of animals’ humanity, and of all biological beings’ inherent relationship with Earth.

The advances in animal studies sparked what became an epochal event in the rethinking of basic ontologies. The “animal turn” of posthumanism has witnessed a flourishing of new philosophical works from a variety of disciplines, representing a profound paradigm shift in not just one but in many different disciplines, even entire fields, an excellent example of a “scientific revolution,” as per Kuhn 1962. For example, the entire field of “the humanities” seems based on categorical exclusions of non-hominids from studies of culture, language, emotions, and aesthetics. In anthropology (“the study of humankind”), Ruth Benedict famously proclaimed humans “the culture-bearing animal” (1934: 9–10), a title we now know to be non-distinctive. Beginning perhaps with Jane Goodall’s documentation of tool use and complex social behaviors in chimps (Tonutti 2011; Peterson 2008), many of the previous assertions of absolute qualitative distinctions, the old hallmarks of “humaniqueness” were questioned

and, increasingly, discarded as false.⁸ The turn of the millennium has witnessed an explosion in animal studies and philosophy documenting and dealing with the implications of the growing awareness of our close kinship with nonhuman animals in many areas.⁹

Posthumanism's other main strand centers on the introduction of digital technologies, and has several diverse lines of inquiry, ranging from computer-mediated communication to artificial intelligences. One well-known early approach is the "cyborg feminism," which grew out of Donna Haraway's pioneering work "A Cyborg Manifesto."¹⁰ Haraway explores the possibilities and implications of increasing human-machine linkages, particularly in the roles of identity and culture. Increasingly, scholars are recognizing the epochal impact of the introduction of digital communications, artificial intelligences, and the cyber realm.

Beyond viewing the implications of cyberspace as a cultural arena within which to fashion and perform identities, the notion of artificial intelligence has quickly moved from the realm of science fiction to the realm of the everyday. Already human-acting interfaces (bots) are a regular feature of internet communications, and the quest to build self-aware artificial intelligence has made great technological strides. Combined with developments in AI are related developments in robotics, and the emergence of the intelligent, humanoid robots known as the android."

Posthumanism's two main branches, therefore, are interesting in their respective differences: ethology is largely studying intelligences whose origins predate the human, while digital studies emphasize newer, cutting-edge technological developments. One is based on questioning our relationship to the carbon-based life forms to which we are kin, while the other strand focuses on our relations to our own technological developments. Both can be used to help inform the other, and the wider question of basic human ontology: what is it to be human, and how do we perform our humanity?

Much of posthumanism is decidedly futuristic in its influences and theorizing, with ideas of the cyborg, and collective intelligences. Newness and multiplicity abound. Yet the future is also connected with environmental degradation, wholesale extinctions of species and widespread loss of nonhuman life on Earth: life in the Anthropocene. The central question of what is to be human relies on both topics of inquiry, and neither can be fully separated from each other.

As a folklorist, I am also interested in documenting the vernacular philosophical shifts, as our everyday culture continues to perform the posthuman. What the future of the posthuman age will be makes for interesting speculation: all that seems certain currently is that we are undergoing an era of profound change. For example, 2015 marks the first year that a writ of *habeas corpus*

and
ness,"
itself.
culture,
manism
intelligence
gon.
study of
ve abili-
aniquely
ademic
animal,"
parate of
ines that
categories
apuchin
for equal
re playful
ing other
Fish use
memories
the use of
Harvey's
discourse
mans are
of animals'
arth.
al event in
an has wit-
disciplines,
y different
evolution,"
ems based
language,
ad"). Ruth
mal" (1934:
es with Jane
in chimps
of absolute
questioned

was issued for a nonhuman animal (two chimpanzees) in the United States, categorically challenging the definition of “person” as “human” (Feltman 2015). In 2018, the android Sofia was granted citizenship by Saudi Arabia. Questioning the new, virtual aspects of self leads us to looking at our non-virtual, biological selves. Yet our biology also leads in turn to our animality, and our kinship with the rest of biological life on Earth. The two ends of posthumanism are, at the end, tied back together in evolving notions of what it means to be human: what *are* we?

Such basic ontological cultural questions can have diverse influences, but two of the most prominent stem from science and myth. In this book, I investigate both, as well as the complex dance between them. The emergence of posthumanism is tied into other newer philosophical shifts as well, such as postnationalism and postcolonialism, which are also closely tied to the development of the cyber realm, and which detail the social, cultural, and political implications of the digital era. Philosophy is never truly divorced from the *zeitgeist*: rather, philosophy can be seen as an adaption of thought to the realities and concerns of the different epochs. If, as Anttonen (2005) asserted, the concept of folklore was created by modernity in order to establish a separate, modern identity, then posthuman folklore can be viewed as modernity in hindsight: the recalibration of expressive culture in the postmodern age. This recalibration occurs in the academy, to be sure, but also, and even more importantly, in the everyday world of the everyday person. Folklore, as always, reflects the culture that performs it: in examining folklore, we always find cues to cultural worldviews, belief systems, and senses of identity. In this sense, posthuman folklore is no different: it, too, reveals vernacular ideas of worldviews, beliefs, and identities. It's just that all these have shifted in remarkable, epochal, and revolutionary ways: the world, and ourselves, are not what we thought some few short years ago. Sorting all this out, making sense of this, and integrating these new realities into our current worldview is the realm of posthumanism. How this is all expressed in everyday culture is the realm of folklore.

States,
2015).
oning
logical
with
at the
man:

ers, but
inves-
ence of
each as
devel-
political
from the
realized
the
separate,
hind-
tecali-
tantly,
ects the
cultural
human
beliefs,
al, and
some
grating
anism.

PART 1

THE CONSCIOUS PLANET

Part one takes as its starting point the remarkable recent developments in ethology, which increasingly confirm our close ontological links with other life forms on Earth. The first chapter sets out the implications for such developments for our understanding of culture, communication, and consciousness, with a particular focus on the role of *aesthetics* as a possible touchstone. It makes the case, following developments in ethology, that folklore (and, indeed, culture in general) can no longer be considered the sole domain of *Homo sapiens*, but rather must be viewed as shared inheritances with much of life on Earth.

The second chapter, *The Ape that Captured Time*, focuses on what may be a significant disjuncture between the folklore of human and nonhuman animals, that being the *story*. The story is perhaps the single most significant factor of what it is to be human, and the story's strong relationship with folklore studies reveals this ongoing significance. Tracing the story of the story back in time may therefore tell us a good deal about human evolution, showing both what we have in common with other animals, and what we may claim as unique to our own species. The story is a fundamental part of nearly all aspects of being human, from the stories of nations, creation, fiction, to our own autobiographies, our very sense of self.

The following two chapters investigate some of the implications of post-humanism in how cultures envision their relations to animals. If animals are much like people, should they be considered persons? "Somewhat" persons? To

approach vernacular attitudes of "animal personhood," I investigate the idea of souls: which cultures believe that animals have souls, and which do not? What are the foundations, and implications, of such beliefs?

The last chapter looks at vernacular ways of considering relationships, particularly the notion of sexuality. Sexuality proclaims, disclaims, and establishes relations. Sexuality is also highly culturally encoded, and in the case of Western cultures, integrated with the notion of souls, personhood, and culture. Why is it that animals have come to represent our "wild" instincts? Such thoughts tell us a great deal more about our own cultural views than they do of the wild itself, and, as such, provide resources for understanding vernacular thoughts of ontology.

Part one of this book sets the stage for thinking about our ontology, particularly in terms of a biological ontology: what is it to be an animal, and why are we so often uncomfortable with that label? Our kinship to our carbon-based kin is fraught with cultural signification. Looking at cultures comparatively can give some glimpses as to the contours of this signification.

Such investigations emerge from the "shadow side" of the other main strand of posthumanism, investigated in parts two and three, the increasingly cyborg quality of human life. If we wish to know what it is to be a cyborg, then we must become well aware of what it is *not* to be one: that is to say, to understand our virtual lives and thoughts, we are led back to examining our biological lives and thoughts, and, to do so, led back to examining our animality, and our kinship with life on Earth.

Investigations into our biological ontology are also important in understanding our current situation and potential futures: as we enter the Anthropocene, where life on Earth itself is being radically transformed (and attenuated) by humankind, such philosophical inquiries carry profound pragmatic consequences. Our biology dictates a need for our kin: without the rest of life, we will surely perish, not only as a culture but as a species. Philosophical investigations into our posthuman ontology are therefore no longer a luxury. Increasingly, such investigations are a necessity, in order to be able to provide for a future for our descendants.

To begin the inquiry, let us turn to how we came to be: an origin story, to be sure, but, like all good origin stories, one with radical implications on how to live our lives.

1

FOLKLORE BEYOND THE HUMAN*Toward a Trans-Special Understanding of
Culture, Communication, and Aesthetics*

The scientific study of animal behavior (ethology) is increasingly employing the concept of culture to explain nonhuman animal behaviors and, largely stemming from this, the category of nonhuman culture is increasingly influencing the work of many scholars in the humanities and social sciences as well. This remarkable line of inquiry across diverse fields and disciplines has opened up new questions and avenues for research, in what many have called the “animal turn” in general philosophical discourse.¹

My question in this chapter is how humanities scholars and social scientists, and particularly folklorists, may now approach the study of nonhuman culture, and what may be some of the theoretical implications of such approaches. Since folklore is a discipline focusing on the very topic of collectively shaped, traditional, expressive culture, it would seem to be in an ideal position to take the lead in this newly emerging realm of the study of culture beyond the human.² That nonhuman animals have folklore has already been proposed in folklore studies by Jay Mechling, in his work “‘Banana Cannon’ and Other Folk Traditions Between Human and Nonhuman Animals” (1989), which I reified in 2010 as the “banana canon”—the general recognition that nonhumans have folklore (see chapter 2). Somewhat contemporaneously, animal studies have

increasingly documented behavior among nonhumans that may be interpreted productively as cultural, traditional performances. How, then, may folklorists use these revelations in ongoing studies of nonhuman culture, increasingly noted and studied by biologists, and subsume them into the discipline? How can we bring the "animal turn" to folkloristics?

One of the necessary steps in such an approach is to try to destabilize the false human-animal binary (humans *are* animals)—and with that, the false binary between "social sciences and humanities" that study humans and "physical and biological sciences" that study (mostly) nonhumans—and to try to open up ways that scholarship can engage with animal thoughts without focusing on what people think of animals. There are difficulties, of course; folklorists are not accustomed to nonhuman informants and are not used to examining nonhuman cultural expressions. Our very vocabulary tends toward the anthropocentric (we often work in "humanities" departments, or perhaps "anthropology"). This chapter attempts to lay some groundwork in the other direction, in allowing folklore studies to productively study nonhuman cultures—analogous, perhaps, to how psychology has moved successfully toward allowing "animal psychology" as a valid subfield, which aids in the study of the evolution of psychological abilities and processes.

Perhaps the largest advantage in avoiding entrenched anthropocentrism is that this allows us to view cultural expressions in their evolutionary and biological framework.³ Unless we believe that artistic and aesthetic impulses were gifted to humans in a transcendent moment, we must acknowledge that they have emerged firmly embedded in the development of life on Earth, displaying our close kinship with the rest of Earth-based life. Such a move attempts to shift from an anthropocentric view of consciousness and culture (with analogues to creationist Abrahamic mythology) toward one that is more in harmony with current scientific discourses of the evolution of life.⁴

In this chapter, I focus on the notion of aesthetics as a touchstone. I attempt to show how an evolutionary look at aesthetics not only helps cross the human-animal divide, but also how it can help bridge the entrenched notion of a mind-body split, by examining the evolution of consciousness as well. This chapter attempts to ground my calls for the study of nonhuman expressive culture in a philosophical framework.

EXTRA-SPECIAL AESTHETICS

To begin, what do I mean when I say that animals have a sense of aesthetics? Let me offer some examples of recent scientific discoveries.

Example 1: Songbirds Change their Styles

Songbirds change their songs over time, and females tend to be more interested in the latest trends and styles (Williams et al. 2013). Such journals as *Animal Behaviour* are now filled with references to nonhuman “culture,” “tradition,” and “innovation.” How can ethnomusicologists help examine such trends? What can ethnomusicology contribute to animal studies noticing such phenomena? *Why* do birds change their tunes; are their tunes getting better and better? More or less diverse? Is there a weight of tradition, or is it more of a faddish, pop star of the moment sort of thing? What is the role of singing, and listening to songs, in the wider realm of avian culture? There are indications that birds, like people, change their repertoires in part depending on where they live: in the cities, the songs tend to be louder and faster—for both (see e.g., Slabbekoorn and den Boer-Visser 2006; Brumm 2006; Briefer et al. 2010; Nemeth and Brumm 2009).

Example 2: Nonhumans, Languages, and Dialects

Demonstrations of nonhuman languages (defined here as socially learned symbolic communications) have been steadily increasing in the scientific literature.⁵ Perhaps one of the more interesting aspects of this is the existence of dialectical, as well as linguistic, differences. Examples include the sperm whale, the highly intelligent leviathans of the deep, who travel across the world's oceans in closely bonded, interrelated social groups. They communicate with each other at great lengths, displaying not only individual identity in their communications, but also displaying regional varieties of varying degrees (Antunes et al. 2011). We know next to nothing of what they are saying, yet it seems to be important to them. As highly intelligent and highly social mammals, they are also nomadic, which intensifies the importance of their social relations. What is sperm whale linguistic culture like? How many languages and dialects are there? What are the “verbal arts of performance” (see Bauman 1975, 1977) of sperm whales?⁶ Note that sperm whales are not alone in displaying dialectical differences in their languages—far from it; other documented examples include orcas (Dayton 1990), the small furry hyrax (Kershenbaum et al. 2012), chimpanzees (Crockford et al. 2004), prairie dogs (Slobodchikoff and Coast 1980), and even goats (Briefer and McElligott 2012). Orcas have been observed learning new dialects (Deecke, Ford, and Spong 2000), and even learning to speak “dolphin” in captivity (Musser et al. 2014). The interesting interplay of dialects and social identity in aesthetic performances captures the complexity and beauty of communication. The discipline of folklore has long been involved

with understanding the plurality of cultural expressions, in their variegated degrees of relatedness (and often in direct contrast to nationalist ideologies or the ideals of a standard national language).⁷ What, then, could folklorists say about various dialectical differences in nonhuman cultures?

Example 3: "Madam, I'm Adam": Dolphins Give Themselves Names

Dolphins have personal names (King and Janik 2013). Not only do dolphins give each other, and go by, personal names, but they also seem to remember names of individuals for decades between reunions (Bruck 2013). Absent writing technologies, names are, of course, folklore. Are the dolphin's names nicknames, referring to some attribute of the individual? Or, if not, purely arbitrary? Family names? Is there a naming ceremony? If not, how *are* names arrived at socially; or, if there is, what is a dolphin naming ceremony? The questions far outweigh the answers.

These above examples reveal that aesthetic behavior, and, yes, artistic communication in small groups (as per Ben-Amos's famous 1971 definition of "folklore") have been increasingly documented in the animal studies literature. The pertinent questions then become: *Why* do organisms engage in aesthetic behaviors and reactions, and *how* did this evolve? How might different types of life have developed this differently?

Folklore performances are all deeply involved with aesthetics: what motivates a singer to sing a song (and an audience to listen), if not aesthetics? Does it matter whether the singer is human? Although there is no lack of work on aesthetics from all sorts of angles, there is precious little that looks at the aesthetics of nonhumans. Folklorists would seem to have much to offer in this regard: frameworks, perspectives, theories, concepts, and notions of "prior art" that could help elucidate performance and aesthetic behavior among nonhuman as well as human animals.

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST THEORY? SOCIOBIOLOGY AND FREUD

An approach from the discipline of folklore would likely be somewhat different than the ones offered by sociobiology, which is the only field up until now to hypothesize on the development of human aesthetics. Sociobiology has contributed several major works on the topic, but, as with all sociobiological arguments, causation is notoriously difficult to prove, troubled by the teleology implicit in such arguments; we are such-and-such way because of such-and-such thing in the distant past, which can never be revisited. Proposed

their variegated
ideologies or
folklorists say

Names

Why do dolphins
seem to remem-
ber (2013). Absent
dolphin's names
Or, if not, purely
how are names
ceremony? The

es, artistic com-
1971 definition of
studies literature.
engage in aesthetic
different types

etics: what moti-
aesthetics? Does
no lack of work
that looks at the
much to offer in this
tions of "prior art"
for among nonhu-

AND FREUD

be somewhat dif-
only field up until
etics. Sociobiology
with all sociobio-
we, troubled by the
each way because of
revisited. Proposed

correlations abound, enabling various hypotheses to be proposed as to why, sociobiologically speaking, we are who we are.

In terms of aesthetics, the explanations in sociobiology are usually derived from Darwinian ideas of survival of the fittest, relying on our survival (personal and reproductive) skills of natural selection. Many sociobiologists use a combination of Darwinian evolutionary theory with Freud's theory of repression and sublimation to explain human aesthetics. Freud's idea, explored particularly in *Civilization and Its Discontents* ([1930] 1962), was that humans developed civilization by the repression of incest. That repression of sexuality supposedly helps to form human societies through marriage and alliance groups, and is expressed in various dreams, fantasies, and cultural mythologies.⁸ This move toward "civilization" required the elemental repression of individual desire. This repression of individual desires (sexual but also aggressive) in turn gave rise to the symbolic expression of these individual, tabooed thoughts and feelings in art. For Freud, the energy of "civilized" aesthetics comes about primarily from the repression of sexual urges. However, most sociobiologists focus on aesthetics as deriving not so much from the *repression* of sexual desires as from the *expression* of them—an interestingly opposite supposition. This may be the effect of Darwinian ideas in sociobiology, which tend to emphasize the individual choices involved in natural (including sexual) selection, yet the net result still suggests a sudden creationist moment, when aesthetics as a expression of sexuality became aesthetics as repressed sexuality, giving us, once again, an absolute split between *Homo* and all other life forms.

While Freud's theory may be attractive, there is of course no way to go back in time to see if this was indeed the case. And even if social repression of individual desires is at the root of aesthetics, what to make of the fact that sexual and/or aggressive desires are also strongly curtailed in many nonhuman cultures? Repression is not confined to *Homo sapiens sapiens* (see e.g., the classic *Chimpanzee Politics* [de Waal 1982]). Could this same Freudian principal then be applied to nonhuman cultures? Do their aesthetic activities also derive from social repression (and if so, what to make of the fact that our closest relatives, the bonobos, develop deep social bonds while engaging in a great deal of unrestrained sexual activity)? Further research in actual animal studies may illuminate this question, bringing a sense of testability to the Freudian theory on the evolution of civilization and aesthetics, rather than the common implicit assumption that aesthetics are another marker of "humaniqueness." Answer ✓

Most sociobiological works implicitly assume that only humans have aesthetics, whatever the evolutionary antecedents might have been. One influential book was even entitled *Homo Aestheticus* (Dissanayake 1995). Another more recent, and more influential, work is Stephen Davies's *The Artful Species* (2012)

(the species to which he refers is, of course, humans). Such works underline the position that aesthetics is the realm of the human alone. Such a position is in line with Abrahamic mythological discourses that emphasize the absolute categorical difference between humans and all other forms of life ("God made man in His image"), but it is decidedly out of line with other mythological discourses, and current developments in Western science.⁹

While very often sociobiologists rely on the behavior of our relatives (particularly the close ones) to try to understand the biological roots of human behavior, this has not been well explored in the case of aesthetics. Instead, it is generally assumed that only humans have aesthetics, so there is no point of comparison between a human singer (aesthetically aware) and a nonhuman one (acting out of pure instinct). The relative lack of comparative animal studies of sociobiological theories of aesthetics is odd: most topics covered by sociobiology include a great deal of animal studies, while ideas of *Homo aestheticus* still seem predominant. Bereft of any useful comparisons from current data, sociobiological explanations of aesthetics are therefore even more hypothetical in nature than many other sociobiological theories. For example, one recent high-profile work, Denis Dutton's *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (2009), claims that people enjoyed a painting of a nice British landscape because it was like the savannah, in which we had evolved, implying that our sense of aesthetics derives ultimately from a survival need, as well as a long-standing environmental niche. There are problems with such approaches—why would aesthetic preference be for the savannah rather than the tropics, where we evolved for millions of years? Or the edges of glaciers that many hominids followed for much of the Paleolithic? Or the steppes and waving fields of grain of the thousands of years of the Neolithic?¹⁰ Where, exactly, are such Lamarckian memories stored, let alone how? The book itself is aware of such issues, and prevaricates between the claims of "aesthetics by evolutionary design" and "aesthetics as a byproduct of evolution," while giving relatively short shrift to the influences of culture. In a review of the work, Justine Kingsbury (2011) also notes that biological claims of "functions" tend to imply a normativity, of what *should* be, a claim that anthropologists, trained in cross-cultural differences, are keenly suspicious of, with good reason. The "instinctual" factor is also misleading, since, for a book all about the evolution of aesthetics, there is almost nothing in the work on anything aesthetic except for *Homo sapiens sapiens*, a black hole from which aesthetics seems to suddenly emerge. In spite of its claim of a revolutionary way of seeing aesthetics through sociobiology, such a work still relies on a sudden creationist moment, this time gifted by "evolution" rather than "God."

In much of sociobiology, aesthetics is tied directly to mate choice. Stephen Pinker has famously espoused the idea of aesthetics as an evolutionary "mistake" or some sort of accidental byproduct of our mating strategies, in what he called his "Baywatch" theory of art (1992). One of the most well-known examples is the theoretical framing of symmetry: people often find symmetry attractive, and this is held to derive from seeing symmetry in a potential mating partner's body, since these are in general indicative of healthy genes (a common line of research in sociobiology; for an overview, see Rhodes et al. 1998). A more complex argument on the role of sexual selection can be seen in such works as Geoffrey Miller's *The Mating Mind* (2000), in which the role of the mind, and intelligence, is considered in increasing reproductive success. Which is to say, for humans, and doubtless others, being smart (including witty, funny, entertaining, etc.) has been highly selected for a long, long time, allowing for a sort of stepping stone between sexual selection and aesthetics generally."

THE ROOTS OF AESTHETICS

But it seems to me that there is likely much more to aesthetics than mate choice alone. What appears as a beautiful sunset, or a lovely waterfall, might be hard to translate into mate choice strategies (or other natural selection strategies). Rather, I suggest that the roots of aesthetics go much deeper, to a kind of "fuzzy logic" approximation that all sensate beings have of the universe surrounding them. Such a view might include the use of aesthetics in courtship and reproductive success, but without limiting aesthetics to an evolutionary mistake arising from sexual desire. Certainly some examples point toward courtship; the songbird studies suggests that one of the main social uses of their singing is for courtship and establishing reproductive relationships, but courtship does not always seem to be the central focus of the activity. In addition to direct uses in courtship, a good display of aesthetics may also imply that the organism has other fit, reproductively healthy attributes—perhaps intelligence in particular—and therefore might make an attractive mate. Intelligence has been strongly selected throughout the evolution of life on Earth, not only for hominids, as in Miller's *The Mating Mind*, but for much, if not all, of life on Earth. Aesthetics therefore has been strongly selected throughout its evolution. While it may be an "evolutionary mistake" as per Pinker, it is not clear that this is so; aesthetics could well be an important part of the evolution of life, and consciousness, on Earth, allowing organisms to better interact with the universe surrounding them.

Consider, for example, colors. No humans have aesthetic reactions to ultraviolet light, because we do not see that part of the light spectrum—although assuredly some other species do. Red seems to have special aesthetic reactions in many human cultures, perhaps particularly due to red being the color of blood. Schematic studies have indicated that if human languages have a word for color (besides “light/dark”), then it will be for “red” before any other color (Berlin and Kay 1969). Colors are not “set” (there is no true Irish-Gaelic equivalent for the English word “green,” for example) but seem to reflect our sensorial interactions with the physical world: an interplay of rods and cones, light waves, and linguistic, cognitive categories. In this example, we can view aesthetics as ultimately deriving from the surrounding natural world, as well as reflecting it, in varied cultural constructions.

We can observe this in music, too. Aesthetics are intrinsically a part of music, emotional links between the “performative act” and the perception of aesthetic forms. There is some sort of math behind music, of course, and this is expressed in rhythm and in harmonic soundwaves. Other animals also recognize harmonics, and seem to find the expression of their regularities pleasing. The easiest example is the octave. All people can recognize an octave, which is when a pitch’s sound wave is exactly double that of the original. We might slice up the octave differently—the pentatonic, or five-note scale, being perhaps the most common for folk music—but all traditions agree on the octave. Similarly, researchers have noted that the octave seems recognized in other species as well, including birds, rhesus monkeys (Wright et al. 2000), and dolphins (Ralston and Herman 1995). As Josh McDermott and Marc Hauser put it:

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a case can also be made for the biological basis of the octave, which seems predisposed to have a central role in music; it is both prevalent in musical systems worldwide and perceptually privileged, at least in some cases, in nonhuman primates. (2005: 51)

So when animals (including *Homo sapiens sapiens*) sing or dance, there is an interaction in “perfect” forms—the regularity of soundwaves (an octave really is an octave, and the perception of it reflects this). Thus, aesthetics is a way for an organism to involve itself in the mathematical regularities of the universe—things like rhythms (cycles of the seasons), notes (soundwaves), cadences, movements (dance) in the case of music.

Then there are also material designs of many species. Might not all these organisms have a “feel” for “good-looking” material constructions? The impressive constructions of bowerbirds inspired a provocative, if short, article by John Endler in *Communicative and Integrative Biology* (2012), entitled “Bowerbirds,

Art and Aesthetics: Are Bowerbirds Artists and Do They Have an Aesthetic Sense?" The idea of symmetry is mathematically powerful, and useful in consciously made designs—not just in assessing a potential mate's reproductive possibilities. Such approximations of mathematical regularities help develop the idea of "ideal" forms, somewhat like the Platonic *eidos*, for cognate organisms, based on their sensory and synesthetic relation to the actual, not-so-ideal world.

These can further be applied and expressed socially, helping to develop socially shared "ideal aesthetics." In many complex life forms, the role of *socially shared* aesthetics helps to create what seems to be a group mind of collective intelligence, or social knowledge, which presents an interesting quandary: although intelligence can be held collectively, the subjective experience is only experienced on the individual level. This tension, between the individual organism and the social group, has a very long history on planet Earth. To understand all this, we need to take a deeper look at the root notions of *aesthetics as a motivating force of life*. I further propose that folklore is well situated for this study. After all, the communication of aesthetics—and/or the aesthetics of communication—is a *sine qua non* of folklore. To be sure, not all aesthetic communication is folklore, but all folklore is aesthetic communication. Further, this is a very deeply rooted part of life. Living organisms are rewarded with pleasure in expressing symmetries of nature, the math underlying the physical universe, with which the cognate must interact, and, to better its own position, better understand.

This also connects the age-old problem of the "mind" and the body. The body is the device through which the sensate being interacts with its surroundings, which is to say, the universe. Hence, the regularities of the body (two ears for stereo sounds, two eyes for depth perception, etc.) shape the interactive potentials. Yet the body is not divorced from the surrounding reality, but has instead been intensively shaped in response to the surrounding physical environment. Consciousness has therefore come to be at this intersection of replicating material forms—organized matter, if you will—and the physical reality that surrounds, nurtures, and ultimately destroys them. The "mind" is shaped by the experience of stimuli and the perception of a surrounding reality from which such stimuli flow—this leads to the experience of agency; whether an amoebae, a fish, or a fisherman, one must *decide* what to do.

In the more complex beings, "meta" levels are recognized. For example, play behavior is a very "meta" activity. It requires the understanding of symbolic behavior, and the recognition of symbolic behavior in others. ("This is not a real bite, but a play bite.") Play behavior reveals not only a sense of aesthetics (defined here as the enjoyment of symbolic representations), but also recognition of the consciousness of others, of other wills and volitions (sometime

to ultra-
although
hetic reac-
the color
ages have a
any other
ish-Gaelic
reflect our
and cones,
can view
dd, as well

of music,
aesthetic
expressed
harmon-
the easiest
er a pitch's
the octave
common
others have
ing birds,
ean 1995).

of the
prev-
some

there is
octave
tics is a
es of the
braves),

all these
mpres-
by John
erbirds,

called the "theory of mind" in the literature). Although playing does seem to be a fairly risk-free way to learn, the organism is rewarded by feelings of pleasure in engaging in this symbolic behavior: playing is fun. Playing has been observed throughout an impressive range of the animal kingdom (see, for an overview, Fagen 1981; for an extended discussion, Bekoff and Byers 1998). That is to say, most animals are sensate beings, capable of understanding symbolic action and behavior, and finely tuned to the aesthetics of fun. This is not a particularly new point—in his *Homo Ludens* ([1938] 1955), the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga claimed that play was an important part of our evolutionary development. Although he claimed that humans should be called *Homo ludens* in honor of the importance of play for humanity, Huizinga recognized that humans are by no means the only animals to enjoy play behavior, and explored the topic of nonhuman play at considerable length.

In the next chapter, I discuss the importance of "play" by asking what folklorists can say about games like "tag." The game has been documented among many mammals, and is clearly far, far older than *Homo sapiens*. What makes for a good game of tag, versus the not so memorable? What can we say about the feelings of pleasure that play provides? How could folklorists, who often study games like tag, comment on non(and pre)hominid varieties? To even broach such questions may require a substantial reevaluation of our notions of agents, personhood, and culture.

POSTHUMANISM, THE ANIMAL TURN, AND FOLKLORE STUDIES

"Posthumanism" is the term applied to the general approach of questioning previously held notions of "personhood" in Western academic discourse, which tended to unproblematically assume a categorical link between "person" and "individual *Homo sapiens sapiens*." Posthumanism has enormous societal, ethical, and legal implications; witness the growing sense of legal rights of nonhuman animals in such cases as two chimps being granted *habeas corpus* (relief from unlawful imprisonment) in the US, the declaration in India that dolphins are "nonhuman persons," and the general growing acceptance of "animal rights" in legislation around the world.

In the scientific world, most "animal studies" are now having to grapple with the enormity of the task, for which they have not been prepared. Animal studies are usually located in departments such as biology, reflecting the longstanding view of animals as biological (rather than moral or philosophical) agents, driven by "instinct" rather than thoughtful consideration, and linked to us only in our shared physiological features. Wildlife management, for example, does

not generally take into account the disturbance of animal cultures; these are assumed to be "living in nature," and "wild and free," instead of cultured beings. How can environmental protection protect not just animal lives, but also animal cultures? What animal cultures have been destroyed already, unknowingly?

The confluence of human studies and animal studies stumbles across rocky ground; even much of the language that we use is ill-suited for understanding animal thoughts, feelings, and culture. If an animal acts altruistically, we may say it was a "humane" thing to do, while if humans kill each other, we may describe the participants as "beastly" or "acting like animals." Nondomesticated animals are called "wild," which problematically implies a freedom from societal constraints. Perhaps the largest stumbling ground lies in the words we use for ourselves: "folks," "people," "person," "souls," and "agents" are all often held to be coterminous with *Homo sapiens sapiens*. This has led to discussing animal behavior without discussing animal mentality. The songbird is often described as singing due to "instinct," yet few scholars would feel comfortable ascribing this same rubric to our own species. One initial step toward understanding folklore beyond the human seems to be to recast the definition of these terms to be able to include agents of other species.

The idea of understanding other species as aesthetic, communicative agents ("persons" by many definitions) is neither new nor novel as many cultures have long held such views. As Marc Brightman, Vanessa Grotti, and Olga Ulturgasheva put it in their "Animism and Invisible Worlds: The Place of Non-humans in Indigenous Ontologies," "Animism is, by definition, the attribution of human(-like) subjectivity, agency and emotion to non-humans: in short, non-humans seem to be endowed with personhood" (2012: 14).

Nor is this idea limited to humans. Several studies from biology have described various species learning the communications of other species, in order to derive pertinent information—and even, in some cases, lying to deceive their eavesdroppers (Wheeler 2009)!

It is, however, relatively new in western academic discourse, which has long been dominated by an anthropocentric view of a categorical split between humans and other animals. The dismissive charge of "anthropocentrism" (imagining that animals were like people) may be seen as diametrically opposed to these viewpoints. Rather than seeing animals "as if they were people," what happens when we view people "as if they were animals" (which, of course, they are)? The discovery of trans-special cultural studies is an intriguing one, with potentially important contributions.

Posthumanism and the animal turn have affected many disciplines. The widespread influence of this rises to the level of a "paradigm shift" as per Thomas Kuhn (1962). Anthropology alone has witnessed a host of recent

works on the topics. For more on the idea of "multispecies ethnography" and the implications of posthumanism and the animal turn in anthropology, one could see particularly Eben Kirksey and Steffan Helmreich's "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography" (2010), discussing the *Cultural Anthropology* special issue dedicated to this topic, as well as Alan Smart's "Critical Perspectives on Multi Species Ethnography" (2014), similarly. An important contribution to this discourse is also Tim Ingold's "Anthropology Beyond Humanity" (2013).

In one compelling example, Eduardo Kohn explored how his hosts, the Amazonian Runa people, thought of nonhuman personhood, frequently commenting on the mental states of nonhuman "people." He says that Runa animism "is grounded in an ontological fact: there exist other kinds of thinking selves beyond the human" (2013: 94). Kohn's research causes him to reflect that "lives and thoughts are not distinct kinds of things" (2013: 99). He concludes with a note supportive of the consideration of animism within a philosophical framework, stating, "The world is animate, whether or not we are animists. It is filled with selves—I dare say souls—human and otherwise" (2013: 217). These considerations, stemming from both his experiences with the Runa, and the general trends of posthumanism, are important in the way that the nonhuman agent is considered.

Yet while Kohn maintains that symbolic reference (and, hence, morality) only occurs among humans (2013: 217),¹² I would venture a bit further to propose nonhuman agents as fully symbolic beings, since it seems that the notion of performative aesthetics is inherently symbolic, interacting with the apparent regularities of the universe (such as the octave example, discussed above, or the color spectrum, or time). The degrees of symbolic reference may be seen as quantitatively, but not qualitatively, different: a spectrum instead of a dichotomy.

While posthumanism has seen a flurry of works within anthropology, it has been much less in evidence in folklore studies, even as many discussions of internet folklore touch on the general contours of posthumanism. As posthumanism is also the theoretical bridge between animal studies and cultural studies, this lack of engagement inhibits the recognition and discussion of nonhuman cultural studies in the discipline. Unlike many disciplines, folklore has yet to come fully to terms with the implications of the "animal turn." With a few exceptions¹³, there has been a conspicuous silence on the topic. Folklorists, for the most part, have continued as if nothing has changed, as if aesthetic performances and appreciations remain the sole domain of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Yet, in many ways, folklore would appear to be an ideal discipline from which to engage with the animal turn. Folklorists, like ethologists, study performances.

"Who are the folk? (Among others) we are!" famously exclaimed Alan Dundes. (1980: 19). Following Dundes's reformulation of the "folk," we should ask anew: what is this "we," and who are the "others"? Can animals be "folk" as

well? If performers and audience members, and members of folk groups, are also nonhumans, then how can folklore studies productively come together with animal studies in an effort to study culture in its trans-special context? What could folklorists offer to the vast study of nonhuman life on Earth?

Not surprisingly, I would assert that there is much that folklore could offer. For example, folklore studies has long noted the importance of accurate collections of performances, and perhaps particularly the role of archives. Recent moves in open access provide excellent models for how vast quantities of data collected from a variety of researchers can be stored, shared, and compared.¹⁴ Classical theoretical developments in the field, such as the historic-geographic method and typology systems, have greatly aided folkloric research. Is there a way to type nonhuman songs, for example, so as better to compare them across time and space? Further, folklorists have also come to understand a great deal about how tradition works; it is always performed at some present moment, yet represents the past performances at the same time. It consists of a semiotic circle of meanings, with its own rhetorical weight.

Importantly, folklorists have emphasized the respect for the views and cultures of our informants. Very often, folklorists have found themselves working with minority peoples, many of whom have been viewed disparagingly by members of dominant cultures. The word "folklore" itself is perceived as problematic, due to pejorative notions attributed to the rural dwellers of Europe after the heyday of industrialization and modernity. Nonhuman animals, likewise, have had their personhood and culture denied by members of the dominant society—more even than most minority human groups, animal cultures lack a voice of their own in the academy.

Finally, the central importance of cultural performances in social relations lies at the base of folklore studies,¹⁵ and this conviction seems applicable across the species divide as well. With aesthetic performances taken in the wide view as part and parcel of life on Earth, folklore studies seems to have a vast new frontier opening up, a new mission not only to understand the role of aesthetic performance among humans but its role in life on Earth. Such a quest shifts the focus from understanding human societies and psychologies in terms of aesthetic performances toward understanding nonhuman cultures and psychologies as well—indeed, even toward understanding the underlying basis of aesthetics itself.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

How deeply rooted is all this? Although it may be tempting to start with the animals "nearest and dearest" to us—the domesticates, or extinct hominid species such as Neanderthals and Denovisans—what do we make of culture "in

the wild" or among the more divergent life forms? The octopus, for example, has been observed engaging in social learning via observation and clear play behaviors (see e.g., Kuba et al. 2006). Octopi enjoy learning tricks. They seem to be very creative, intelligent creatures, yet they are *Mollusca*, closer to a snail than to *Homo*. How long have octopi, or their relatives, been engaging in such playful behavior? Surely for millions of years before humans!

Not to be forgotten is the rather remarkable recent research on plant intelligence. Plants have been shown to have memory and complex systems of communications.¹⁶ Plants alert other plants of danger, sometimes specifically. While we know next to nothing of plant communication, the recent evidence points toward a great deal of lively communication taking place, in chemical and other signals, of which we have been nearly completely ignorant in our scientific discourse. If plants communicate, then do they also have social learning? Which is to say, is there a plant culture or cultures? If so, what sort of form might it take? What might be the aesthetics of the floral world?

Or what of the "hive mind" of ants and bees? Perhaps these are even strangest still to contemplate. Karl von Frisch noted that honeybees can communicate complex information to their hive mates with complex dances seeming to indicate the location of good food (1967). Is there an aesthetic component to this dance as well? To even begin to answer these questions, I believe we may benefit from this new, very broad view of aesthetics as experiences that bring feelings of pleasure or displeasure (in myriad forms), and that this is rooted in the basic properties of life, life as organized matter responding to stimuli from the outside environment.

An evolutionary understanding of aesthetics may also help dissolve the "mind-body" divide that has so long plagued Western philosophers. This "situated body" follows epistemological and phenomenological moves in philosophy that acknowledge biologically mediated experience (e.g., Husserl [1952] 1989; Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2012) and comports with many recent studies of the "embodied mind" (e.g., Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch's *The Embodied Mind* [1991], Shaun Gallagher's *How the Body Shapes the Mind* [2005], Antonio Damasio's *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* [1994], and Evan Thompson's *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* [2007]). Unlike the "soul-like" image of consciousness (as in Descartes's "homunculus" view, predicating the "mind-body" split),¹⁷ the "embodied mind," with its view of the necessary links between thought and the physical world, does not need homunculi nor souls. This approach has proved useful in posthumanist views of the cyborg realm, as well, reminding theorists that while the internet is "mediated," so, too, is the experience of the "real" world, mediated through our senses (see e.g., Biocca 1997). It is with

such an un-
approach t
at the noti
studies of
and reinte
of which i

Folklor
of *Homo s*
to help ex
What cult
ated on a
before. Th
human co
of the cor
a necessa
understa
the evolu

For example,
clear play
They seem
to a snail
going in such

plant intel-
systems of
specifically.
evidence
chemical
in our
social learn-
sort of form

even strang-
communicate
seeming to
component to
we may
that bring
is rooted
to stimuli

dissolve the
This "situ-
in philoso-
[1952]
udies of the
Rosch's
the Mind
the Human
ology, and
ousness (as
plit).¹⁷ the
ought and
approach has
reminding
ence of the
It is with

such an understanding of mediated experiences where the phenomenological approach to epistemology can be put into an evolutionary context, by looking at the notion of aesthetics as a basic motivating principle for all life. Further studies of this question might help further demystify the notion of "the mind" and reintegrate the mind back in to the body, and back into the physical world, of which it is made, and to which it refers.¹⁸

Folklorists should reconsider the assumption that folklore is the sole domain of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. I further suggest that folklore studies is well situated to help expand cultural studies into animal studies (and vice versa), generally. What culture is, and how it works, should be rethought, restudied, and reevaluated on a scale much grander and larger than anything we have considered before. Traditions, culture, and aesthetics seem to be much larger than the human condition. Rather, an aesthetic sense seems likely to be part and parcel of the condition of life itself. Acknowledging this, and investigating this, will be a necessary step for the future of folklore studies, and for the future of scholarly understanding of culture, in terms of consciousness, aesthetics, agency, and the evolution of life on Earth.