Introduction: The Place of Stories in Apsha Social Life

In my experience, no one is more pitied in Ukrainian rural life than the person who is alone, as I discovered when I would try to sit in the house alone and read or work at my computer. Within an hour, the room would begin to fill with people, holding conversations around me if not directly engaging me in conversation. Soon, I realized that they had come to find me, and, so to speak, bring me back in to the fold. “We were worried about you. Why are here you alone?” they would ask. Over and over again, in varying contexts, people would tell me how much they disliked being alone or working alone, and how much more interesting it was to do the same amount of work in a group than individually.

In the village of Apsha,¹ where I did most of the ethnographic fieldwork that informs this paper, family, friends, and fellow workers provide a social net that both supports and envelopes those inside it. And the thread that holds this net together, that defines its shape and ensures its maintenance, is spun from the stuff of everyday life, on the spindle of shared conversations. In this paper, I explore the concept of “everyday” storytelling and the dialogic roles that “narrators” and “audiences” can take up and carry forward in the performance of these stories. Moreover, following work such as that of Johnstone (1990) I argue that stories about everyday life, whether couched as more

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¹ Upper Apsha is a local name for the village in the eastern part of the Zakarpattia oblast’ of Ukraine where I have conducted linguistic and ethnographic research for the past 10 years. While Zakarpattia does differ markedly from other parts of Ukraine in some aspects of language and culture (see, e.g. Dickinson 2007), based on my experiences in and discussions with various people regarding village life in other parts of Ukraine, I believe that the arguments I make here will generally apply to rural conversational storytelling in other areas of Ukraine and perhaps Russia as well.
traditional performances of songs or as casual discussions of neighbors’ doings, are an integral part of this community’s negotiation of social values. Telling stories about both everyday and remarkable events has of course been a mainstay of the Apsha social fabric since long before the upheavals of perestroika and Ukrainian independence, but now the evaluation of people’s beliefs and actions has become more challenging as this community struggles to negotiate an understanding of which of their moral truths will remain true in the face of enormous social and economic changes.

This paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, I offer a summary of some key theoretical orientations towards performance that have shaped research in the fields of linguistic anthropology and folklore for the past thirty years or so. In this section, I also consider theoretical concepts of “narrator” and “audience” relevant to these theories of performance. In Part II, I analyze a performance situation in which several songs are sung to demonstrate how roles of narrator and audience can emerge and shift across what might be considered a straightforward example of “performance.” Finally, in Part III, I compare the song performances to the cooperative telling of a story about a death in a nearby village.

**Part I: Theories of Performance in Linguistic Anthropology and Folklore**

As Gabbert (1999) has discussed, the study of performance has undergone a fundamental shift in the field of Folklore since the 1970’s, moving from the study of texts as a primary object of study resulting from performance, to the study of performance as a process and as such an object of study in and of itself. In a seminal article for the field of
Folklore, Ben Amos outlined the ways in which the context of a performance can influence or alter its nature and content:

The social context, the cultural attitude, the rhetorical situation, and the individual aptitude are variables that produce distinct differences in the structure, text and texture of the ultimate verbal, musical or plastic product. The audience itself, be it children or adults, men or women, a stable society or an accidental grouping, affects the kind of folklore genre and manner of presentation. ([1972] 2000: 4)

This theoretical realignment is also evident in the work of linguistic anthropologists from this same period whose work “crossed over” into folklore, chief among them Hymes (1981) and Bauman (1974, 1986, 2004). Both of these scholars’ work focuses on the nature of performance as activity whose form and content are bound by community standards and expectations for the demonstration of culturally-defined skills, the competence (both knowledge and know-how) to create performances that the audience can recognize and evaluate as such:

“Performance involves on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus marked as subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer’s display of competence.” (Bauman 1974:11)

The study of performance then becomes the analysis of structurally recognizable shifts that set such activities off from the surrounding activities of non-performance, and at the same time the study of a particular performance instantiated in a singular, unrepeatable context. Hymes summarized the challenge of analyzing performance as:

…showing how appreciation and interpretation of performances as unique events can be united with analysis of the underlying rules and regularities which make performances possible and intelligible; in showing how to overcome the divorce between the emergent and the repeatable, between the actual, the realizable, and the systematically possible that has plagued the study of speech. (1981: 79).
In his discussion of the nature of performance, Hymes considered not only situations that are culturally recognized as performance events (such as the telling of a tale to an audience) but also a broader linguistic concept of performance as the act of bringing to life latent abilities or knowledge, such as for example when a person produces a particular grammatical form at the request of a field researcher, and in so doing “performs” their knowledge. While the utility of this more general interpretation of the concept of performance may seem to muddy the waters unnecessarily, Hymes and others have argued that recognition of the pervasiveness of performance as a part of human cultural activity is necessary if we are to balance the demands of understanding how both shared structures and emergent properties of a specific context shape human actions and interpretations.

Both Hymes and Bauman relied on the work of Erving Goffman (1959; 1974; 1981), particularly his use of stage metaphors and their application to diverse contexts of speech, including but not limited to traditional verbal art. One example of this influence can be seen in his discussion of “participant roles” and most notably his recognition of the need to separate out different speaking roles defined by the relation between speaker and utterer, such as the author of an utterance versus the animator who speaks it and the principal who is considered responsible for its content. (see e.g. Irvine 1996). In Part II of this paper, for example, I discuss performances in which the singer is clearly not the author of the material, but may or may not take responsibility for its content, depending on its relevance to the particular social context in which it is performed.

The idea of participant roles also expanded ideas about performance and its relation to context, as Goffman argued for a recognition of the “audience” as active
participants in a performance; indeed he argued it is often the emergence of an audience, and the corresponding shift in the behavior of various participants in an event that defines the start of a “performance.” This concept of the audience as the arbiters of performance is clear in the definitions already noted above; without an audience of some kind, there can be no performance, and it is the establishment of an audience which defines the boundaries of a performance. Goffman referred to this kind of structural shift, for example, when conversational participants shift into the role of performers or audience members for the telling of a joke, as a change in footing (1981), in which a different framework for interaction, with particular rules and expectations for different types of participants, was being invoked.

In his definition of frames of interaction, Goffman (1974) devotes a chapter to what he terms “The Theatrical Frame,” which in its purest form “is that arrangement which transforms an individual into a stage performer, the latter, in turn, being an object that can be looked at in the round and at length without offense, and looked to for engaging behavior, by persons in an ‘audience’ role (1974: 124). Goffman goes on to develop this notion of performance in relation to “frames” – shared cultural understandings of the type of interaction in which people are engaged and the accompanying shared set of rules for interaction in those given contexts. One example of such rules would be clapping: during a classical music performance, clapping is expected only at certain junctures, while at a popular music performance musicians may encourage rhythmic clapping, or audience members may applaud a solo within a given composition. Moving from the idealized performance situation of a stage performance in which the roles of performer and audience are often defined by space, orientation, freedom, and
focus of gaze, Goffman returns to his notion of performance or presentation of self in everyday life (Goffman 1959), even in the context of informal conversation, to argue that there are significant parallels in these two seemingly disparate activities.

Thus while key work in folklore and related studies focused primarily on the separation of performance events from quotidian interactions, other work in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics has underscored the importance of performance frameworks in the structuring of everyday conversation. For example, Norrick (1993) focuses on conversational joking as a instance in which context is an essential element in the recognition and interpretation of the joke as a miniature performance to be “evaluated” by the “audience” within the larger context of conversation. As he notes “It is the performance within a concrete context which makes a story funny.” (1993:118). Again emphasizing the role of the audience in “making” a performance, Norrick also incorporates the notion of the construction of the meaning of a joke performance as an interactional achievement; neither joke teller nor audience has full control over the success or failure, the acceptance or the dismissal of a joke. Instead, the telling of a joke is constructed as a dialogue whose final meaning is the result of collaborative effort, as the audience’s laughter, groans or silence answers the joke-tellers attempt at a performance.

The collaborative achievement of meaning a concept that has strongly influenced the study of conversational structure within sociolinguistics (see e.g. Button and Lee 1987; Schegloff 1982; 1986; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974). The concept of collaborative effort, developed most strongly by proponents of the Conversation Analysis approach within sociolinguistics, provides insight into the step-by-step development of
conversational meaning by focusing on “next turn,” that is, evidence in the response of an interlocutor to the actions of the previous speaker (Lee 1987; Milroy 1998). This strictly sequential approach to conversational interaction highlights the extent to which understanding depends, not only upon what the speaker says, but also upon the listener’s interpretation of what is going on. As with Ben Amos’ exhortation to folklorists to reject notions of a “text” that can be analyzed outside of its cultural context, this approach focuses on an interaction itself, rather than abstract referential meaning of words and phrases, as the location of the interpretation of an utterance.

In general, work on collaborative effort in different areas of linguistics and linguistic anthropology has demonstrated that this collaboration requires effort on the part of all participants, even if the listener does not speak, since both minimally verbal tokens (e.g. “mmhm”) and even silence (see Gal 1991) function as cues to the nature and successfulness of a conversational interaction. Meaning is negotiated and can emerge as shared precisely because no single one of the participants exclusively controls joint understanding of the conversational context.

Although different in individual approach, each of these theoretical stances is similar in their orientation towards meaning in language as emergent rather than fixed. Furthermore, this meaning emerges as a speech event (Hymes 1983) moves forward sequentially; like the shift in folklore from focusing in texts to focusing on the meaning of the text in its context of production, increased attention to the social contexts of language-in-use reveals how meaning is negotiated as an interaction unfolds. Thus conversations may give birth to performances, a joke may initiate an argument rather than
laughter, and one person’s story can be altered by questions and comments from others present.

Of course, participants in an interaction, whether it be a performance in a theater or a casual conversation at the grocery store, are not without ground rules that can serve as reference points for their own behavior and for the interpretation of the behavior of others. Some of these rules are part of the metalanguage of good manners (“Don’t interrupt!”) while others are so subtle and variable across groups that they may only be detectable through the close study of language in use (such as whether, and how long, a participant should pause before beginning to speak after another person finishes speaking).

My understanding of collaborative interpretation in conversation as I apply it to in Parts II and III of this article to the analysis of both song performances and a story told in conversation, draws on Bakhtin Circle arguments that linguistic interaction is characterized and even impossible to achieve without elements of dialogicity; achieving meaning without negotiating among all of the contributions to that interaction thus verges on the impossible. In Voloshinov’s formulation:

All meaning is dialogic…Therefore it is not right to say that meaning belongs to a word as such. In essence, meaning belongs to a word located between speakers, that is, meaning comes into being only in the process of answering, active understanding. Meaning is not in the word and not in the soul of the speaker, nor in the soul of the listener. Meaning is the effect of coordination [vzaimodejstvije] of the speaker with the listener on the basis of a particular sound complex. Voloshinov (1995[1929]: 321; my translation; emphasis in original)

While theoretically compelling, this process of coordination and negotiation of meaning on a moment-to-moment basis presents challenges for researchers seeking evidence of how meaning is actually achieved in a given interaction. [[[Add in brief discussion of
narrative performance and interactional achievement in linguistic anthropological study of narrative]

In the second section of this paper, I will contrast two different frames for song performance in the village of Apsha, focusing on the dialogue between the performers and their audiences as they negotiated both the participatory structure of those interactions. In particular, I consider how audience members’ interactions with a singer or singers help to define a performance as more or less formal, and also how performers’ stance regarding the text of a song can situate the meaning of that song as a form of storytelling in context.

Part II: Song Performance, Context, and Emergent Stories

Once encouraged as part of acceptable expressions of national identity during the Soviet period, folksinging and folkdancing performances continue to be a part of Ukrainian public life, institutionalized in school events and festivals as well as through the production and sale of folk music on the local and national level. At the same time, a lively tradition of singing traditional songs continues at rural weddings throughout Ukraine. These songs can generally be divided into two types: sad ballads and bawdy songs. The sad ballads are usually sung by a group of people as part of drinking traditions, and hence are referred to as “zastil’ni pisni” or “at the table” songs. In the first example I will discuss below, the singer chose these songs to perform in the unusually formal context of being asked to sing songs for me to record. During a field visit in the summer of 2005, eight years after I first recorded the songs I discuss in this

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section, I was listening to a compact disc of wedding songs with some friends. One song that caught our attention was a *zastil’na pisnia* about a man who has been mortally wounded far from home and is speaking to his mother in the form of a raven’s cries. I commented how sad, and therefore inappropriate to a wedding the song seemed to me, while my friends countered that the *zatillia*, or parts of the reception spent eating and drinking at the table, were in fact the most appropriate contexts to share feelings of loss and sadness as you remember friends and family members who have died. These songs, then, are understood as expressive of shared experiences of loss, and may be performed in contexts of discussions on those and related topics.

Bawdy rhymes (*kolomyjky*) are sung during wedding preparations, the wedding procession and as part of raucous and dance-oriented parts the festivities. In Apsha, older women are generally cited as the repository of the largest selection of *kolomyjky*. These songs may be sung in one of two common performance frames: either by several people together in a ragged chorus, or with one person “performing” while the “audience” participates by laughing or commenting. Perhaps for this reason, applause is rarely offered in these contexts; rather appreciative laughter or other commentary is considered an appropriate response to the songs’ cleverness and the singer’s ability to evoke laughter. As I will discuss in relation to my second example below, one way in which a singer can display virtuosity is by singing songs or song stanzas that reference the immediate context of the performance, for example stanzas incorporating the name of someone in attendance (and therefore seen as “addressing” that person) or that comment

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3 The raven frequently appears in Russian and Ukrainian folktales and folk songs as a representative of death or the dead.
on a topic being discussed in an ongoing conversation (common themes include a bride’s eagerness or reluctance to leave home).

In 1997, during my dissertation fieldwork, I expressed some interest in recording examples of traditional songs. With this goal in mind, my research assistant Natalia and her young baby, along with her mother Anna, visited Maria Fedoryxa, a middle-aged woman living a couple of miles from me on the other side of the village, not far from Natalia’s mother-in-law. There were several other people at the house when we arrived, including an older woman named Liuba, Liuba’s husband, and her sister, Odotia. Knowing the reason for my visit, Liuba and Odotia turned the conversation to local traditional songs. The beginning of their efforts to invoke a performance frame for Maria to showcase her singing set off an elaborate and sometimes awkward series of negotiations of participant roles within this interaction. While the stated purpose of the visit was to hear Maria sing, setting up the expectation that she would perform and the others present would act as the audience, in fact for the first ten minutes or so of the recording the role of primary performer shifted back and forth between Liuba, Maria, and to a lesser extent Odotia and Liuba’s husband, who towards the end of this first ten minutes both chimed in by singing a couple of awkward kolomyjky.

The shift from the chitchat of our initial conversation into the performance frame came after the assembled group drank vodka together, as drinking and singing are closely linked in this community. The transition was initiated by Odotia, who, after praising Maria’s singing, encouraged her to sing a song she called “Oj mamko kudy ty mene

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4 This is a common form of naming married women in this area – first name plus an appellation derived from her husband’s first name or last name.
a melancholy composition about loneliness and loss. However, Maria demurred, laughing “But my mother didn’t marry me off far away!” in essence deflecting the song choice as not relevant to her life and by extension, to the given interactional context.

Nonetheless, Liuba began the song, and Odotia joined in briefly on the first verse. On the second line of the song, Odotia dropped out and Maria joined her, singing at a slightly lower volume and thus showcasing Liuba somewhat as the primary performer. Maria then sang the next line of the song at full volume, with Liuba joining in only softly at the end of the line. At that point, some confusion, perhaps over different variations of the song text, and Maria stopped singing abruptly while Liuba continued with the fourth line of the song. Odotia admonished her “Don’t interrupt!” and she stopped singing. Maria responded good-naturedly “Let her interrupt. Go ahead, I’ll parrot” After a brief pause, Liuba continued singing the next line of the song, but after she finished, Maria picked up the song, singing the rest on her own at full volume and clearly demonstrating greater vocal strength and skill than Liuba. At one point, Odotia commented “See how nicely she sings!” At the conclusion of the song, Maria offered a small spoken commentary, “Nuo,” and those present offered a brief round of applause, completing the collaborative construction of Maria’s singing as a special kind of more formal, individual performance.

While this interaction began more informally, with two singers sharing the song and listeners offering various comments, by the end it had taken on characteristics of a

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5 Oh mama where have you sent me [married me off] to” Songs are usually referred to by the lyrics of the first line, although of course they can also be evoked in other ways, such as “the one about the old woman” or “the one that Maria sang at her sister’s wedding.”
6 Meaning she would sing along at certain points for emphasis or to harmonize.
7 This all-purpose work is extremely difficult to translate, but in this context it would mean something like “So there you have it.”
more formal solo performance, complete with audience applause to signal its conclusion and the opening of the floor to commentary.

After Maria’s performance, Natalia praised her saying “Sing another one, I had no idea you sang so well!” Odotia again suggested a song, naming a first line, and Maria began singing in, with Liuba and Odotia singing the first verse with her, then limiting their singing to the supporting “parroting” role. At first the song echoed the sadness of the first:

Oh the green fields would turn green
If a young girl turned smart she wouldn’t get married
She wouldn’t get married so young
Oh mama I didn’t get married so long ago
But I look in the mirror and I’m already turning gray

After this line, Odotia commented “That’s for sure!” and several people laughed gently. At this point, Liuba jumped in and singing the same tune as the lead singer with Maria parroting, took the turn of a more bawdy kolomyjka, as the singer comments “Without young men, what would I do with my lips” a line that drew more raucous laughter from the audience. Liuba and Maria then traded the lead on a few more verses of the song before Liuba began singing another tune. Maria did not join her and her performance was considerably less successful and she even paused in the middle to ask “Have you had enough yet?”

At the conclusion of Liuba’s song, the performance framework continued but in some disarray: several other people, including Liuba, her husband and Odotia all offered short bits of song, followed by exhortations to Maria to sing again. Indeed, Maria was elevated to the role of a master performer by other people in the room, who noted that she should have represented the village in singing contests. After she disavowed interest in
performing onstage, other people in room start up a brief conversation about a recent flood in Czech Republic, where many of the people in the room had husbands or other relatives working as migrant laborers. This conversational interlude, while seemingly unrelated to the larger context of song performance, in fact played a key role in establishing the context for the song that followed.

After a couple of false starts during which Maria coughed a few times and a baby in the audience causes a some disruption, Maria began singing a song about a man named Ivan who goes to war, leaving his bride, Marusyna, in the care of his mother. Although she begins while others are still conversing, this talk quickly dies out, and in contrast to the signing at the beginning of the tape, no one else joins in. Maria’s song tells the story of Marusyna’s poor treatment at her mother-in-law’s hands and culminates in Ivan’s return and discovery that his wife has died. He goes to her grave, and the singer animates a conversation between Ivan and Marusyna’s ghost, who has taken the form of a raven. Marusyna calls her mother in law a “sorceress” and says she was poisoned and she advises Ivan to look after their child but not to marry again until his mother is “rotting in a dark grave.” Finally, the song concludes with a traditional “bard’s” couplet “So I’ve sung and sung/And if you asked me I would sing again.” As with the first song she sang, Maria clearly indicates to her audience when the performance is over, closing her part of the performance frame and opening up space for the audience to respond. During the song, several people made quiet comments like “It’s so sad,” but at the conclusion of this couplet, the audience burst into appreciative laughter and applause.
After praising Maria again for the quality of her performance, people begin to comment on the song itself, which is new to them. Maria notes that she got the song text from the newspaper:

1. Maria: From the newspaper. It was in the newspaper. People would really say something like that, all of that [is true to life], how she tried, just for the hell of it, to [kill] her…

2 Anna: Well Marijchka, that’s exactly how it really is. That is the exact truth.

3 Odotia: How [that one] talks down to/makes trouble for the children [meaning Ivan and his wife]…

Here, in contrast to her statement at the beginning of the conversation, when she specifically separated her experience from the content of the song (“But my mother didn’t marry me off far away!”), here she and members of the audience instead focus on how true to life the song content is. In this case, I argue that it is the context of the performance that reinforces the interpretation of the song as true to life and in particular as highly relevant to the personal experiences of the audience. In this way, the song becomes a larger part of the dialogue among those present and forms a link between talk about a flood in Czech Republic and the indictment of evil mother-in-laws that follows the song performance.

Indeed, the mention of the flood is a key element in the song’s interpretation. At the time of the recording Anna’s husband, their son, and and their son-in-law, Ivan were both working there as migrant laborers, and Ivan’s wife Natalia and her baby were present for Maria’s performance. In discussing the flood, Anna expressed her worry about her family members working abroad, a common theme in Apsha storytelling of this time period, when communication between migrant laborers and their families at home
was by and large dependent on letters carried back and forth by travelers. It is also important to note that Natalia and her husband were at the time experiencing marital problems that her family believed to be caused by her mother-in-law and which were affecting her health. In this light, Maria’s choice of song, about a man named Ivan who must leave his family, and whose wife is then denigrated and eventually killed by her evil mother in law, gains considerably greater meaning. Anna’s statement that the song is true to life, and others’ concurrence with this, again gains greater meaning within the larger context of the entire visit. In addition, in a portion of the conversation that I did not record, Maria discussed a recent interaction she had had with Natalia’s mother-in-law that did not show her in a very good light.

While a number of different songs were performed during my visit, this one in particular seemed to fit in with the dialogue developing among the participants, part of a larger ongoing evaluation of the effects of migrant labor on this community. In this sense, Maria’s offering of the song performance became her “turn” in that conversation, a chance to take on the role of storyteller and to make that story available for evaluation by other participants in the conversation.

The potentially “conversational” nature of Apsha song performances became clearer to me a few weeks later, when I went with my friend Anna and her granddaughter Oksana to her mother Hafia’s house. I went there to interview a woman commonly referred to in the household where I lived as Vujchina (Uncle’s wife), a notoriously independent and slightly wacky older woman renowned for her ability to sing bawdy wedding songs. After discussing some of the details of her dramatic life story, in which

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8 This situation improved somewhat when more telephone lines became available in the village in the late 1990s, however it is only recently with the placement of several cellphone towers in the region in 2004 that regular communication between migrant laborers and their families has become commonplace.
she described being given by her mother into servitude in pre-Soviet times, experiencing a famine and forced collectivization, being forced to marry an older man at a young age, divorcing him and having children out of wedlock, I asked Vujchina to sing some of the songs for which she is so well known. For the next several minutes, she sang several songs, at first struggling, but gradually becoming more comfortable with this unusual performance context. At the start of her performance, she asked whether she should sing “Oj ja dity hoduvala” (Oh, I fed my children…), and after a few false starts, during which Anna’s granddaughter Oksana asked her to sing louder, she began singing a song narrated by an old woman whose children reject her. After a few lines, she stopped and began to cry, saying her throat was closing up and that she had started the song wrong.

Anna encouraged her to drink some more vodka, and she began singing again. When she reached the line “Now my children have grown and they work for money,” she began to cry, then composed herself and sang “Mama doesn’t have enough to buy bread/And now the children are grown, they work driving trucks.” At this point, Vujchina paused and offered the aside “Not my children, the poor things, it’s just in the song,” to which Anna responded with an affirmative noise. After that, Vujchina’s singing became stronger, and at the end when she asked “How was that?” “Anna answered “Good, good.” Somewhat upset by her crying during the song, I recommended that she sing something funny, not something so sad, so she sang a song about growing old and how “sinful” she used to be. At the end of this song she said slyly “That’s when I was young. Now I’m more honest [i.e. “well-behaved”].” Then she added an ironic coda “As good as horseradish!” [i.e. not well-behaved at all], eliciting laughter from the group.
Although she sang a few more short couplets, a tension remained in the room; Vujchina seemed uncomfortable with the contrived performance context, so far removed from the freewheeling give and take of a wedding-preparation party, where she noted “Usually I yell the songs out.” While she was finishing one of these songs, Anna’s mother Hafia, an old friend of Vujchina’s came in. After a brief conversation and some more vodka, Vujchina started to sing again, and to my surprise an interesting dialogue developed between the two women, as Hafia began softly prompting her between couplets. The last hints of tentativeness dropped away from Vujchina’s singing as she increased the volume of her singing to a near-yell and moved from one song to another more quickly. The “song conversation” developed fully as Vujchina responded to Hafia’s prompts, then began tailoring her offerings to fit more closely with the given context – the names and physical characteristics of the audience members, and relating the theme of previous couplets to new ones:

Hafia: “Nu ydu naxodyty” ("Well I'm going to walk")
Vujchina: “Well I’m going to walk and sing
And they will feed an old woman
H: “That one about the old woman”
V: Hey old man the old man goes down the road saying
“If you only knew, littla Hafia, how my feet hurt
Oh my legs hurt oh my heels hurt
Yours would too if you had walked the world like I have”
H: Nuo. [Well then.]
Anna: Sing something to Hafia, something for [the name] Hafia
V: Hey Hafia hey Hafia long-haired
You won’t be sad as you walk out as a bride
H: And now [sing] how that Nikolayxa sang to that Romanian woman about what she food she gave to whom?
[Anna begins laughing]
Draft version

V: Hey Gypsy Gypsy Gypsy\(^9\) Hafia
   I gave you just as much as you deserved!
[General laughter]
Anna: [laughing] That’s the way it should be [i.e. “That’s more like it!”]
V: O Maria has black eyes
   I’ll slip away from the party and go to Hafia’s…
H: But I have grey eyes
V: But I have grey eyes and you have the same
   And it seemed to me that yours are cursed [prokliati]
H: Damned [correcting her word choice]
V: Damned
A: You see how well Vujchina sings, mama?
H: Yes.
V: You have grey eyes, and I have the same
   That’s what I liked, that we are both alike

Breaking out of the performance frame to comment on the content of the song, Vujchina said to Hafia “Go look at yourself in the mirror and see for yourself if you and your old man [husband] don’t have the same grey eyes…” Vujchina then sang another series of couplets about grey eyes, in which the singer comments that people lie about her and try to cast spells on her, but she ends up “clean of spells.” After this she paused for a moment, and Anna urged “Go ahead, sing, sing.” In response, Vujchina offered the following couplet:

Oh I sing, I myself [male] don’t know why I’m singing
Every night I’d go visit a different girl…

After a few more exchanges, the interaction returned to a more usual conversational mode, as those assembled discussed the weather, the harvest, the trials of dealing with

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\(^9\) Although Apsha residents recognize Roma and Romanians as different ethnic groups, Romanians are sometimes called gypsies in conversational speech, usually in situations where slyness or greediness are being discussed.
aging bodies, and the foibles of various neighbors, all exactly the kind of topics covered in traditional *kolomyjky*. In listening to this tape again, I was struck by what Hymes calls the “breakthrough into performance” (1981) – the moment where the performer moves completely into the performance context and the “audience” begins to fulfill its role, demonstrating its evaluation of the performer’s work. In this case, although Vujchina was certainly “performing” songs prior to that point where Hafia arrived, the songs seemed unconnected, texts divorced from the contexts in which they are usually performed. What the performance lacked, in a sense, was the conversational give and take, the audience participation, that is the essence of *kolomyjky*. Only in her “dialogue” with Hafia did Vujchina finally break into a traditional *kolomyjka* performance frame, defined in part by the way in which interactions between the singer and the audience, and between the singer’s last song and the next song, creates a unique context for the production and interpretation of each individual rhymed couplet.

In both of these examples, Maria’s song about the evil mother-in-law, and Vojchina’s performance of linked song couplets, language surrounding and inserted into song performances helped to both establish the performance frame, and to define the singer’s relation to the performed song text. In both of these cases, a song performance became part of a larger conversational interaction, as performer and audience returned to more equal footing in the give and take of everyday conversation, further contextualizing the song choice and influencing its interpretation by the audience.

In the final section of this paper, I extend the idea that dialogic negotiation of meaning is a model for performance, even in less dramatic contexts such as the telling of recent events. Here, I consider conversational storytelling as another participatory
framework in which, while one person may be singled out to carry the narrative, the comments and contributions of other participants, the “audience” are essential to the progression of the story and its interpretation.

**Part III: Narrator and Audience in Everyday Storytelling**

As I have discussed more fully elsewhere (Dickinson 1999), Apsha stories comprise a significant proportion of conversational interaction that surrounds simple socializing and especially talk conducted in conjunction with work. All aspects of everyday life, from the cost of goods at the market to sick farm animals, from gossip about neighbors’ husbands to descriptions of what one made for dinner the previous night, are all woven together into the omnipresent social net that connects Apsha residents in almost every moment of their daily lives. In the folklore literature, “storytelling,” is often associated with the format of a single narrator involved in a dramatic performance, perhaps of a ghost story around a campfire, or a parent animating a fairy tale bedtime story. [[Discuss approaches to everyday storytelling such as Johnstone 1991; Tannen 1998; Goodwin 1990]]

In Apsha these formal storytelling performances are few and far between; instead most stories are told as part of conversations, with other participants peppering the narrator with questions, engaging in co-narration, or offering supportive commentary. While these moments of storytelling in conversation are not clearcut performances like the songs discussed in the second part of this paper, they did represent a shift from the “regular” back and forth of conversation. The telling of a story in conversation does entail a shift into a narrative frame in which one person takes on the responsibility of
telling the story, while other participants become the “audience,” supporting the telling of
the story and offering their evaluation of it. Without this audience support, their
willingness to suspend the more even back and forth commentary of regular
conversational interaction, the story could not be told. At the same time, as with Hafia’s
support and influence of Vujchina’s song choices, the audience is expected to play a key
role in shaping the progression of the story.

To demonstrate how this kind of “everyday” performance unfolds into the roles of
narrator (performer) and audience, consider the following story, which is once again
framed by a discussion of migrant labor and its effects on members of the local
community. A woman named Natalia stopped by the house, and asked whether Anna’s
son had returned to work in Czech Republic yet, prompting Anna to tell a story about how
his neighbor had died suddenly, delaying his departure. Woven throughout her narrative
are comments and corrections offered by other participants, as well as elements of the
story that connect to larger discussions of families separated by migrant labor:

1Natalia: Is Vasyl still at home and Jur or where are they?
2Odotja: Yes
3Anna: And Jur, when they arrived Saturday morning, and Vasyl told me, that…
“we will leave on the fourteenth or fifteenth” he says “on Sunday evening” but
after that Vasyl was here yesterday, but his neighbor died, she was like a
mother to him, that woman. Well, and he didn’t [discuss] anything with us,
nothing at all because it was like he couldn’t speak he was so sad
4N: [at the same time as A] sad
5A: Yes, well and I still was going to ask him he said if only you know [I wanted to
ask him] when the funeral would be but they asked [the husband’s] mother and
she says that oy! The woman’s husband is in Pskov and they sent for him last
week, obviously something was hurting her but she was still managing [the
pain]
6Vasylyna: [overlapping with A] And is her daughter home?
7O: She doesn’t have a daughter
8A: There is a daughter! And the daughter has a young child and she’s at home! But her son isn’t. I don’t know if maybe that’s her daughter-in-law

9O: daughter-in-law, because she, and they have a little girl

10A: Oyoyoy, and her son isn’t home. And they sent a telegram to the husband that she was v-very sick. He wrote back from Pskov that he would be home on Friday but in a second telegram he said “I can’t come because they haven’t paid me and I don’t have the money,” and now he’ll come, well he has to come

11N: Goodness gracious!

12A: And her sister Anna, D--- what is her first name?

13O: Anna

14A: Well, and she is somewhere at a wedding, I don’t know where. And there’s no one here

15O: Well! I ask you

16A: There’s no one home and [Vasyl] said that if [the funeral] is going to happen it will happen on Sunday…

[[[After a further discussion of the collaborative construction of a narrative and complications of the roles of ‘narrator’ and ‘audience’ in this example, I argue for the applicability of the performance context to conversational storytelling, and note that the intensive involvement of the audience in the construction of the narrative, as with the song performance described just above, is part of that same process of making narrative “true” by keeping them close to the real life experiences of those telling them. ]]]

Conclusions: The centrality of dialogue to Apsa performance [to be expanded]

In this paper, I have focused on the theorization of “performance” as a joint activity constructed cooperatively by members of a community. These performances must conform to certain expectations, for example in relation to form and content, in order to be recognized and treated as such by their audiences. At the same time, each performance is unique in its characteristics, shaped by immediate features of the context.
In particular, I focused on the role of the audience and of the surrounding verbal interactions as part of the development of the meaning of a performance in context. In Apsha conversations, narrators are expected to connect their stories to broader topics and themes, strengthening social connections among participants. As I have demonstrated here, the more actively audience members are able to contribute to the content of a song and/or its interpretation in relation to these larger social themes, the more valued a performance, and the narrator’s story are.
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