

[Article] Creativity, Liminality, and Metaphor in Songwriting



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I wrote my first song the day I met Chelsea. The song wasn't about her, but something seemed to change that day, and I've been writing songs ever since. The art of songwriting has always fascinated me. As a teenager, listening to my favorite songs over and over, I marveled at every detail, wondering what kind of wizardry was used to create art that moved me so powerfully. When I started writing songs myself, the process still seemed like a mystery. When I started leading songwriting workshops in Indonesia, I was able to witness the birth of some great songs that are still used in churches around Indonesia. I also noticed a lot of musicians struggling to create songs, frustrated with the process and the outcome. I began to wonder more and more how songs are written—not just in the moment, but what greater social forces are at work behind the songwriting act itself. Aristotle (1960) saw creativity as the production of something by the “agency of someone, whose knowledge to do so comes from somewhere and the resultant novel variation is seen as a valued addition to the store of human knowledge” (McIntyre 2008, 202). This is in contrast to Plato's (1937) inspirational view that a muse brings sudden inspiration. Is Chelsea really my muse, as Plato would say, or did I start writing songs because I finally had enough knowledge of music to create novel variations in that domain?

We won't ever be able to unravel all of the mystery about songwriting—and I don't want to. But I also recognize that certain conditions, knowledge, and experience make songwriting more rewarding and more useful. In the following essay, I will explore some theories that can help us understand how songwriting happens and how we might help create the conditions that allow more great songs to be written. Where possible, I have attempted to use examples from Papua, Indonesia, because I hope to research congregational songwriting in Papua.

I will begin with a discussion of creativity in songwriting. Considering a few case studies from the Western pop songwriting process and a failed Scottish mass, I will explore how the systems model of creativity, optimal distinctiveness theory, and stable and malleable theory can be used to analyze songwriting. The second section of this essay will explore how the songwriting process can be considered liminal, and how increasing the liminality of the process may produce better results. Finally, in the third section I will use Peircean semiotics to describe how metaphor works to create an emotional and identity-forming response.

Creativity and Composition

Following the Romantic period, creativity in the Western tradition has been seen primarily as the work of an individual genius (Benson 2013; C. Anderson 2016). While the individual is an important part of the creative process, the following theories see creativity emerging from a cultural system rather than from one individual. Csikszentmihalyi states that “creativity results from the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation. All three are necessary for a creative idea, product, or

discovery to take place” (Csikszentmihalyi 2009, chap. 1). Brian Schrag proposes that for arts to thrive they require both stable and malleable elements (Schrag 2005). Schrag relates the interplay of these two elements to dynamos, calling the resultant structure “artistic dynamos.” “People draw on their communally constructed, stable systems (like stationary magnetic fields) to craft malleable communicative acts germane to particular times and places (like rotating magnetic fields)” (Schrag 2021, 146). Certain parts of the domain are stable, allowing an individual to introduce creativity through the malleable elements. Using the terminology of Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model, we could say that if the newly introduced elements are accepted by the field, then those elements feed back into the domain. Robin Harris recognizes that an imbalance in stable and malleable elements can cause the decline of a genre (2017, 178). Csikszentmihalyi concurs, stating that “it is possible to wreck a domain either by starving it of novelty or by admitting too much unassimilated novelty into it” (2009, chap. 2).

In *Locating Cultural Creativity*, John Liep states that “creativity bursts forth when elements, which were already known but apart, are brought together by inventive people in a novel way” (2001, 1). Liep defines creativity simply as “the novel combination of old ideas” (2001, 7). The stable parts of culture are reorganized to create something new. Cultural creativity as a theory emerged in the early 1990s as a reaction against the dominant philosophy that cultures are static—instead arguing that individual and collective agency are a part of the continual reinvention of culture through creativity (Lofgren 2001). The level of creativity needed depends on the social situation. Friedman (2001) shows that creativity isn’t simply play, but that it concerns the deeply felt needs and emotions of the social subjects. As a result, the area of greatest creativity will be at the intersection of greatest cultural difference and “situations where there is interaction involving different values, world views and forms of expression” (Liep 2001, 12). “In periods of major change, when conventional understandings are discredited or no longer able to explain altered conditions, the need for creating new cultural schemes to account for life in the world becomes acutely urgent” (Liep 2001, 6). The most extreme creativity emerges when it’s most needed.

Optimal distinctiveness theory helps describe the motivation behind some of this creativity:

The optimal distinctiveness model (Brewer 1991) posits that human beings are characterized by two opposing needs that govern the relationship between the self-concept and membership in social groups. The first is a need for assimilation and inclusion, a desire for belonging that motivates immersion in social groups. The second is a need for differentiation from others that operates in opposition to the need for immersion. As group membership becomes more and more inclusive, the need for inclusion is satisfied but the need for differentiation is activated; conversely, as inclusiveness decreases, the differentiation need is reduced but the need for inclusion is activated. These competing drives hold each other in check, assuring that interests at one level are not consistently sacrificed to interests at the other. According to the model, the two opposing motives produce an emergent characteristic—the capacity for social identification with distinctive groups that satisfy both needs simultaneously. (Leonardelli, Pickett, and Brewer 2010, 66)

When a culture’s arts are too similar to those of the surrounding culture, members of society feel a need to create something different. When there is too much differentiation in arts, those same members feel a need to assimilate more with arts of the majority. Using stable and malleable vocabulary, we could say that there is more emphasis on the malleable when differentiation is needed and more emphasis on stable when assimilation is needed. Fredrik Barth (1969) showed that “although cultural hegemony may be consolidated by powerful forces, other social groups will at some point challenge the authority and diverge culturally” (Liep 2001, 8).

This back and forth between assimilation and differentiation helps a culture's arts find an equilibrium that serves the community's needs.

Benson (2009) states, "One way of thinking about a musical work is that it provides a world in which music making can take place. Performers, listeners, and even composers in effect dwell within the world it creates" (32). Creating such a world requires stable elements and ample room for malleability in the form of improvisation. No theory perfectly describes all of the various causes for creativity, but a combination of Csikszentmihalyi's systems model, Schrag's stable and malleable elements, Liep's cultural creativity, and Brewer's optimal distinctiveness model give us some useful theoretical tools to describe creativity.

We now turn from general creativity to musical creativity in the form of songwriting. I found two studies to be particularly informative. They both apply Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity to professional songwriting for Western pop/rock genres. McIntyre's (2008) study used participant observation, in-depth interviews, shorter interviews, secondary interview material, a limited survey, and analysis of documents and songwriting procedures. Bennett (2012) chose to study collaboration in songwriting, primarily because the creative process is easier to observe, as collaborators are forced to communicate their process and ideas.

According to McIntyre's (2008) research, it is important for the songwriter to acquire what Bourdieu (1993) calls cultural capital. This process is known as domain acquisition, leading the songwriter to develop a habitus (Bourdieu 1993), or "feel," for how to write songs that will be considered creative by the field. Good songwriters have internalized the domain and begin to know intuitively what the field will consider creative. Bastick (1982) proposed that intuition is derived from learned experience, resulting in a body of knowledge that can be "intuitively accessed and processed" (McIntyre 2008, 47). "The ability for songwriters in the contemporary Western popular music tradition to make choices and, therefore, be creative is thus both circumscribed and facilitated by their knowledge of the domain of contemporary Western popular music and their access to, and knowledge of, the field that holds this knowledge" (McIntyre 2008, 49). In Western pop music, the field is all of the people working in the music industry, as well as the consumers of music (McIntyre 2008). In McIntyre's study, all of the songwriters interviewed had at least some formal musical training and a wide variety of informal training. They had all become so immersed in the domain and field that they all developed a "feel" for songwriting.

In Western pop music, there is a rather rigid musical form that has changed very little since mid-twentieth century (Bennett 2012, 139). However, the field is also proactive, demanding novelty (McIntyre 2008). "Deviate too far from the norms and the risk of the song 'failing' rises; stay too closely within them and the song may exhibit cliché—or even plagiarism—and fail anyway. The popular music listener demands a limited bandwidth of novelty" (Bennett 2012, 146). Bennett goes on to say that "A lot of student writers are really desperate to rebuild the whole house whereas an experienced songwriter is happy with the house—they just want to decorate it in a new way" (152).

Bennett noticed that in collaborative songwriting there is an initial stimulus presented by one of the collaborators that starts the songwriting. More stimuli are added throughout the process. These stimuli could be part of a lyric, a musical idea, basic theme for the song, and so forth. These stimuli can be either approved, vetoed, negotiated, or adapted by the collaborator (Bennett 2012). In the Western pop tradition, once the song is complete, the melody and lyrics are the stable element, and the production decisions during recording are

malleable. However, once the song is recorded and distributed, the recording is stable and the resulting performances become malleable.

To summarize, songwriting is essentially the production of a new musical work accepted by the field, created by someone who has internalized the domain to the point that they can create from “feel.” With this understanding of songwriting, we now move to looking at how good songs are created. What makes a piece of artistic creation good? Bennett (2012) takes an evolutionary approach, stating that “genres could be identified as ‘species,’ which have evolved to suit their fan-base ‘environment.’ Characteristics of individual songs will vary and are required to do so to avoid accusations of plagiarism, but they do not deviate so substantially that they cannot survive in their environment” (143). Bennett and McIntyre both consider a song in Western pop music to be creative if the field—the producers and fans—consumes the songs created. If we agree with Wolterstorff (1987) that art is meant to *do* something, then we must first ask what Western pop music is meant to do. Looking at Bennett’s and McIntyre’s descriptions of success in the field, we see that creative success is measured simply by commercial success, so Western pop music is meant to make money. However, most songwriters in that tradition would probably not agree with this statement. John Liep (2001) writes that “creativity in its modern sense must be seen as part of the expansion of capitalism” (5). The rise of capitalism with its “immense expansion of productive and commercial development was accompanied by what Schumpeter (quoted in Zukin 1991, 5) called a ‘creative destruction’ on an awe-inspiring scale. Old forms of production and cooperation, old ways of life and relationships, whole classes and populations were swept away” (Liep 2001, 5). Liep goes on to say that “Power relations and the control of resources are of the utmost significance among the conditions for creativity” (9). Considering the Western pop music industry, I don’t completely agree with McIntyre and Bennett that the charts are the best evaluation of creative success. Advertising and promotion play such a prominent role in what the public hears. It’s very possible that a song heard by only a few people might be successful, but because it’s not promoted to the public, it never reaches that point.

Since the focus of my future research will be congregational music, we need to look to a different field to understand what is considered a successful song. Schrag (2021) describes the potentially harmful effects of arts and argues that arts can result in positive or negative change. Wolterstorff believes that art can be a weapon against fallenness: “Paradise is forever behind us. But the City of God, full of song and image, remains to be built” (Wolterstorff 1987, 199). Turning to congregational music, it may be instructive to look at a case study in which a song was *unsuccessful*. Ferguson (2018) analyzed Sir James MacMillan’s “Mass of Blessed John Henry Newman” as just such an example. MacMillan is a very successful Scottish composer who has written both secular art music and congregational religious music. He was commissioned to compose a mass for the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United Kingdom in September 2010. Those performing the mass had great difficulty learning it, and MacMillan’s hope that it would be used after the visit was not realized. Ferguson describes the reasons for the mass’s lack of success. I will attempt to show how the lack of success can be explained using vocabulary from stable and malleable and systems model of creativity theories:

- 1) The mass was created to foster a sense of national scale for the papal visit, but the hope was that it would also be used after the visit. MacMillan attempted to write one piece of music for two different fields, missing both in the process. The purpose of a song must be clear if it is to fulfill that purpose.
- 2) MacMillan prioritized aesthetic over functional concerns, creating a piece that was too difficult for most people to sing. It’s important to fit the difficulty of the song to the ability of the field.

- 3) MacMillan admitted that he was trying to “make his mark” on the music of the Scottish Mass, pushing too hard for change. He discarded too many of the stable elements, upsetting the balance between stable and malleable. In order for music to be understood as creative, it needs a balanced amount of both stable and malleable elements.
- 4) MacMillan departed from the Scottish or Celtic feel of his other masses, moving toward a more English art music aesthetic. He was using music from one domain (secular art music) in another domain (Scottish mass). He was trying to mix domains, but the field wasn’t ready or motivated to change.
- 5) In all of his other successful masses, he reworked traditional Scottish tunes, allowing people to connect with a domain they were already familiar with. The new mass had none of these connections, so it was less likely to connect to the field evaluating it.

In summary, when evaluating the success of congregational music, the field—consisting of congregants, pastors, and worship leaders—needs to be considered. The compositions also need to connect to the stable parts of the domain, so that they are recognized as creative. When composing congregational music, the composer must consider how the field will react to the musical piece, connecting stable and malleable elements to create something that connects with the past as well as contributing something to the future domain. The final goal of congregational music may be to worship God, but whatever the goal of a piece of music, it is clear that if the field rejects it outright, it won’t be able to achieve the intended impact.

Shifting our attention to Papuan music, many studies show that Papuan music is much more improvisational than the Western musical tradition (Gillespie 2010; Rumsey and Niles 2011; Peyon 2019; Frank 2013; Kuegler 2005). Describing the Duna understanding of creativity, Gillespie writes, “Compositions are generally not fixed but spontaneous creations” (2010, 26). Writing about the importance of improvisation, Benson argues that what “we call ‘composing’ and ‘performing’ are essentially improvisational in nature” (2009, 2). This is true for all music, but it’s especially clear in Duna music, where the melody can stay the same, but a good musician is able to manipulate the lyrics to fit the performance. Lyrically, the Duna place high value on textual innovation in the form of word substitution, repetition, and parallelism (Gillespie 2010, 184). Therefore, one could say that a song is created only at the moment of performance. This depends on genre as well. Traditional Papuan genres in the Kosarek region use the same melodies and simply change the words to fit the topic. The Kosarek songs written in Pacific string band styles each use a different melody, although the melodies are very similar. Traditional Papuan music exhibits more lyrical improvisation but less musical improvisation. With increasing Western influence, lyrics in newer Papuan songs are becoming more stable and the music is becoming more malleable, keeping the equilibrium.

Liminality in Songwriting

As we explore how songs are created, it’s also important to consider where and when they are created. Do certain spaces yield better songs? Although the current study can’t answer this question, I have noticed some important parallels between good songwriting spaces and liminality. Victor Turner (1987) described liminality primarily as a space where transformation takes place. The limin, or margin, happens between separation from society and aggregation back into society. Initiation rites are the most familiar liminal spaces. Liminality is characterized by *transformation*, *creativity*, and *communitas*. These three aspects of liminality make it a particularly fertile space for effective songwriting. Transition is the essential process in liminality, but

throughout the transition there is always transformation as well. Those going through the transition change through the process (Turner 1987). Schechner calls these liminal states “transformation performances” (2020, 152).

Within the liminal period, there is also space for creativity. Working from Sutton-Smith’s (1972) ideas about games of order and disorder, Turner describes liminal as “settings in which new symbols, models, and paradigms arise—as the seedbeds of cultural creativity in fact” (1974, 60). Turner describes liminal space as “an interval, however brief, of ‘margin’ or ‘limin,’ when the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun. There is an instant of pure potentiality when everything trembles in the balance” (1974, 75). Interpreting Turner’s ideas on liminality, Beech states, “In liminality, the chaos of the unknown is transformed into something new through the encounter” (2015, 188). Creativity is a part of the process of personal transformation that happens during the liminal period.

Another integral part of liminality is the fostering of what Turner calls *communitas*, a description of togetherness in a less structured environment. Often those in liminal states are “treated equally, reinforcing a sense of ‘we’re all in this together.’ People wear the same or similar clothing; they set aside indicators of wealth, rank, and privilege . . . sometimes first names are not used” (Schechner 2020, 150). Turner showed that *communitas* is in contrast to structure. “*Communitas* . . . may be said to exist more in contrast than in active opposition to social structure, as an alternative and more ‘liberated’ way of being socially human, a way of both of being detached from social structure . . . and also of a ‘distanced’ or ‘marginal’ person’s being more attached to *other* disengaged persons” (1974, 82). For congregational songs especially, individual transformation, musical creativity, and the fostering of a strong community are all important in the process as well as the product of the songwriting experience.

After Turner’s work on liminality, he created another category—liminoid. Below are the differences (as outlined in Turner 1974, 84–86):

- 1) Liminal phenomena predominate in tribal and early agrarian societies while liminoid phenomena occur more in societies that have undergone an industrial revolution.
- 2) Liminal phenomena are collective and cyclical, usually based on biological and calendrical rhythms. Liminoid phenomena can be collective, but they often result in individual products.
- 3) Liminal phenomena are integrated into the societal process, while liminoid phenomena are usually on the margins of society.
- 4) Liminal phenomena use symbols that have a common meaning for all, while liminoid phenomena use symbols that are for specific groups of people.
- 5) Liminal phenomena often support the structure of society, while the liminoid are parts of social critique.

Songwriting seems to be much more liminoid than liminal. However, Atkinson and Robson (2012) describe a change that has recently taken place regarding these two words. “Over the last ten years, framing contemporary settings through liminality has enjoyed a renaissance enabled by blurring the distinction between liminal and liminoid and allowing flexible temporalities” (2012, 1354). As I discuss Atkinson and Robson’s (2012) study, I will use the term liminal with the understanding that most of what I’m discussing is, in fact, liminoid in Turner’s original framework.

Atkinson and Robson (2012) wrote a very informative article in *Health & Place* on liminal characteristics that contributed to the success of arts-based intervention in elementary schools. “Our proposition, then,” they write, “is that arts-based practices that can successfully generate such spaces of wellbeing are usefully explored and conceptualised through Turner’s theory of liminality” (Atkinson and Robson 2021, 1349). Two cases of arts-based intervention programs were recorded and studied by the arts practitioners. One was facilitating writing, and other was facilitating painting and modeling (clay). The groups intentionally tried to create a liminal space using separation and reintegration, inversion of social hierarchies, equality among participants, and the communication of what Turner (1987), following Jane Harrison (1903), calls *sacra*. *Sacra* includes what is shown, what is done, and what is said during the liminal period (Turner 1987, 12). The groups always met in the same place at the same time every week. They had certain rituals for entering and leaving the space. They all received certain *sacra* in the form of special knowledge and special notebooks. All students were equal, and sometimes the teacher and students would switch roles—also common liminal characteristics. The authors see liminality as a “separation from the everyday routines and entry into an alternative social encounter in which different rules, different values, and different relations apply” (Atkinson and Robson 2012, 1350). Their intention was to study the positive effects of arts in liminal spaces. Discussing art therapy for children, Atkinson and Robson (2012) write that “building *communitas* made the sessions a safe space for sharing and receiving compliments from their peers which translated into a growing confidence in their ability to produce [art] work worth the attention of others” (1353). The program was so successful that it was extended several times.

Turning songwriting workshops, the primary liminal aspect highlighted is creativity—playing with the different parts of culture to create something new (Turner 1974). But there are many more ways that liminal aspects are reflected in songwriting workshops. Any meeting, seminar, or workshop in Indonesia requires a wide variety of paraphernalia, setting it apart from everyday life. There must be a large sign, called a *spanduk* in Indonesian, that includes who is putting the activity on, when and where it is being held, and the title of the activity. As soon as this *spanduk* is in place, it creates a space where participants are set apart from others. There must also be name tags—even if the names are not legible. Every participant is also given a packet with several pens, a notebook, workshop materials, and notebook in which to write songs. All of this sets the participants apart for a set amount of time and a certain space for a specific purpose. Workshops are also always opened by the beating of a drum three times by the hosting body, such as church or NGO. Reintegration occurs at the end of the workshop when the drum is again beat three times, and all the participants are given the recordings and lyric sheets produced during the workshop, along with a certificate acknowledging their participation in the activity. Each time my colleagues and I attempted to circumvent one of these symbols in the interest of practicality, the effect was disastrous. These are the symbols used to show that a person is being set apart and then reintegrated with a new status into the world, and when all of this is in place, the workshop can run smoothly. If the participants are further set apart by staying in one location for the week, the results are much better. If they stay with hosts in the neighborhood or village, the results are not as good, and if they stay at home and come to the workshop every day, the results are even worse. Some of this may be practical, because participants often come to sessions late because of duties at home, but I believe the liminality of the workshop is somehow diminished as well, therefore diminishing the transformation, creativity, and *communitas*.

During songwriting workshops, we have certain information we share about songwriting and songwriting activities, that gives the participants new knowledge about a specific subject. When participants start writing and recording songs, they seem to feel a new status. We also show videos of other workshops and

songs created to give the participants a sense that they are being initiated into a group whose members span the archipelago. Indonesian seminars, meetings, and workshops are known for being very hierarchical, and most participants plan to sit and simply listen for several days. Our focus on participatory methods inverts that social structure, so that the teachers from outside become the learners and the local artists become the teachers. Equality is fostered among the participants through inversion of roles as well—the pastors and leaders of the church who participate need to learn from the musician participants with lower social status. They often work very well together, and many participants have reported high feelings of *communitas* throughout the workshop. Many workshop participants have told us that the biggest change they experienced in the songwriting workshop was a feeling of closeness and community with everyone else.

There are many similarities between Atkinson and Robson’s study and the songwriting workshops we’ve done, but the most interesting difference is that the students in the study only came to the group for a few hours a week, whereas songwriting workshops are usually full days for a whole week. I would like to consider how we could still keep the liminal nature of the songwriting workshop without the massive expense and difficulty of a week-long workshop. In the Atkinson and Robson study, the constant change from liminal to the “real world” can still encourage what happens in the liminal, because it urges people to use what they have gained in the liminal in the “real world.” “Contemporary applications of liminality have modified Turner’s characterisation to allow short but repeated periods of separation. . . . allowing flexible temporalities to liminality addresses the critique of abrupt transformation by recognising gradual incorporations of new identities” (Atkinson and Robson 2012, 1354).

In my upcoming research, I would like to explore how can we create a more liminal experience when people don’t have the time or material resources to spend a week in a separate location writing songs. Atkinson and Robson (2012) write that “managing liminality involves balancing the integrity and permeability of boundaries. Contemporary settings of liminality, with their flexible temporalities, are vulnerable to intrusions from the wider context in ways that Turner’s settings of total and protracted withdrawal were not” (1353). This calls for some kind of action research, but it would be interesting to try songwriting activities for only half a day or one day at a time, over several weeks or months, and identify ways the liminal could be increased. It would also be crucial to discover the liminal devices or spaces Papuans already use to set certain activities apart.

The Power of Metaphor

One of the defining characteristics of traditional Papuan lyrics is the frequent use of figures of speech—primarily metaphor and metonymy. Examples of these can be found in a wide variety of locations all over Indonesian Papua (Peyon 2019; Frank 2013; Oguri 1981; Yektingtyas-Modouw 2008; Voorhoeve 1977) and Papua New Guinea (Rumsey and Niles 2011; Feld 2012; Gillespie 2010). In the following discussion I will focus primarily on the metaphor and metonymy found in the Yali area, since most of the lyrics available are from Zollner (1977), appearing in Peyon (2019). Most figures of speech used in Papuan lyrics are from nature—birds, trees, and rivers seem to be particularly important. Since both metaphor and metonymy are used in Papuan lyrics, I will begin with general definitions from Lakoff and Johnson:

Metaphor is principally a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another, and its primary function is understanding. Metonymy, on the other hand, has primarily a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to *stand for* another. But metonymy is not merely a referential device. It also serves the function of providing understanding. For example, in the case of the metonymy the part for the whole there

are many parts that can stand for the whole. Which part we pick out determines which aspect of the whole we are focusing on. . . . metonymy serves some of the same purposes that metaphor does, and in somewhat the same way, but it allows us to focus more specifically on certain aspects of what is being referred to. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 36–37)

Although metonymy primarily uses one entity to refer to another, the composer *chooses* the word specifically to focus on an important aspect of that word. In the following translation of a Yali song from the Siegfried Zollner collection in Peyon (2019, 327), we see how metonymy and metaphor function in Papuan lyrics:

We are all sick, plagued by disease,
the *heli* trees have been felled, only saplings have remained,
the *heli* trees in Heni, only saplings have remained,
the *heli* trees in Ulunggek, only saplings have remained.
We are all sick, plagued by illness,
the *heli* trees have been felled, only saplings have remained.

Heli trees often die and lose their leaves, sending up young shoots in the process. The composer uses *heli* trees to convey that disease and death are ravaging the village. The *heli* tree here is clearly a metaphor, because it represents death by frequently dying and shedding leaves. Heni and Ulunggek are mountains near the village of Anggruk. These two function as metonymy, because no one died on those mountains, but both of the mountains refer to the village of Anggruk, where people are dying (Peyon 2019, 328). But the *choice* to refer to these two mountains is also important. Rivers are more commonly used to refer to the village near them, but in this case these two mountains are mentioned instead. Why? The mountains of Heni and Ulunggek are also known as places where dead spirits go, so the choice to use these particular mountains to refer to the village location increases the *association* with death that the singer is trying to convey. Whether metaphor or metonymy are used, there is always a choice and intention involved in the words that are used.

Besides Lakoff and Johnson, other scholars such as Robert Nisbet (1969), Victor Turner (1975), and Charles Peirce (D. Anderson 1984) all categorized nonliteral figures of speech in different ways. In the following discussion I will use metaphor as a blanket term for all nonliteral figures of speech. “Metaphor is, at its simplest, a way of proceeding from the known to the unknown. . . . Metaphor is our means of effecting instantaneous fusion of two separated realms of experience into one illuminating, iconic, encapsulating image” (Nisbet 1969, 4, qtd. in Turner 1975, 25).

We can all attest to the power of metaphor, but how do metaphors work? Semiotics can help us delve deeper into why metaphor is such an especially effective way of communicating. Peircian semiotics is particularly helpful, because signs are divided into three types: icon, index, and symbol. Iconic signs resemble their object and are most important for imagination. Indexical signs are associated with their object and are important for establishing fact. Symbolic signs are primarily linguistic and are important for arguments or propositions. Turino states that “Symbols are *signs about* other things, whereas icons and indices are *signs of* identity (resemblance, commonality) and direct connections” (1999, 228). Signs, such as icons, that are direct, affective, and less-mediated are considered to exhibit more “firstness” in Peirce’s framework. Those signs that are linguistic propositions and indirect, such as symbols, exhibit more “thirdness” in his tripartite semiotic framework. In Thomas Turino’s article “Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music,” Turino proposes that music’s power to create identity is related to its “firstness” (1999, 221).

He goes on to explain exactly how this happens: “The crucial link between identity formation and arts like music lies in the specific semiotic character of these activities which make them particularly affective and direct ways of knowing” (1999, 221). “It is my thesis,” he writes, “that the power of music to create emotional responses and to realize personal and social identities is based in the fact that musical signs are typically of the direct, less-mediated type” (Turino 1999, 224). Unfortunately, Turino’s brilliant exposition of Peirce’s framework provides no discussion of how lyrics work as part of the complex of musical signs. In light of Turino’s understanding of Peirce, I argue that the iconicity of metaphor in song lyrics also exhibits more “firstness” than propositional symbols in lyrics, which exhibit more “thirdness.”

One of the crucial ways of understanding the affective potential of a sign is through the sign–object relationship (Turino 1999, 228). One type of iconic relationship is metaphor—“juxtaposed linguistic signs, which are not iconically related to their objects or each other” but that “posit some parallelism or similarity between the objects of the signs” (Turino 1999, 227). The way metaphor is defined here clearly includes both metonymy and analogy. Peirce’s second category of sign–object relationship is indexical—signs that are associated through co-occurrence, such as smoke being an index of fire or V7-I movement signaling musical closure in Western music. Symbols are the third and most mediated type of sign–object relationship.

Turino shows us that music exhibits more firstness than thirdness not just because music is indexical, but also because musical signs are so multivalent and complex. “The multi-componential aspect of music can not be overemphasized as a basis of music’s affective and semiotic potential. . . . the rhythm, meter, tempo, mode, melodic shape, and texture likewise may each function as discrete signs sounding at the same time—contributing to the power of a particular meaning, to new insights, or to emotional tension, respectively. . . . the ambiguity or density of the sign complex discourages a response in Thirdness and encourages unanalyzed feeling” (Turino 1999, 237). Metaphor and other poetic devices are also more ambiguous and dense, making them more “music-like,” encouraging unanalyzed feeling and identity formation.

In order to explore this further, we will now turn to Anderson’s (1984) exposition on Peirce’s view of metaphor. Peirce believed that “a metaphor is a symbol in which iconicity dominates” (456). According to Peirce, metaphors are *precise* in articulating feelings, but logically vague. Feelings are vague, because they are “firsts and therefore preanalytical” (Anderson 1984, 462). Anderson states that “Metaphor . . . has its role in artistic creativity as a way of bringing new things into the world. . . . with creative metaphors, the poet expresses artistic hypotheses: unlike the scientist, he uses feeling, not thought, as his guide” (465–66). Peirce believed that metaphors change through time, starting more as icons and ending more as symbols. This is what he calls a frozen or dormant metaphor (Anderson 1984, 464). As metaphors move from icon to symbol, they also move from firstness to thirdness, increasing their ability to communicate clearly, but slowly losing their emotional response.

Some lyricists seem to have a knack for creating fresh metaphors, leading to an almost instant emotional response. Others rely on well-used metaphors, and although we know exactly what they’re trying to communicate, we don’t *feel* it in the same way. I believe this is because the metaphor in the first example is still closer to an icon, while the metaphor in the second example has become a symbol. Turino addresses the human need for all levels of signs. “The fact that certain parts of ourselves are only available through pre-symbolic signs is precisely why we need art and music, media that operate largely at the iconic and indexical levels. It is also why humans need distinct realms of practice which foreground the different semiotic levels of iconicity, indexicality, and symbolism to achieve subjective integration of the ‘whole’ person” (244). For a song to

effectively communicate on an emotional and identity-forming level as well as a propositional level, it needs both firstness and thirdness. That isn't to say that all songs need to be a mix of the two, but simply that when writing songs, neither should be ignored.

When I spoke recently to Mulikma, a Kosarek writer of Scripture songs, I discovered that although traditional Kosarek music uses lots of metaphor, the songs he and his colleagues are writing don't use metaphor, because they want the message to be clear. However, when asked what he is writing about, he said that he is writing songs from Revelation, a book that may have more metaphor than any other book in the Bible (Mulikma 2021). As ethnodoxologists, we often follow Bible translation practice and encourage songs that are clear, accurate, and natural. But we sometimes emphasize clarity at the cost of the emotional, identity-forming power of metaphor. Jesus himself frequently used parables, a type of metaphor, to hide the message of the gospel (cf. Matthew 13:13), and perhaps also to increase the emotional as opposed to cerebral response. Jesus refers to himself by using metaphors such as the bread of life (John 6), light of the world (John 8), and five other metaphors in the book of John. Psalms and Proverbs are full of metaphors that hold propositional meaning while appealing to the emotions as well.

Yali Scripture songs are used widely in highlands of Papua, even in many areas where Yali is not well understood (Mulikma 2021). In Wilson's (1988) dissertation on Yali Scripture songs, he discusses how over a hundred songs were written in the early 1980s and quickly became popular throughout the region (1988, 56–57). Wilson's analysis focuses primarily on parallelism as the poetic function that makes these songs memorable, but the ten examples he includes in appendix two also evidence frequent use of metaphor (Wilson 1988, 65–71). Below is one of the songs that clearly shows a variety of metaphor and propositional teaching (Wilson 1988, 69):

62. [2 Peter 3:10-13]

When Jesus comes, he will not come like a man
 When Christ comes, he will not come like a man
 He will come destroying (as he comes)
 To sort out people (good from bad)
 He will come destroying (as he comes).

Up (refrain)

Yehei yehe hu o, We are in awe of Jesus
Hu o yehei yehe hu o, We are in awe of God
Hu o yehei yehe hu o.

By the coming of Jesus the heaven will become nothing
 By the coming of Christ the earth will become nothing
 What will remain are Jesus' words
 God's word also will remain.

Well-formed and unformed *werema* nuts
 Continue to roast them indiscriminately
 On the day I come to break them open,

I will come with “mallet” in hand
Continue to roast them indiscriminately.

Forsake your sins now
If you do not forsake (them)
At the “tail end” of time
I will come to hit/kill you.

If you have become cold
If you have become lukewarm
On the day when I Jesus will come
I will come and spit you out.

Many of the Yali songs use metaphors from nature, such as rocks, falling leaves, pigs, and pandanus nuts, as we see in the above song. Wilson calls the *werema* nut metaphor “cryptic,” while some of the other metaphors in the songs are more clear (1988, 69). Peyon, who is Yali himself, suggests that metaphors in songs and poems convey hidden messages. He mentions that hidden metaphors can communicate sensitive information about conflict or love without losing face or creating open confrontation (Peyon 2019, 375–76). They also provide knowledge about places, people, plants, and animals in the surrounding environment. “Sociocultural reality is described in associations. Reality is hidden behind symbols. The messages of these songs can only be understood by deciphering the symbolic language. At this point, it takes a deeper understanding and feeling to interpret the poetry” (Peyon 2019, 335). For certain metaphors, communication requires shared personal experience. This seems especially true of metonymy, where the index is more important than the icon. “Indexical relations are grounded in personal experience; the members of social groups will share the indices proportional to common experiences. Thus, indexical communication is most prominent in intimate groups” (Turino 1999, 235). Using shared metaphors may also increase the identity-forming aspect of metaphor, because the use of metaphor signals insider knowledge, which also connects to identity.

As metaphors change, it’s important to keep in mind that “revolutions of thought are often simply the replacement of one metaphor with another” (Nisbet 1969, 6, qtd. in Turner 1975, 28). “The metaphor selects, emphasizes, suppresses, and organizes features of the principal subject by implying statements about it that normally apply to the subsidiary subject” (Turner 1975, 30). Often the “poets, writers, religious prophets” begin the process of modifying metaphors (Turner 1975, 28). It would be an interesting study to see *how* and *which* metaphors are now used in Papuan music. It would also be illuminating to study how songs using metaphor work within Christian worship.

Conclusion

We won’t ever fully understand everything about the songwriting process. I love the mystery of it. There may be something in most of us that wants to believe Plato, that a muse—for me, Chelsea—brings the songs to us. But if we look closely, we can also see the truth in Aristotle’s view. While we wait for the songs to come, we can do some things to increase the quality and frequency of songs. We can learn the domain and get to know the field so that our songs use both stable and malleable elements in ways that clearly communicate our message. We can create liminal spaces to facilitate creativity and *communitas*. We can learn how lyrical choices will affect

those experiencing our songs. We can practice these elements of how to write songs, so that when the muse does show up, we're ready to create something that will be recognized as creative by the field and feed back into the domain.

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