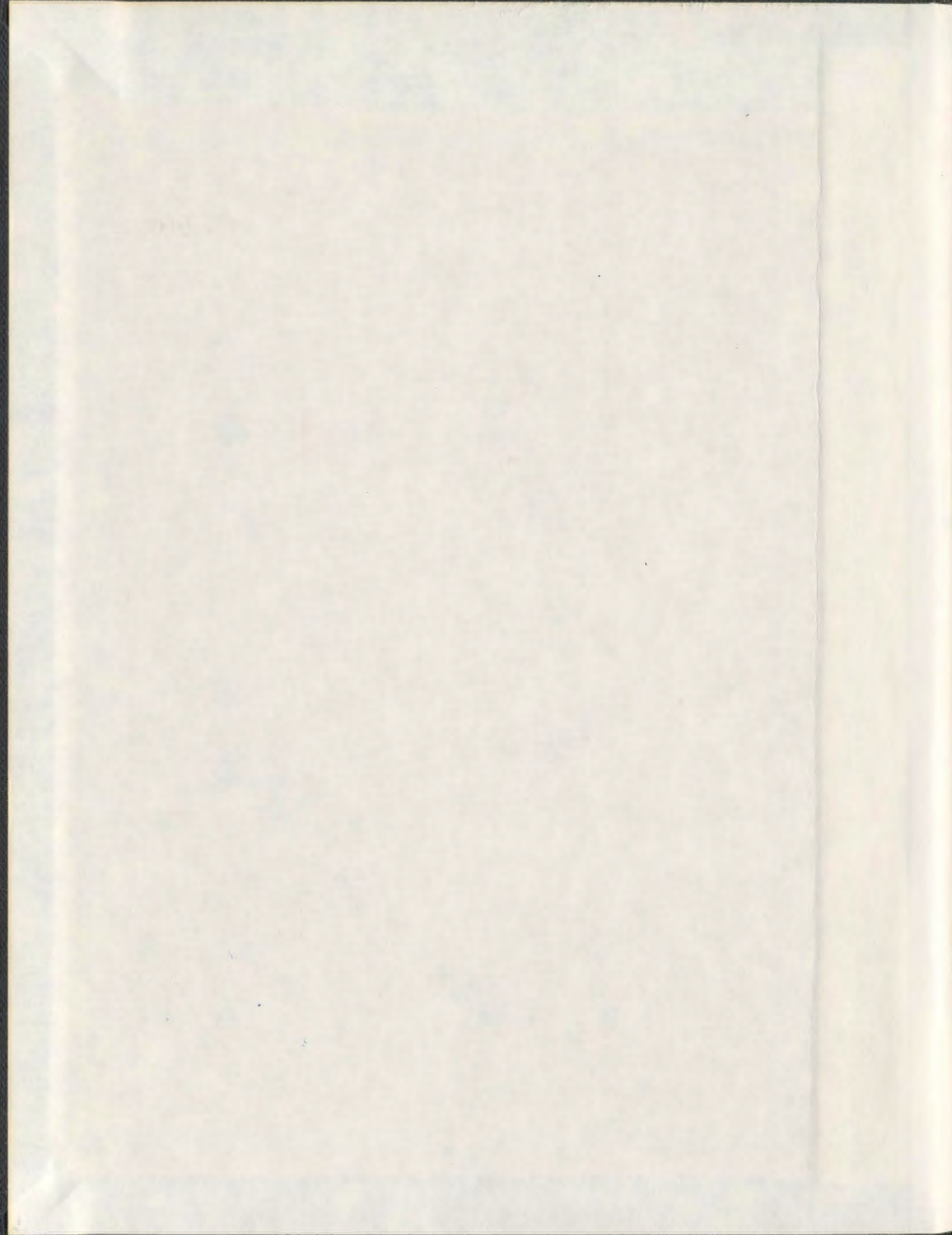


SERIAL COLLABORATION:
SMALL WORLD ACTIVITIES AND THE
GLOBAL COMMUNITY

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by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses a body of traditional practices that have yet to be identified and analyzed by folklorists. These practices—identified variously by participants as object-tracking games, small world activities, treasure hunts, or simply as hobbies—are herein described as instances of “serial collaboration,” a phrase which encompasses the two necessary components that link the varied manifestations of this tradition to each other. Serial collaboration, a folk form that has been in existence for some time, has emerged as a newly influential expressive tradition within contemporary communications technologies. While still prevalent in non-technological forms, the current popularity of these activities on the Internet makes them ripe for examination in both their original and new contexts. This dissertation includes an introductory description of the variety of activities that make up this tradition, an analysis of the primary and secondary characteristics of this tradition for the purposes of generic identification and definition, an examination of several case studies, and a consideration of the many theoretical approaches and issues that contribute to an understanding of the role, function, and meaning of this tradition in contemporary society. Participants’ reports of their activities reveal a shared perception of an ur-form, an original generic identifier that provides the basis upon which disparate manifestations are emically linked, as well as revealing a clear understanding of the shared generic features that qualify an activity for inclusion. By exploring this and other facets of the tradition, this dissertation will serve as a proposal for the recognition of serial collaboration as a discrete genre of folklore.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part I	6
Prologue	6
Chapter 1: Definitions	10
Basic Definition	10
“Serial”	12
“Collaboration”	13
Deep Definitions	17
Related Practices	22
How Is This Folklore?	29
Generic Placement	33
Chapter 2: Genre	38
Material Culture	38
Custom	40
Graffiti	41
Game	43
Individual Traditions	45
The Process	50
The Making of a Genre	54
Past Attempts at Genre Creation	60
The Generic Features of Serial Collaboration	68
Chapter 3: Theoretical Implications / Unifying Themes	73
Space and Place	73
Temporary Ownership	76
Globalization and Modern Travel	78
Imagined and Virtual Communities	82
Transmission, Networking, and Serendipity	88
Narrative, Ostension, and Legend Tripping	94
Sub-Cultures, Counter-Culture, Anti-Consumerism	96

Chapter 4: A Taxonomy of the Genre	106
Part II	114
Research and Methodology	114
Chapter 5: Case Studies of Type A	120
BookCrossing	120
Where's George	127
Roaming Gnomes	134
Travel Bugs	139
Flat Stanley	141
Amish Friendship Bread	145
Other Examples and Related Activities	151
Parodies	159
Chapter 6: Case Studies of Type B	170
GeoCaching	171
LetterBoxing	180
Rock Stacks	187
Other Examples	209
Chapter 7: Conclusion	214
Epilogue	223
Bibliography	224
Appendix I: Surveys	241

PART I

Prologue

A woman walks to a bus stop on her new route to work in San Francisco, California. As she approaches the stop, she sees a book, obviously used, lying abandoned on the bench. She thinks at first someone has left it behind by accident, but the note stuck to the front announces, "I'm not lost, I'm free!" She picks the book up and opens it, reading from a sticker on the inside front cover that the book has been traveling from reader to reader, gathering reviews and comments on a website called BookCrossing.com. The woman takes the book with her, planning to join in the chain of readers that the book has accrued, pleased with the idea of the unexpected gift from a stranger.

Two friends are hiking in the mountains of Utah when they come across a small metal box protruding from beneath a rock shelf. When they open it, they find a random assortment of small objects and a notebook listing all the other visitors who have found and contributed to the box. Back at home, they visit GeoCaching.com and learn who left the box; they get clues to where other boxes might be located and plan a trip to find them. They talk about the fun of being insiders to the knowledge of these secret treasure boxes hidden throughout the landscape, which most other hikers surely pass by without seeing.

A woman visits Signal Hill in St. John's, Newfoundland, gazing out past the farthest eastern point of North America. She sees around her a collection of rock stacks, many in the rough form of humans, and builds her own small stack near them. Before leaving, she adds a rock to the

largest of the preexisting stacks, feeling a stronger connection to the landscape and to the other people who have walked the same path and admired the same view.

Two young men approach the house of a middle-aged couple they have never met before. Two weeks earlier, the men were in the Galapagos Islands and visited Post Office Bay in Floreana, where they dug through a barrel of unstamped postcards, looking for any addressed to recipients close to their final travel destination. They located one from the couple's daughter, which was brought to the island by a friend of hers, and when they deliver the postcard, they recount its unlikely journey from sender to receivers, much to the wonder of the couple.

A third grader in Kansas, as part of a class project, colors and cuts out a paper Flat Stanley figure and mails it to his mother's old college roommate who lives in Douala, Cameroon. The ex-roommate sends the third-grader photos of his Stanley in various locations in her hometown before sending Stanley off to her sister in Cape Town, South Africa. More pictures are sent, and Stanley continues his journey, helping his maker's class learn about the world outside their school from real people who live far away, rather than from textbooks and encyclopedias.

A newly married couple in Cork, Ireland, finds a disposable camera on a train. The camera has a note on it asking anyone who finds it to take one picture and then pass the camera on. The couple takes a photo of themselves in front of their bed and breakfast and then, seeing that they've taken the last photo on the roll, they place it in the mail, trusting to its pre-paid postage to get it to the person who initially "set it free" in New York City. A month or so later, they go to PhotoTag.org and find their picture, along with a collection of others from people in both New

England and Ireland, in an online photo album. They wonder if they'll ever meet the young boy who was feeding ducks in an early photo from the roll, or the elderly couple from Galway, who make them think of their own future together.

A rubber stamp hobbyist visits Cranmere Pool in Wales, excited about the prospect of visiting the original letterbox, placed there as a "message in a bottle" to fellow walkers by an elderly gentlemen in 1854. When she finds the box, she opens it and uses the ink pad she finds inside to put a copy of her own personal stamp in the box's journal, and then to put a copy of the box's stamp in her own journal. She takes time to look through the journal, admiring the stamps of all the other walkers who have visited the box, and anticipates going online to share her story of being a part of the first letterbox with other enthusiasts.

A Girl Scout is earning her kayaking badge on the Klamath river in Oregon and leads her troop along a portage path on foot around a treacherous stretch of rapids. At a fork in the trail, she finds a rock cairn marking the correct direction. She pauses to add a stone to the cairn, ensuring that it will remain intact and noticeable for future river-goers, and smiles at the sense of goodwill and companionship she suddenly feels with the unnamed people who have gone before her on this trail and who, in their turn, kept the cairn standing with contributions.

A skier at Aspen resort in Colorado packs a spare bra in her parka before hitting the slopes. As she rides up the chairlift with her friends, she pulls out the bra and tosses it onto the ski area's "panty tree," a tree next to the lift that is already covered in bras, underwear, and bead necklaces.

Her friend tosses a strand of beads she got during Mardi Gras, and as they continue up the hill, they laugh at their subversive claiming of territory in the fancy, upscale resort.

A retired U.S. Army general finishes his meal at a diner and as he gets up from his booth, he leaves behind a small green soldier figurine with a Travel Bug, a metal tag asking people to be a part of the figurine's story by visiting a website, attached. He also attaches a personal note, explaining that he wants the figurine to visit army bases around the U.S., and asks for the help of anyone who finds the figurine. Within a few days, he receives an email from the Travel Bug website with an attached photo of the figurine at Fort Polk, Louisiana. Two weeks later, he gets a photo of the figurine with a family of five, posing in front of the entrance to Fort Bliss, in El Paso, Texas.

Chapter 1: Definitions

Just as with the field of folklore as a whole, the subject of definition in this dissertation is complicated and multilayered. There are a number of definitional styles to be employed: enumeration, as with Alan Dundes's long list of examples (1965) that follows his question "What is Folklore?"; summation, such as Dan Ben-Amos's brief phrase (1971) that attempts a concise description that both includes all the appropriate examples and excludes those that don't belong; combination, which offers a short list of unifying features, as with Elliott Oring's list of eight qualities that all folklore items share (1989); even desperation, as with the unfortunate but common "everything is folklore and folklore is everything," to which many bemused Introduction to Folklore students resort. Considering that I rarely let my own Introduction to Folklore students pass without being able to show how at least five of Dundes's examples fit into Ben-Amos's brief phrasing and exhibit each of Oring's eight qualities, I prefer to be thorough when it comes to definition. In this chapter I shall attempt several different styles of definition, beginning with enumeration, for the purpose of explaining what exactly it is that I am writing about in this dissertation.¹

Basic Definition

This dissertation discusses a unified but diverse set of practices including, but not limited to:

- BookCrossing, wherein individuals read a book and then "set it free" for another reader to find.
- GeoCaching, which involves hidden treasure boxes that hikers and walkers find (accidentally or purposefully) and to which they contribute.

- LetterBoxing, in which walkers seek out hidden rubber stamps to add to their journals.
- Flat Stanley, which has school children mail a paper doll to far-flung family and friends and then track the doll's journey.
- PhotoTag, which involves disposable cameras left in public with instructions for people to snap one photo and then leave it somewhere else.
- Travel Mascots, which are small objects, usually toys, that are commonly taken on road trips and photographed in various locations.
- Travel Bugs, numbered tags that can be attached to objects and that explain their goal of travel, thus freeing the object to travel on its own.
- Roaming Gnomes, decorative garden gnomes that are known, through pranking traditions, to be stolen and taken on documented journeys.
- Bead and Panty Trees, natural locations that accrue donations of Mardi Gras beads and undergarments, usually thrown from a ski area chair lift.
- Cairns and Inuksuit, stacks of rocks, sometimes in the shape of people (in the case of inuksuit), used to mark a nature trail or to indicate one's achievement of visiting a particular location.

With regard to the unifying qualities of the above diverse activities, this dissertation is concerned with the process of *serial collaborative creation* (or, more simply, *serial collaboration*) and its many manifestations (which go far beyond the meager listing above), several of which have been individually studied by scholars but none of which have yet been (academically²) grouped together and recognized as a common phenomenon. By the phrase “serial collaboration,” I am referring to the popular vernacular custom that combines factors such as material culture, travel, geography, community, and place into a tradition that is ideally suited

to—indeed that could not exist in quite the same way without—contemporary life.³ The process of serial collaboration as I have defined it is most easily summed up as “object tracking” or “small world”⁴ activities or games; it involves passing an object, usually one appropriated from its original purpose as a mass-produced item, from person to person to see how far around the world it can travel.

This brief summarizing definition will soon prove to be inadequate to encompass the entire scope of activities that are both emically and etically included in the genre of serial collaboration, but by way of an introduction to the concept, it will serve. The key components to consider are the use of an object, the idea of geographical movement, the concept of a chain of people, and, of course, the unifying key qualities of *seriality* and *collaboration*. These are the two basic qualities that distinguish this tradition from others. All further complicating matters will be clarified in this and the following chapter.

“Serial”

Neither component of the phrase “serial collaboration” was easy to come by. I have talked for twenty minutes straight, many times, in order to define what exactly it is that I’m studying in this dissertation;⁵ narrowing it down to two words was a challenge. Even after the identification of the two main unifying qualities that the process I’m studying exhibits in all its manifestations, the choice of specific words was not easy.

In place of the initial term, “serial,” I was originally using “sequential.” The idea I am trying to capture in the term is that of a *chain* of participants rather than a conglomeration, a collection of multiple people, yes, but each of whom takes *individual* ownership of an item before passing it along to the next participant. The dictionary makes almost no distinction

between the two terms: “serial” is defined as “successive” or occurring “one bit at a time,” and “sequential” is (somewhat frustratingly) also defined as “successive” or even, circuitously, as “serial”⁶ (Morehead 1995).

The choice of the word “serial” as the best terminology came from the generally agreed upon idea⁷ that “sequential” implies, more so than does “serial,” a *set* or *correct* linear order to something (implying there would then also be an *incorrect* order), rather than simply a general linear order that might be defined by circumstance or chance. As an illustration, the steps of a particular dance could be said to come in a particular “sequence,” implying that there is a certain order in which they should be performed; in contrast, a “series” of people who file into a convenience store during a given day, while arriving one after another, do not do so in a set or required order. To say that a “sequence” of people entered the store would be to place unnecessary emphasis on the particular order in which they arrived.

In sum, the thrust of the word “serial” in the context of this dissertation is that it implies the idea of “one after another” without implying that there is a correct order or that the order in which things occur is in any way predefined or predetermined.

“Collaboration”

The idea of seriality, at least within this context, cannot be removed from the idea of collaboration, for it requires multiple people to make up a chain of participants. My avoidance of the term “communal” is intentional: the initial phrase I used to describe this process was “sequential communal creation,” which, given the history of those rather loaded latter two words within the study of folklore, turned out to evoke too much unwanted correlation with assertions that I am not intending to make here.

The idea of “communal creation” was promoted strongly in ballad studies by Frances Gummere in his works *Old English Ballads* (1894) and *The Popular Ballad* (1907). He claimed that ballads originated spontaneously from groups of people breaking into rhythmic utterances during the “communal excitement of the throng” (Leach and Coffin 1961: 24). Gummere does clarify that he’s not proposing that a crowd can “compose off hand and simultaneously a ballad” (Leach and Coffin 1961: 27), but rather that “folk poetry was a survival of prehistoric gregarious or communal song, the verse of the horde; [and that] ballads are a crossed and disguised survival of folk poetry” (Leach and Coffin 1961: 263 n34).

The idea of communal creation, thus initiated, has generally been discredited in the form Gummere promoted, but it has not disappeared completely from folkloristics. Gummere himself noted that he was not attempting to deny the work of singular artists, but only to assert that ballads as a folk form show much more of the communal elements of their creation than the individual artistic elements, and Dan Ben-Amos, in 1971, asserted that the idea of communal creation has lived on in the much more acceptable idea of communal *re*-creation. In 1991, Peter Tokofsky published an article on communal creation in the folk dramas of the *Fasnet* (Carnival) celebration in the German town of Elzach. While the creation addressed in Tokofsky’s case study is neither “ecstatic or spontaneous,” it does, as he points out, shift the question of authorship (original authorship even, not simply subsequent re-creation) to somewhere between communal and individual, as the participants “brainstorm portions of a text together” (215). It is in this more reasonable way that the phrase “communal creation” applies to the practices that this dissertation considers, but on the whole, playing with the associations of that phrase is too distracting. My choice of “collaborative” over “communal” indicates that I am distancing this tradition from early conceptions of the singing and dancing throng. In sum, the thrust of the

words “collaboration” or “collaborative” in the context of this dissertation is that they imply the presence of multiple people working together on an activity; it is only through the efforts of a group of people that the process being studied here can take place. The choice of the word collaboration is also beneficial in that it is a quality that the few people who have considered this subject academically have hit upon. Rosemary Horton (2006), a teacher librarian at Trinity College in Australia, authored an article on the comparative aspects of real- and virtual-world collaboration and brought together a list of activities strikingly similar to that which I am considering here: GeoCaching, BookCrossing, LetterBoxing, PhotoTag, Where’s George, and 1000 Journals. Horton’s linking factor between these activities is their collaborative nature,⁸ and she endorses their combination of the collegial nature of the web with “real world” aspects as useful teaching tools.

The phrase “serial collaboration,” or, as I will sometimes use, “serial collaborative creation,” thus implies a unique circumstance of group participation by way of individual participation. An example of something that is serial but not collaborative might be a line of people at a bank’s automated teller machine; they use the machine one after another, but are not each contributing to a greater, joint creation. An example of something that is collaborative but not serial might be a barn raising; the creation is without doubt communal or collaborative, but all the participants are there together, working at the same time, rather than approaching and interacting with the structure one at a time. It is interesting to note that all “traditional” activities (such as the barn raising in the above paragraph) are by necessity collaborative; there must be more than one person involved for a “passing-on” to occur. Seriality is much more easily obtained in non-traditional settings (like the bank).⁹ It is the *combination* of the two qualities here that makes the focus of this study unique.

Of course, not only “tradition” but “transmission” as well is a key idea in the study of folklore. If “collaboration” is a necessary element to tradition, it could also be said that “seriality” is a necessary element to transmission. It is true that as any item of folklore gets passed through time and space, its individual owners and practitioners could be said to form a chain of participants, thus enacting a version of serial collaboration.

This, unfortunately, simply shows the weakness of single words to wholly exclude unwanted concepts. For the sake of this dissertation, and as will be illustrated in much greater depth in the following section, the phrases “serial collaboration” and “serial collaborative creation” can and will be defined precisely and narrowly. The key to understanding the way in which the specific process I’m examining here is differentiated from all the other potentially “serial collaborative” traditions is the self-aware nature of the seriality involved herein. These activities are not merely serial by chance or circumstance; they in fact derive a huge portion of their cultural significance and meaning from the fact that each individual participant is not simply tangentially aware of past and future participants but is instead actively engaged in connecting to them in a serial manner. In this way, the “serial collaboration” that is the focus of this dissertation is a distinct, definable category of traditional behavior.¹⁰

Before moving on to more complex definitions, it should be noted that the identification and naming of this process also required the identification and naming of the objects that are central to it. In the sense that these objects are similar to chain letters, I will use the term “chain objects.” For the sake of variation, and to highlight the importance of the unifying concepts of the phrase, I will also use the term “serial collaborative creations” (or the more convenient SCCs) to refer to the objects.

Deep Definitions

The above basic explanation of serial collaboration—that it involves the passage of an object from person to person, to see how far it can travel—certainly applies to many of the individual customs that are included in this category of behavior. There are some activities though, such as Geocaching, that do not perfectly fit that description. This is the first distinction to be made in defining this process: there are two types. Type A, where objects are physically moved about the landscape, connects best to the brief definition of the process given at the start of this chapter. Type B SCCs, in which the object remains stationary and people travel to and contribute to it one at a time, do not, but are undeniably linked to type A by their process of serial contribution, which links individuals who are geographically displaced from each other through a shared object, just as the type A instances do. Perhaps the most compelling motivation behind the connection of these two types into the same category of traditional activity is that participants themselves emically link the two types. There is, as will be discussed further in a moment, currently no official generic name for the process (“game” is perhaps the most common), but when participants make connections between activities, they will often say things like “something similar to BookCrossing” or “a game like Geocaching.” It is this emic connection of the two seemingly distinct types of activities that initiated my desire to find the linking factors between them. The characteristics listed below are those factors.

In my attempt to identify the commonalities between all instances of serial collaboration, I determined that all examples share four main primary characteristics with regard to their processes of creation and use.

1. Contact. People come into contact with objects through geographical movement. Either the objects are *passed from person to person* (type A) or the *people pass by the objects* (type B).
 - a. For example, in BookCrossing (type A), a book is passed from person to person, and those people take the book with them once it is theirs, leaving it in a new place for the next reader to find. With GeoCaching (type B), a hiker or walker passes by a cache which remains where it was found, even after the person has interacted with it.
2. Contribution. The people involved *contribute to* the object, either by adding to its physical form or by continuing its journey through some sort of personal effort.
 - a. When people encounter an object with a Travel Bug attached to it (type A), they must move the object to a new location, adding (and usually documenting) a leg of its journey. When people find a shoe tree or a panty tree (type B), they add to its physical form by contributing another pair of shoes or a piece of underwear, but they leave the collection of objects behind them when they go.
3. Community. *Multiple* people interact with the object, but they do it *one at a time* or in small, sequential groups.
 - a. Many individual people may pass around a single Flat Stanley paper doll (type A), but each person or couple will have it to themselves for the duration of their time with it. Similarly, many people will visit a particular Letterbox (type B) to place a copy of its stamp in their journals, but they will go to the box themselves or in small groups or two or three, rather than agreeing upon a collective time for everyone to visit.

4. Chain Awareness. Those who interact with the object individually (or in small groups) are *aware* of others' involvement with the object's existence, though they may not interact with them directly. This awareness is *expected* and *necessary*; the object, by virtue of being a chain object, implies the presence of past and future participants.

- a. The enjoyment of a Travel Bug, or of a BookCrossing book, or of a Flat Stanley (all type A), is that each object came from someone else and will go to someone else. If a person simply wanted a toy, or a book, or a paper doll, he or she could get it himself. Similarly, if a person wanted a hidden treasure box of his or her own, it could be made; visiting a cache or a letterbox (both type B) is especially exciting because of the past and future visitors who have interacted (or will in turn interact) with the same object in the same location.

These four primary characteristics—contact, contribution, community, and chain awareness¹¹—are summed up in my use of the phrase “serial collaboration.”

Many, but definitely not all instances of serial collaborative creation, also share three minor, secondary characteristics.

1. Technological. The activity around the object may or may not be documented, recorded, or updated on the Internet.
2. Trackable. The object may or may not be trackable or traceable. An individual participant can in some cases follow the object's progress accurately rather than simply hoping that its chain continues. Tracking is accomplished most easily with technological activities, but is also possible (as will be discussed later) without the aid of technology.

3. Personalizable. A given individual's contribution to the object may be personalized or recognizable, so that other participants will know that a particular alteration in location or form was made by a particular person.

These secondary characteristics provide much of the meaning and cultural significance afforded to chain objects by participants. While the participant chain is, by definition, known to exist by each individual, any specific knowledge of the object's future or any opportunity for direct interaction among the chain members stems from some form of trackability or personalization. This does not, however, mean that trackable instances of serial collaboration should be favored for examination over non-trackable instances. It is simply important to remember that this tradition is being carried out in many private instances where it is not at all trackable and does not eventually end up on the Internet.¹² A group of students from the Folklore department at Memorial University of Newfoundland once stole Dr. Diane Tye's name plate from her office door and took it on a trip, getting pictures of it in different places and with different people during a conference. The pictures went no further than the graduate students' room in the department's hallway, but they—and other non-public examples—are still a testament to the popularity of the tradition.

Of course, the issue of trackability is not a binary one. All instances of serial collaboration fall along a continuum of non-trackable to trackable. Where's George bills can be checked-in upon at any time, by any member of the chain, by entering their serial number into the website; assuming that people are not receiving the marked bills and ignoring the instructions,¹³ each new member of the chain will show up on the website. The journeys of painted coins, however, which would be instantly recognized if they were to return to their

originator, cannot be called upon at will, so the chance of the item actually being trackable is unlikely, though still technically possible. In the middle of the continuum are bills upon which an individual has written his or her address and a request for postcards from recipients of the bill. While lacking the interactive map provided by the Where's George website, the originator of the bills can still piece together a relatively accurate record of the bill's journey, albeit one that is unavailable to other members of the chain.

Interestingly, instances of serial collaboration are most commonly emically linked together according to their placement on the trackability continuum rather than by their surface-level similarities. For example, BookCrossing and Geocaching, two examples of serial collaboration that are of differing types but that are both distinctly trackable over the Internet are quite commonly connected as being the exact same type of activity by participants. The passage of unmarked books between hostel backpackers (type A), however, which isn't often trackable at all beyond one or two steps, is much more similar in many ways to the anonymous addition of rocks to cairns or inuksuit (type B) than to BookCrossing (type A), despite being an incredibly similar activity on the surface (both involving the passage of books from person to person). The level of personal recognition and trackability then, as noted above, has much to do with the cultural significance of these activities.

This continuum of trackability is related to (but distinct from) another continuum, along which the many manifestations of serial collaboration are widely spread: natural to technological. The simple manipulation of rocks involved in the creation of a cairn shares an identical pattern of person-to-object interaction as a geocache. In fact, they are often found in similar locations. But their complexity of communication, while similar with regard to the most

basic level of visual signification, is contingent upon their vastly differing level of technological involvement. This dissertation aims to examine all examples of serial collaboration—from the most natural to the most technologically mediated, the most anonymous to the most trackable—but it must be acknowledged that when it comes to the emic classification, the various activities are grouped by participants consistently by their shared placement upon the previously described continua.

Related Practices

There are many traditional activities and customs that are closely related to serial collaboration, but which should not be mistaken for it. “Circulating objects,” or “passarounds” as they are also sometimes called, are a common custom within family and friend groups, and are the most closely related form of traditional behavior.¹⁴ The idea is simple: a pair or group of people passes or circulates an object among themselves as a marker of their connection. Usually, the group or pair is one that previously shared the same geographic area (a home, a hometown, a school, etc.) but is now separated by a greater distance. The object that is passed around becomes a tangible way for members of the group to experience each other’s presence and reintroduces a sense of shared physical space to the distanced relationship. A recent article in the Canadian national paper *The Globe and Mail* addressed the topic by explaining one family’s practice:

A passaround must be small enough to secrete into an article of clothing, a pocket or suitcase without the owner's knowledge, and usually just before one leaves after a visit. Upon discovery, a passaround must never be acknowledged but instead, hidden in the luggage, pocket or some such of the original donor. (Best 2006: A20)

Even simply staying within the family, the passarounds can gain a lot of mileage:

The grey pig left in the slipper of our five-year-old granddaughter in London, England, was her introduction to the game. Her mother explained the rules to her and after her next visit to Canada the pig appeared in the pocket of my dressing gown. Gaining more and more traveling miles, Grey Pig found its way back to London again where the nanny found it; unaware of the rules, she placed it in plain view on the fireplace mantle. (Best 2006: A20)

The connection to serial collaboration is clear: objects get passed from person to person and place to place.

Some groups enact this custom by passing the same gift back and forth each year during the holiday season. The gift is often either something expensive or something funny. I spoke with one young man, traveler and writer Kyle MacDonald, whose family regularly exchanged the gift of a framed photo of a Mexican Wrestler:

His name was “El Gordo” and I cut him out of a Mexican wrestling magazine. My brother promptly put him in a frame and he became a legend in the family. He was a meaty Mexican who wore a neck brace and was giving a “thumbs up” signal. He was so obviously in pain, but truly wanted to show the fans that he was still a “go-er”. It was so awesome. He was even wearing a suit. (MacDonald 2006)

The photo proved funny enough that it circulated in Kyle’s family for several years before being lost.

Perhaps one of the best-known examples of this is the popular true contemporary legend about Roy Collette's and Larry Kunkel's "Christmas Pants." The story has circulated by word of mouth and on the Internet since at least 1999. Here is a sampling of the tale, in its Internet form:

It all began in 1964 when Larry Kunkel's mom gave him a pair of moleskin pants. After wearing them a few times, he found they froze stiff in Minnesota winters and thus wouldn't do. That next Christmas, he wrapped the garment in pretty paper and presented it to his brother-in-law.

Brother-in-law Roy Collette discovered he didn't want them either. He bided his time until the Christmas after, then packaged them up and gave them back to Kunkel. This yearly exchange proceeded amicably until one year Collette twisted the pants tightly and stuffed them into a 3-foot-long, 1-inch wide pipe.

And so the game began. . . . The brothers agreed to end the caper if the trousers were damaged. But they were as careful as they were clever. As the game evolved, so did the rules. Only "legal and moral" methods of wrapping were permitted. Wrapping expenses were kept to a minimum with only junk parts used. (Mikkelson 1999)

The pants went through a number of further, impressive wrappings, culminating in their immersion in molten glass, which proved their ultimate demise.

The pattern described above is regularly enacted by family and friend groups, and, as noted above, it often occurs in situations where the participants are living far away from each

other. The pattern can manifest in any shape or size, from a dyadic form—two sisters exchanging a small cheap toy—to large groups of friends sharing something expensive or impressive.

Gabrielle Signorella, a 28-year-old architect in San Francisco has a circulating object tradition with a group of girlfriends from college, several of whom now live out of the area. As she explains, the four of them were on a trip to Portland, Oregon, in 2004 when they decided to visit the local Tiffany's jewelry store:

We started talking about how three out of four of us had nothing from Tiffany ... and we all had no men to buy Tiffany jewelry for us and how that was a shame. So someone suggested we go in on a piece together and we could each have it for a month and then pass it along to the next person. (Signorella 2005)

Sharing expensive jewelry is an idea that gained national prominence thanks to a *People* magazine article on Jonell McLain and the circle of thirteen women she brought together around a \$37,000 diamond necklace they dubbed "Jewelina." Unable or unwilling to take on the expense of the necklace individually, they purchased it together in 2004. As CBS news reported,

Each of the women gets to wear the necklace for 4 weeks (for most, it is the month of their birthdays). There are really no rules, only humorous suggestions, McLain notes. "We say if you go to Paris, you have to take Jewelina." (CBS 2005)

The women all found that the bond created by the necklace was worth more to them than the necklace itself. Their group became a support group for many of them, and together they regularly raise money for good causes. McLain emphasizes:

The rule is really sharing because that's the important thing. You wouldn't be talking to me if I bought this necklace all by myself. It's because it is a group of people. It has a bigger purpose that relates to the community. The community is so much more powerful. It's about women sharing. (CBS 2005)

Gabrielle and her friends found the same thing. As she says,

To me, the necklace is a symbol of the four of us being friends and feeling that we are reaching an age of marriage but not seeing it in our future. Instead of finding some of the meaning and purpose and fulfillment in life through a husband and children, we find it in each other and in our experiences as single women. We talk all the time about how the four of us are family and how we want to continue our traveling and "purchasing" traditions even after we all have families of our own. (Signorella 2006)

Cultural geographer Yi Fu Tuan has noted that "[i]t is an essential characteristic of being human that we feel the urge to reify experience, to give those fleeting moments of pleasure and pain a narrative outline or visual shape" (1980:462). Dell Hymes uses the phrase "traditionalization" (1975) for this process of defining social significance among a group of people; as he says, "every group makes some effort to traditionalize aspects of its existence" (353). The emotional significance in these examples is tied directly to the fact that the people sharing the object have previous connections that they are reifying via the activity. Serial collaborative creations, or chain objects, differ from circulating objects, or passarounds, in the way they break out of limited, prescribed circles and into ongoing, farther reaching chains that usually involve strangers. The distinction can be rendered visually in the following way:

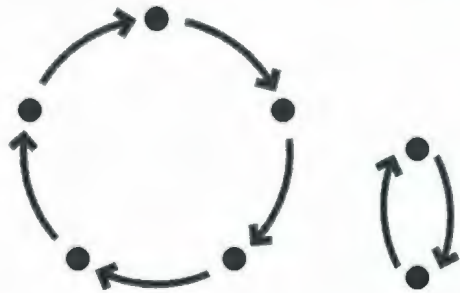


Figure 1.1. Passarounds follow these patterns of movement



Figure 1.2. Type A chain objects follow this pattern of movement

Another related phenomenon is the creation of spontaneous shrines (or, as Jack Santino refers to them, “performative commemoratives” (2004)), a form of informal memorial assemblage comprised of objects left in a given location (often a location significant to the event or person being memorialized, like the roadside location of a car crash, or the home of the deceased). The pattern of creation for spontaneous shrines is basically identical to that of type B SCCs; the shrines are collaboratively created, but in a serial manner. Consider this visual rendering:



Figure 1.3. Type B chain objects follow this pattern of movement.

The main distinction between shrines and type B chain objects lies in the meaning of these objects. Spontaneous shrines have a dedicatory focus; they serve a purpose beyond simply functioning as a representation of their own process of creation. Santino refers to them as “public memorializations of death” (2004: 363), noting that they project their message “in front of an undifferentiated public that can then become participatory if it so chooses” (2004: 364). Other types of assemblages, even those that are not memorializing a death, are designed to communicate purposeful messages to the public at large. Santino explains his concept of assemblages as “the popular presentation of discrete elements as a larger whole” involving “the juxtaposition of elements that can be and often are displayed as discrete units in order to modify, strengthen, or otherwise develop a symbolic public statement” (2001: 50-51). As he notes, they can be both large and small, more and less formal. Regardless of size however, the “dialog of semiotic messages” (2001: 51) created by the combined power of multiple symbols in one object or collection is a powerful communicative force. Similarly, the cumulative properties of chain objects certainly do increase their ability to communicate (perhaps more so with type B objects, which physically grow as contributions are made, than with type A, in which the accumulation is less visually evident), but a clear distinction between spontaneous shrines and chain objects can be found in what, exactly, is being communicated. The chain objects, as will be discussed in more depth later, do not serve functions outside of exhibiting and representing the very activity that creates them. Spontaneous shrines have expressive value beyond the meaning inherent in their process of creation; by using coherent indices to memorialization and commemoration (crosses, candles, photographs, even their locations) they speak to the public about their specific reason for being. Cultural assemblages such as those Santino has studied in Northern Ireland reflect community pride, inclusive and exclusive tendencies, and loyalty to a cause or crown.

These objects don't. As objects, they often might as well be junk for all that their physical form signifies anything. They are indices to the *process* they are a part of and nothing more; with serial collaboration it is the form of the process that holds meaning.

In a sense, *any* object that is bought or sold could be said to be a chain object. For example, one family builds a house and, twenty years later, sells into another family, who builds an addition. While in a technical sense this *is* serial collaboration (the four primary characteristics could be argued to fit), the *motivations behind the actions* do not match the motivations behind the process of serial collaboration (which will be discussed later). Though the serial nature of the two families' collaboration on the same house may lead them to feel a connection to each other, that connection was not the driving reason for their activity. If a young woman inherits her grandmother's jewelry and wears it to her prom, she may feel a connection to her grandmother, but it is a recognition of a specific relationship, similar to the circulating objects in family and friend groups; serial collaboration notably links *strangers*. It is important to remember at this point that the activities I am studying in this dissertation are *emically connected to each other by participants*. If shrine building (or house building, or family heirlooms) were of the same type, participants would note it.

How Is This Folklore?

Definitions of folklore, ones that identify shared features of all the things in the category rather than ones that simply enumerate them, are not easy to come by. The best known, Dan Ben-Amos's "artistic communication in small groups" (1971), certainly suffices for folklorists, but it is a big definition in a little package, and the level of unpacking it requires in order to accurately describe any given item of folklore renders it cumbersome,¹⁵ despite its brevity. I

prefer to use the definition proposed by Dundes and Pagter in 1987: Folklore is any traditionally shared cultural product¹⁶ characterized as having two unique qualities: that of *having been repeated* by individuals, and that of *having undergone variations* over time.

I am arguing here that the general process of serial collaboration is a form of folklore. It is a process that has been repeated innumerable times (not as innumerable links within a given chain, but as innumerable separate chains of participants), with distinct variations each time (the object involved, the method of passage, etc.). John Niles, in a 1989 article, defined an item of folklore as something that is “part of a cultural pattern that repeats itself without dependence on any one authoritative source” (103). That is what we find here with serial collaboration. The process of taking an object and passing it from place to place, or of constructing an object in a given location and having people visit and contribute to it one after another, is a pattern of behavior that is repeated, with varying details, without deference to a single “correct” version. It is learned by observation and imitation, and is not tied to any institutional organization.

Elliott Oring’s eight qualities of folklore as explained in his *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres* (1989) also apply. Serial collaborative activities are certainly communal (his word, not mine, but clearly the concept of “shared among a group” is applicable); they are common and ordinary, as opposed to elite; they are informal rather than formal; they are marginal rather than mainstream; they are personal, in that they involve person-to-person connections; they are traditional in that knowledge of the activities is passed on through time and space; they are expressive rather than pragmatic; and they are wonderfully ideological, as will be explained later.

Diane Goldstein (1993), arguing against the unfortunately common “everything is folklore” definitional perspective and seeking to distinguish the role of the folklorist from the role of the anthropologist¹⁷ (and the roles of other social scientists), identifies three distinct concepts that are at the heart of the folklorist’s toolbox: genre, transmission, and tradition. These concepts have been at the core of folklore studies since the inception of the field, but Goldstein reconsiders these older notions in a contemporary way, understanding them as emergent and dynamic. With regard to genre, she observes that:

As a framework for the production of and interpretation of communication, the applicability of genre to medical issues goes far beyond the simple choice of the text of a proverb instead of a narrative. Genre choices suggest issues of authority, distance and direction, identity, stereotype, connections between topic and attitude, areas of tension, taboo, pride, and expectations. (19)

Even outside of the medical issues that Goldstein is specifically considering, the idea that a particular expressive form is being chosen to communicate a given idea places a subject within the realm of the folklorist, who is prepared to understand “ideas of who can say what, to whom and under what circumstances” (19). Serial collaboration is indeed a consistent expressive form (just what it expresses will be discussed later), and the choice to engage in this particular pattern of behavior is the same one as the choice to present one’s personal opinion in the frame of a traditional proverb.

With regard to transmission, it is the *informal* cultural processes that are the domain of the folklorist. Goldstein points out how the typical, formal methods of information gathering in the medical fields don’t always serve the needs of patients, and folklorists are in a unique

position to be aware of the informal information acquisition methods employed instead. She explains:

Oral and written channels of information each shape information in ways that folklorists recognize and each is chosen on the basis of its positive or practical characteristics. ... The folklorist's knowledge of how our informants find a *curandero* or for that matter, an abortionist, how they locate information on the use of an herb in treatment of cancer, or how they track down the sources or verify a rumour that someone has put pin holes in all of the condoms in town drug stores are heightened by our understanding of how folklore is transmitted and what happens to it in the process. (21)

A knowledge of serial collaboration, the initial engagement with a particular instance of it, and even the internal system of transmission that is employed within the process itself all rely upon informal networks. It is not uncommon that a participant will have first learned about a particular serial collaborative activity via a more formal avenue such as a popular press article, but this is not the way in which these activities are mainly (or were initially) promoted. As will be discussed in later chapters, the informal, even interstitial, networks employed by participants in these serial collaborative activities are key to the continuing significance of the form. Were they not "folk"—were they to utilize more mainstream or institutional networks as a means of passage—they would not be relevant, and would not exist.

Finally, Goldstein focuses on the idea of tradition. Historically, this concept has been so rooted in its connection to the past and to the antiquarian study of folklore that many contemporary folklorists have eschewed its inclusion in any definitive explanations of the field. Goldstein however, following Richard Bauman's lead, prefers to view tradition as a social

process that is not tied to any particular temporal scheme. As she explains, “We can think of tradition as the seemingly universal need to recreate aspects of experience and as the various ways that we keep the past alive in the present. It concerns the ways that we value continuity and persistence through time” (22). Far from being about the past then, the concept of tradition allows us to fully understand the cultural processes that shape the present. This is especially significant for the inclusion of serial collaboration as a form of folklore, as any understanding of tradition that focuses only on the past would quite likely exclude a number of the more technologically oriented cases. Seeing tradition as the recreation of experience, especially meaningful, expressive experience, gives serial collaboration a clear traditional quality. It is evident that serial collaboration falls within the domain of the folklorist.

Even when taking on the task of unpacking Ben-Amos’s definition, serial collaboration remains clearly within the scope of folklore. It is artistic communication in that it is a non-pragmatic method of communicating a message and it exists within a “contextual convention” (Ben-Amos 1971: 11) that sets it apart from nonart communication. It takes place in small groups comprised of the individual participants in a given chain. Despite the many seemingly non-folk aspects of this tradition—the fact that it is global, the fact that it incorporates communications technology, the fact that it utilizes mass-produced objects—it is undeniably folklore.

Generic Placement

While the classification of this process as folklore may be undeniable, there is much less certainty when it comes to the generic identification and definition of the process within the field of folklore studies. All instances of serial collaboration entail both an object and a process,

leaving the tradition generically stuck between material culture and custom (not to mention the emic category of “game,” which many participants use in their descriptions). In a recent article describing the picture postcard craze of the early twentieth century, Bjarne Rogan observes that postcards are both objects and embodiments of ritualized communication. Many early twentieth century postcards contain almost no actual information beyond the name of the sender and an indication of his or her location; it is the simple act of communicating that is significant. Rogan notes that this phatic style of communication has been called “activity-oriented” communication (as opposed to typical, informative communication) and that it “pre-supposes a set of common references and some shared knowledge” (2005:19). When little denotative information is given in the “text” of a communicative object, the recipient’s cultural competence may clearly be assumed. SCCs would not be culturally successful without a shared frame of reference for their use. Regardless of which form of serial collaboration a given person participates in, the process itself is meaningful as a custom that brings a dispersed community—a “para-social folk group” (Narváez 1991), if not a traditional folk group—together around a *tangible* element that is lacking in other non-localized traditions (such as email-based narratives and chain letters).

The idea of genre in general, is, of course, no longer as impermeable as it was once perceived to be. The idea of analytical and ethnic (etic and emic) categories indicates the basic concept that genre distinctions are culturally-derived, and Trudier Harris’s extensive examination of the concept of genre in the 1995 keywords issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* states that “folklorists have come to the conclusion that genre is a continuous site of contestation” (510). With these ideas of porous categories and intertextuality, the need to firmly classify this activity generically is perhaps lessened; but with regard to understanding the scholarship that has

come before and that informs my analysis of this activity, understanding where this process fits into the field becomes significant.

Emically, the activities are often referred to as games and occasionally as customs. Often, they are referred to simply as activities or hobbies. The two analytical categories that best apply and that I will utilize most often when seeking previous analysis are material culture (emphasizing the centrality of the chain objects themselves) and custom (emphasizing the process that occurs around the objects). As this dissertation is concerned with both the objects and the process, both genres apply. While these may be sufficient, they are certainly not comprehensive. There is also the category of narrative, which is often invoked in invitations to join the process (to be a part of the object's "story"). The idea of legend-tripping, with its ostensive overtones, is also applicable, as is Santino's aforementioned concept of "performative commemoratives."

On the whole, I will be referring throughout this dissertation to serial collaboration as a process or an activity. I will refer to the serial collaborative creations, the objects, as chain objects or SCCs. It is notable here that the objects, which often begin their lives as mass produced items, can be considered to be "de-commodified" by their inclusion in this process (a shift that is almost always noted in the opposite direction: the commodification of folklore); the meanings with which they are imbued are entirely vernacular and non-institutional. This, among the other evidence that no currently recognized genres of folklore can adequately inform this subject, perhaps indicates the need for a new generic form that can bridge this dual level of cultural existence. The following chapter reflects on this notion.

¹ Through the course of my research, I have discovered that for audiences familiar with one or several of the examples I'm studying, no definition beyond "Oh yeah, stuff like that" is necessary. The entire chapter devoted to definition here stems from the flip side of this discovery; it seems that with an audience familiar with *none* of the examples I use, no brief definition will suffice. Perhaps the best way to comprehend the material at hand is to have first-hand experience with it. This is the first of many parallels between serial collaboration and the field of folklore as a whole. Most people feel they *know* folklore (or a proverb, or a legend, or serial collaboration) when they see it, but the articulation of that knowing verges on impossible.

² I make this qualification because many of the individual manifestations of this process *have* been connected, emically by participants themselves, as examples of the same thing. This will be discussed later.

³ I would, at this point, like to thank Ian Brodie for his suggestion of the term "manumission" as the name of this set of traditions. While I did not choose to use this term, consideration of the suggestion did help me to perceive various nuanced aspects of the subject.

⁴ Please see Chapter 2 for an explanation of this alternative term.

⁵ Papers on topics related to this dissertation have been presented at the 2005 and 2006 meetings of the American Folklore Society, the 2005 and 2006 meetings of the Western States Folklore Society, and the 2005 meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada.

⁶ It should be noted that "sequential" is listed in the dictionary officially as an adjective form of the noun "sequence," while "serial" is simply listed as an original adjective. To be exact about it, the definition of "sequence" is "a succession" or "a series". Thus, my use of the words "successive" and "serial" as the official definitions of both adjectives is admittedly extrapolated from this grammatical situation.

⁷ I owe this distinction mainly to Paul Jordan-Smith, though many others contributed their opinions.

⁸ It has also been brought to my attention that "collaboration" is a current buzzword in the business world, where group projects are often considered to be the trendy new format for accomplishing tasks. It should be noted that I am not attempting to use this word in such a way, with connotations of business or the workplace, here.

⁹ I am not unaware of the fact that line-waiting undoubtedly has many traditional, or at the least, sociological, aspects.

¹⁰ If a convincing argument for viewing this process as "traditional," or indeed even as "folklore," is needed at this time, please see the following section entitled "How Is This Folklore?"

¹¹ Alliterative, for convenience.

¹² It must be noted, however, that the Internet has without doubt played an enormous role in the promotion of these kinds of activities. The enjoyment that comes from being able to truly track these objects seems to be much deeper or more appealing than the unconfirmed (or at least unwitnessed) hope or assumption that a released but untrackable object is indeed out traveling the world.

¹³ This is, admittedly, a common occurrence.

¹⁴ My thanks go to Pauline Greenhill for the suggestion of the term "circulating objects."

¹⁵ My students will back me up on this. "Artistic communication in small groups" functions best, in my opinion, as a kernel phrase for folklorists. Scholars understand why it accurately captures all the aspects of folklore, but if one were to use it cold, on an uneducated audience, to define the field, it would hold basically no explanatory power.

¹⁶ Dundes and Pagter actually say "any 'traditionally' shared oral or written story," though clearly the definition extends much farther than that.

¹⁷ Goldstein focuses specifically on medical folklorists and medical anthropologists, but her distinctions apply to the larger fields in both instances.

Chapter 2: Genre

It has been shown time and again in the field of folkloristics that the identification or the creation of a “new” genre of folklore has never been an easy task. As indicated in the previous chapter, I intend to identify serial collaboration as a distinct genre of folklore. Initially however, it must be made clear that, while there are a number of related pre-existing genres that certainly inform and illuminate the study of serial collaboration, none of them are able to fully encompass the complex entirety of the form. This chapter will examine the relation and utility of familiar genres of folklore to the process of serial collaboration, will explore the nuances of the concept of genre in general, and will propose the identifying features of the genre of serial collaboration itself.

Material Culture

While serial collaboration is a genre of folk tradition that is being recognized emically without a shared terminology (neither etic nor emic), participants have, as noted in Chapter 1, used a variety of existing classification schemes to describe the process. Often, the focus is on the *chain objects* themselves, and the genre becomes material culture.

The objects themselves actually provide a solid basis for launching into a study of this kind,¹ but when removed from the process in which they are utilized, their meaning alters drastically. With serial collaboration we are not, for the most part, talking about traditional “folk” objects; these are not handmade, unique creations. But Henry Glassie points out that the more mass produced items are incorporated into our lives, the more we incorporate them into our cultural existences as well:

By consistently using the word “artifact” during material culture analysis, we implicitly stress one dimension of all things. They are made. By using the word “goods,” we stress another. They are traded and possessed. All things are artifacts, all are goods, and material culture study needs both orientations. (1999: 85)

Barbara Babcock, in her discussion of the concept of “artifact” (1992), notes how well objects serve as symbols to engender, maintain, and control social relationships (212).² Simon Bronner illustrates one of the many ways in which objects can do this when he notes that most objects (not including those meant to be used up) “persist beyond the moment of their creation; they have an ‘objective existence’” (1986: 202). Unlike more ephemeral cultural products, objects can last through time, a quality that aids the process of serial collaboration.

While the objects used in serial collaboration have usually been appropriated from their intended purposes, the study of material culture has made room for such actions. Babcock notes that “the use and meaning of an artifact can change radically depending on the context in which it is placed and the perspective from which it is viewed” (207). Henry Glassie has also observed, with particular relevance to type B chain objects, that

In montage, pastiche, and assembly, twentieth-century artists have shown that the *collection*, the new unit composed of gathered bits, is a major expressive mode of industrial civilization. The painting expresses the painter. The collection of paintings expresses the collector. The television expresses its Japanese manufacturer. Purchased, the television becomes part of a collection that is arranged into a home to express its creator, the homemaker. (1999: 84, my emphasis)

Objects do not simply need to be viewed in the binary opposition of handmade versus mass-produced; vernacular behaviors, and expressive behaviors, involve the “handmade” manipulation of mass-produced goods. It is material culture studies such as these (see also, for example, Appadurai 1986), studies that branch beyond the limited perception of folk objects as productions of the hands of folk artists, that apply most readily to the study of serial collaboration.

Custom

When the focus is on the *process* aspects of the tradition, custom becomes the more appropriate source of prior scholarship for this activity. The simple fact that it is an *activity* hearkens to the definition of custom as a genre. Richard Sweterlitsch defines custom as “an activity performed with such regularity that it is considered expected behavior or a part of social protocol” (168). With regard to serial collaboration, while the activity isn’t carried out with quite the regularity of, say, Sunday dinner customs in some families, when the necessary objects are in place and the initial movement has been made, the protocol to continue the chain is certainly recognized (as evidenced in the plethora of chains currently in action).

Sweterlitsch notes that there are four basic types of custom: calendar customs (holidays, yearly events), rites of passage (pivotal moments in the human life cycle), significant communal events (festivals), and customs related to folk belief (rituals). Serial collaboration relates best to the last, though in truth, while the overall definition fits well, none of these four subtypes matches up perfectly. It could be argued that serial collaboration pertains to a certain kind of belief about the world (as will be discussed further in chapter 3), and in that sense, becomes a ritual that enacts and reestablishes that particular worldview.

While the term “ritual” tends to evoke religious overtones, it is Roy A. Rappaport’s general definition that I would say applies in this case: “Ritual is understood to be a form or structure, that is, a number of features or characteristics in a more or less fixed relationship to one another. Events conforming to this definition occur outside religious contexts” (249). My listing of the primary and secondary characteristics of serial collaboration illustrates this idea of features in a fixed relationship, but however astute or relatable these understandings of custom and ritual may be to the fixed process of serial collaboration, they do not manage to encompass the entirety of the tradition.

Graffiti

Another related genre, and one that is also perhaps an unexpected addition, being so set in its main generic category, is latrinalia, a form of graffiti specific to bathrooms that often inspires—and sometimes even pointedly requests—contributions from further participants. Alan Dundes described latrinalia as “traditional inscriptions” on bathroom walls (1966: 91) and divided such graffiti into 5 main types: advertisements or solicitations, requests or commands, directions, commentaries, and personal laments or introspective musings. While any surface that has been marked with graffiti could be interpreted as a request (or at least an opening) for further defacing, there is a particular type of graffiti that deserves especial consideration here. With regard to serial collaboration specifically, in 1977, Gregory J. Longenecker identified a particular subtype of latrinalia that he called “sequential parody graffiti” (s.p.g.) (354).³ By this he is referring to lists, often humorous ones, that are started by one person in a restroom and are added to by future stall occupants. As an example, he cites the following list of movie titles, altered to include the word “beaver,” in a stall on the campus of UCLA:

What was your favorite beaver movie?

1. Gone with the Beaver
2. Blazing Beavers
3. 2001, a Space Beaver
4. Paint Your Beaver
5. Beaver on the Roof

...

(356)

This is only the start of a list that ran to 187 entries. Not all lists that Longenecker found were titled, as is the above, with a direct request for contributions. The following list was also found in the UCLA campus:

Reality is transparent

The university is opaque

The world is flat

The end is nigh

The beginning is dead

The big inning, yea!

Your meaning is clear

So have no fear

We have nothing to fear

Findley is here!

I'm only here for the beer

(357)

The genre of sequential parody graffiti is familiar enough in the context of a restroom that no direct request for contributions is needed. In fact, as Longenecker points out, sequential parody graffiti can probably be classified as a type of latrinalia specifically, since “virtually all my research and fieldwork indicates that s.p.g. is written [only] on bathroom walls” (356). While serial collaboration is not often referred to as graffiti *per se*, its appearances in public places (abandoned BookCrossing books, undisguised geocaches) do lead some, usually non-participants, to classify it as intrusive vandalism.⁴ Of course, as much as an understanding of sequential parody graffiti can illuminate the quite similar process of serial collaboration, the generic category itself is not sufficient to encompass it.

Game

Ideas of “fun” and “enjoyment” and “leisure” often contribute to the classification of serial collaboration as a game. Jan Brunvand identifies a game as something that involves the element of competition, the possibility of winning and losing, and that has rules. In contrast he distinguishes a pastime as something which, while it may resemble a game (both a game and a pastime could involve tossing a ball, for example), has no organized rules and no element of competition. In this sense, serial collaboration might better be classified as a pastime, since there is much more of an element of cooperation than there is of competition. On the other hand, the organizing structure of the process and the desire to have the chain reach a great length (perhaps

even a greater length than other people's chains) could be seen as adding in the necessary elements for a game.

Beyond definitional rules and competition, the concept of *play* applies well to serial collaboration. As Johan Huizinga observes, "play is a voluntary activity . . . executed with fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension [and] joy" (13). This idea of play activity having its aim be "in itself" is especially applicable to serial collaboration. While there may be other traditions that appear similar in structure to serial collaboration, they are often distinguished by having external purposes (as noted earlier, a shrine is memorial, a chain letter brings luck or money, etc.). The meta-chain (a chain designed to be a chain rather than to serve another, external purpose) of serial collaboration keeps the goals of the activity (and its meanings) simply about sustaining the activity.

In their book *City Play*, Amanda Dargan and Steven Zeitlin also acknowledge the internal world created by play, referencing Irving Goffman's idea of play as focused interaction:

Rules of irrelevance tell the players what to ignore. Rules of transformation tell the players how the real world will be modified inside the encounter. With the outside world held at bay, players create a new world within. A kind of membrane forms around them. They often experience a sense of intimacy, the closeness of sharing a world apart. Ceremonies of initiation and departure are likely to mark the focused gathering. (29)

This image of an entire world existing inside the play encounter is significant. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, many of the implications of serial collaboration that people strive to emphasize deal with conceiving of the world in a particular way (see Stanley Milgram's small

and interconnected model in the following section) that is soothing to the stressors of contemporary life. This creation of a small play-world within the confines of the rules of serial collaboration allows people to perceive the world the way they choose with much more ease. Dargan and Zeitlan also note how play can “transform awkward intervals” (31); how it can be used to fill in spaces that daily life has left empty. As will also be discussed in Chapter 3, contemporary life leaves many (at times unfamiliar) spaces empty, and serial collaboration fills in nicely.

Individual Traditions

Considering that this topic has never been written about as a unified set of similar traditions, several individual iterations of the tradition have been addressed in scholarship and have been connected to a wide variety of pre-existing genres. The most obviously related previous scholarship has been conducted on a popular example of serial collaboration: the roaming garden gnome. David S. Hulst made the first (and one of the few) academic mentions of the roaming gnome phenomenon in 1988. He felt it was a curious intersection of folklore and popular culture—the use of a mass-produced object in a vernacular process—and in this he identified one of the major facets of serial collaboration in general. Hulst studied the roaming gnome as an urban legend, focusing less on the actual custom of gnome stealing and more on the narratives that formed around instances of gnome stealing. Jan H. Brunvand followed suit in 1989, again identifying the gnome stealing traditions as a facet of contemporary legendry.

The June 1992 issue of the *British Folk Studies Forum*’s *Dear Mr. Thoms...* offers a collected roaming gnome story:

Alice and Jim Gillespie, Bughtlin Green, East Craigs, Edinburgh, came back from their holiday last October to find something strange at their house.

Underneath a rose bush was a garden gnome they'd never seen before. A note tied round his neck said, 'My name is Norman Gnome and I've come to live with you because you have such a lovely garden.'

...

Soon postcards started arriving for Norman from gnomes and pixies round the world. At Christmas time, the couple brought Norman indoors and put him under their tree. But, lo and behold, by Twelfth Night he'd vanished from the house!

...

Meanwhile, Alice and Jim kept getting cards from all over the world from Norman's uncles and cousins—even one from his mum and dad in Africa!

Then a few weeks ago the couple had a phone call from Edinburgh Airport saying they'd to collect a passenger from the London flight. It was none other than George Gnome, Norman's chum!

...

George was put in the garden, on his own—until Mother's Day. Alice received a parcel from York—and there, lying in a box, was Norman with a letter all about his fantastic adventures and an unsigned Mother's Day card." (20)

Many academic mentions of gnomes are similar to this—much description and not much scholarly commentary—though there are exceptions.

Jeannie Thomas, in her work, *Naked Barbies, Warrior Joes, and Other Forms of Visual Gender* (2003), has explored gnomes as a form of yard art (or “comfort art” (112), as she eventually dubs it), and touches on the issue of gnome-napping. Thomas gives a historical overview of garden gnomes as decorative features—“Renaissance gardens also featured statues of dwarves, rustics, servants, or peasants, and similar types of statues remain in today’s yards” (64)—and then goes on to discuss various contemporary gnome stealing incidents (which will be discussed in chapter 4). Lest any readers underestimate the seriousness of gnome-napping (and the deep love homeowners evidently have for their yard gnomes), Thomas cites the following *Sunday Telegraph* article from London:

Incidents of gnome-napping have increased to the point where a senior police officer declared that “no gnome can now be considered safe.” Last week in Lingolsheim, a well-heeled suburb of Strasbourg, 43 gnomes were found dumped on the grounds of the public library. In Rouen, 68 were recovered from the basement of a house after a week-long police surveillance operation. (Langley 2000: 28)

A week-long police surveillance operation certainly speaks to the importance of gnomes in our lives. Though Thomas does not focus on instances of traveling (and thus returning) gnomes, she does mention one German group that, true to the serial collaborative tradition, passes the gnomes from landmark to landmark, sending pictures of the gnome on its travels home to its worried owners. Not much more scholarly work has been done on this subject, though Jocelyn Gadbois (2001) has also written about gnomes, focusing on the tradition of setting gnomes free.

Beyond the above examples, attention to specific examples of SCC has been limited to the popular press, where they have proven to be a very popular topic. Daily newspapers,

magazines, news programs, and even the more scholarly of the popular press publications such as *Smithsonian Magazine* have devoted pages to the description of the process in its various forms. I will address these popular sources more in depth when I discuss the various case studies in part two of this dissertation.

One other related specific folkloric item bears mentioning here: chain letters. It is, of course, chain letters that provided the terminology for chain objects, and several aspects of the process—such as the emphasis on “not breaking the chain,” or the desire to see how far the letter can reach—are common to both. Physical chain letters, which circulated through the postal systems, are more closely related to chain objects in their basic tangibility—they are not merely the ephemeral bits of virtual data that are more contemporary emailed chain letters.

Many chain letters often build on the idea of personal gain. As the United States Post Office, which has put out a formal statement on the topic of chain letters, describes it:

A typical chain letter includes names and addresses of several individuals whom you may or may not know. You are instructed to send a certain amount of money—usually \$5—to the person at the top of the list, and then eliminate that name and add yours to the bottom. You are then instructed to mail copies of the letter to a few more individuals who will hopefully repeat the entire process. The letter promises that if they follow the same procedure, your name will gradually move to the top of the list and you'll receive money—lots of it. (USPS)

The Post Office goes on to point out that chain letters are illegal and generally unprofitable.

Many chain letters focus simply on money, though I recall receiving, around age thirteen, a “panty” chain letter that said I’d receive 25 pairs of underwear if I sent one to the person at the

top of the list. There are also chain letters that simply ask participants to send postcards, emphasizing the “how far did it get?” motivation. Another very common type of chain letter is that which makes less quantifiable promises, alluding to good luck if one continues the chain, and bad luck if one breaks it. Herbert Halpert, in a 1956 note to *Western Folklore*, cites such a “chain of luck” letter that had been circulating since the early 1900s:

About twenty-five years ago, A.R. Wright in a brief survey of English folklore mentioned the popularity “right up to 1928” of chain letters, which he called “chains of luck.” After mentioning that the message was to be sent to nine people, he quotes: “Whoever does this will have great joy and happiness, but to those who neglect this will come misfortune. Do not break the chain. It was started on a Flanders battlefield.” (287)

Comparing this to a recent, Internet-based chain letter, it is evident that not much has changed:

You must send this on in 3 hours after reading the letter to 10 different people. If you do this, you will receive unbelievably good luck in love. The person that you are most attracted to will soon return your feelings. If you do not, bad luck will rear its ugly head at you. THIS IS NOT A JOKE! You have read the warnings, seen the cases, and the consequences. You MUST send this on or face dreadfully bad luck. (Mikkelsen 2005)

It is interesting that the threat of ambiguous “bad luck” (though often the luck cited in the letters has to do with money or love) has as much if not more staying power than the promise of easy wealth or personal gain. The fact that there is no need for the exchange of physical items in such chain letters makes them well adapted to the virtual environment of email.

While chain letters are certainly related to chain objects, the primary characteristics of serial collaboration do not fully apply. The tangible, paper-in-an-envelope, old fashioned kind of chain letter may, especially in this time of prolific e-chain letters, begin to be perceived more like serial collaboration, but on the whole, it is a different tradition.

The Process

Specific manifestations aside, this genre has been identified, and studied, by its process alone, though not by folklorists. While the academic studies here represent a scholarly point of view, there is still a type of emic recognition of the process of serial collaboration. In the mid-1960s Stanley Milgram first devised the concept of the “small-world phenomenon” through an experiment that involved the passage of packages through a chain of participants to see how quickly they could travel to an unknown recipient.⁵ As Elizabeth Devita-Raeburn elaborates,

[Milgram] gave 60 people in Wichita, Kansas, envelopes and the name of a target person—a stranger—along with a few details of that person’s life. Their mission: to get that envelope to someone they knew on a first-name basis who then might be able to pass the envelope a step closer to the target person. In a subsequent study, he used two starter populations in Nebraska and one in Boston to reach a target in Sharon, Massachusetts. (44)

Milgram has said that he got the initial idea for his study from social scientist Ithiel de Sola Pool and mathematician Manfred Kochen, who,

in the 1950s, spent a good deal of time trying to arrive at a mathematical formula that would explain how closely all of us are actually connected. But de Sola Pool

and Kochen were unable to find an equation that satisfactorily represented the nuances and complexities of society. Milgram, who was already famous for the obedience experiment in which study subjects administered painful electric shocks to other study subjects when urged to do so by an authority figure, came up with the letter method as a tool to try to solve the problem in real life. (Devita-Raeburn 45)

According to Milgram, the phrase “small world” implies that social networks are “full of unexpected strands linking individuals seemingly far removed from one another in physical or social space” (Travers and Milgram 1969: 426). This, of course, makes the phrase “small-world” a very suitable name for this genre of activities, which are so similar to this concept and to Milgram’s experiments. As Milgram and Jeffrey Travers explain in a follow-up study:

The simplest way of formulating the small world problem is “what is the probability that any two people, selected arbitrarily from a large population, such as that of the United States, will know each other?” A more interesting formulation, however, takes account of the fact that, while persons a and z may not know each other directly, they may share one or more mutual acquaintances; that is, there may exist a set of individuals, b , (consisting of individuals $b_1, b_2, \dots b_n$) who know both a and z and thus link them to one another. More generally, a and z may be connected not by any single common acquaintance, but by a series of such intermediaries, $a-b-c- \dots -y-z$; i.e., a knows b (and no one else in the chain); b knows a and in addition knows c , c in turn knows d , etc. (1969: 425)

The main question addressed by their research was whether the interconnectedness described by the small world model could be demonstrated experimentally; hence, the package-passing test.

The results indicate that the mean number of links between any of the two people was 5.2 (intriguingly close to—and the inspiration for—the popular lay theory of “six degrees of separation,” which will be discussed further in later sections). This idea of the interconnected “small world” is quite obviously connected to the idea of serial collaboration; participants in type A serial collaboration are basically acting out Milgram’s experiment. Also, the underlying idea of chains of individuals being connected though they may not know it yet, is key to the process.

Much of the scholarship that followed Milgram’s work provides a consideration of the statistical and mathematical implications of that phenomenon (see Barrat and Weight 2000, Barthelemy and Amaral 1999, Franceschetti and Meester 2000, Gray, Seigneur, Chen et al. 2003, Kleinberg 2000, Newman 2000, Newman and Watts 1999 and 2000), but the anthropological and sociological study of the concept as a popular theory by which some people guide their action and communications, has not yet been thoroughly explored, especially with regard to the materially-oriented custom on which this dissertation focuses. As Newman and Watts (1999) have noted, the study of the small world phenomenon “has important consequences for, amongst other things, the spread of disease and evolutionary game theory, as well as related topics concerning genetic regulatory networks and networks of synchronized oscillators” (2). Given that the “small world” concept has certainly captured the interest of the general population (note the pervasiveness of the “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon” game),⁶ folklorists would do well to examine closely the way this idea filters into traditional culture. Sociologist Judith Kleinfeld’s recent research (2002) has called Milgram’s original results into question, indicating again that there is a need for further research into this and related topics.

Kleinfeld, in an attempt to better understand Milgram’s surprising results, studied Milgram’s original papers in the Yale archives. In her words:

What I found was disconcerting: very few of his folders reached their targets. In his first, unpublished study, only 3 of 60 letters—5 percent—made it. Even in Milgram's published studies, less than 30 percent of the folders got through. Few replications spanning cities had been done, and these showed few folders made it through, especially across class and race boundaries.

Perhaps people didn't bother sending the letters on. That was Milgram's explanation. But that seems unlikely. The folder was not a simple chain letter, but an official-looking document with heavy blue binding and gold logo. If the subjects knew how to reach the targets, they would have passed the folder along. (2001 par. 10)

Whether true or not, the idea has gripped people's imaginations well. Duncan Watts, a researcher for Columbia University, has taken the general popularity of the theory and is attempting to replicate Milgram's original study using the Internet:

Watts, an assistant professor of sociology, chose a diverse set of anonymous "targets" around the world. Internet users are invited to register at the site. They receive a little information about a target and, with guidance from the Web site, they send an e-mail to someone they already know who might be closer to the target than they are. And so on.

He has pursued targets "who are not just academics and computer industry types." An ex-flight attendant and someone who works in a pizza parlor, for instance. Those people, he says, might indeed find out that they are connected to faraway lands and people in ways they never envisioned. (Weeks 2002: C01)

Further study may be needed, but the “small world” idea has taken off in non-academic arenas (as will be discussed further in Chapter 3). The recognition of small-world activities as a group of like behaviors renders the research done in this field a contribution to the understanding of the genre of serial collaboration.

The Making of a Genre

Despite the applicability and utility, as noted above, of several existing genres of folklore to the study of serial collaboration, and despite the other non-genre-based arenas in which it has been considered, I have, throughout this dissertation, been referring to serial collaboration as a distinct genre of folklore. This is not a statement that the history of folklore studies will allow casually, and in the following section, I will explain my reasons for this identification. Folklore’s roots in philological study, starting in the eighteenth century, gave the concept of “genre” a prominent place in folklore studies (Bauman 1992). The classification of folklore has been vital to the study and teaching of the subject matter; Alan Dundes (1965) even believed that an enumeration of all the different genres that make up the stuff of folklore would suffice⁷ as a definition for the field. While the significance of the concept of genre remains, scholars have begun to consider it in different ways. Trudier Harris notes how

in recent decades, folklorists have come to the conclusion that genre is a continuous site of contestation; with the acceptance of merging, blurring, and overlapping categories of classification, folklore scholars have changed the questions they ask about the urge to classify. (509)⁸

In one such questioning of the set categories of folklore, Dan Ben-Amos (1976) addressed the difference between analytical (or etic) categories of folklore and ethnic (or emic) classifications. As he explained, scholars need to set up classification systems for organizational and comparative purposes (analytic categories), but that does not mean that the categories set up by scholars (often based on the scholars' own emic categories) are going to match up with the classification system of the people (ethnic genres) whose lore is being studied, a system that reflects not a need to organize texts but to distinguish between "cultural modes of communication" (215). These dual purposes indicate one of the difficulties in the practical classification of folklore. Ben-Amos acknowledges that both systems relate to each other (and Richard Bauman even proposes that analytical categories are switching to the more ethnic purpose of understanding "communicative practice" (1992: 53)), but, as is illustrated with the example of serial collaboration, when there is no prescribed analytical category for an ethnic genre, the relationship between the two modes of categorization can become hard to find (or create).

The significance of the emic existence of serial collaboration as a genre of folk tradition without an "official" etic name (or an agreed upon emic one, for that matter) lies in the fact that the tradition clearly has enough meaning for people to continue participating in and propagating it without any institutional or linguistic guidance whatsoever.⁹ As Joe Graham has noted, in his study of emic genres in Texas folklore,

One of the strongest arguments for studying any native system of classification is the insight it provides into what its users consider the most important characteristic of a given domain. In a broader sense, studying native classification systems provides insight into the importance of the alternative, "ground-level"

ways of ordering and giving meaning and value to life. This is especially true of folk categories of expressive culture, for in them we can find some of the clearest expressions of the ways in which a group imposes order and value on day-to-day life. (1981: 11-12)

By grouping all the various examples of serial collaboration under the umbrella of “the same kind of activity,” even when no set terminology exists for them to use as descriptors, participants are strongly identifying shared traits among activities that express something for them. In an effort to move from conceptualizing a communicative practice to categorizing for analytical purposes, this dissertation seeks to explicate the process of serial collaboration as a distinct genre of folklore.

According to Dan Ben-Amos (1976), there are four main ways to divide the cultural expressions of folklore into genres: theme, form, archetype, and function. With regard to *theme*, the emphasis is on what the lore is about. In this mode, stories about animals would be grouped together as fables; stories about gods would be grouped together as myths. Any questions of form (length, verses) would follow the content. While Ben-Amos does acknowledge that “this assumption of direct correlation between subject matter and folkloristic typology does have some significant methodological value” (217), in the end he concludes that thematic divisions are too subjective; most folklore has more than one theme, and “the choice of some themes as essential and the dismissal of others as irrelevant involves either personal, cultural, or theoretical subjective judgments which defy analytical objectivity” (219).

With regard to *form*, which Ben-Amos introduces as the “holistic approach,” genres would be distinguished by the structure of the material, the way in which the component parts related to each other. For example, a riddle can be defined as having a question and an answer

(or a topic and a comment); a folktale can be described as a longer prose narrative, divided into the thirty two elements of Vladimir Propp's morphology. As Ben-Amos explains:

Essentially, the holistic approach affirms the ontology of folklore forms and changes the concept of genre from a nominalistic to a realistic entity. A genre is no longer just a label for a relatively similar corpus of themes but it is a real form, which exists regardless of any interpretation or classification. The holistic conception of folklore genres provides, in other words, for the fulfillment of Carl Wilhelm von Sydow's demand to build up a "natural system" of traditional forms.

(220)

Unfortunately, without any other consideration for the division of genres, form alone does not satisfactorily meet the needs of folklorists. Ben-Amos cites studies that utilized Propp's morphology to show that myth and folktale were the same genre.

The *archetypal* approach is an interesting one; it proposes that genres are formulations of "basic mental concerns" (222). Ben-Amos cites André Jolles, who proposed such generic bases as the human mind's preoccupation with the holy (legend), the essence of the universe (myth), the soluble problem (riddle), and the suspension of immoral reality (the *Märchen*). This approach works well with a universal understanding of genre (that independent of culture, there are the same generic patterns in all folklore). Unfortunately, there is circular logic at work in the best of the archetypal approaches—the archetypes being represented are taken from the folklore they are meant to explain.

The *functional* approach has "focused upon the relationships between forms of verbal art and the existing cultural, psychological, and social needs" (223). Functional analysis is one of the most popular means of interpreting folklore, but its relativity renders it a difficult basis upon

which to determine generic classification. Given that every culture has its own unique way of taxonomizing its own verbal art, there is no way a generic system based on one culture's functional understanding of folklore could be used as a cross-cultural analytical tool.

While Ben-Amos goes on to identify the three attributes that speakers of folklore regularly (and cross-culturally) recognize as playing a role in their ethnic conception of genre, it is sufficient here to note that most generic categorizations use a blend of the above four approaches. For example, in our culture, we may use form and content to distinguish between a folktale and a proverb, but we may then use archetype and function to distinguish between a folktale and a legend (which, holistically and thematically, may be quite similar).

Considering this, the qualities that set the genre of serial collaborative creation apart from other genres of folklore, at least according to Ben-Amos's scheme, are mainly structural and functional. There is not enough consistent imagery in the process itself, across all its manifestations, for a specific content-based theme to take root. My definition of the process from Chapter 1 clearly divides the process into a set of distinct component parts (a structure), and it is the presence of these parts that determines whether an activity can be classified as serial collaboration. Of course, while some of those characteristics are truly structural (dealing with the steps of the process) some are functional, depending on the purpose for which the process is being enacted (which is, perhaps, archetypal). As has been noted, the creation of and contribution to a spontaneous shrine is quite similar in structure to that of a type B chain object; it is the way that object functions for the people involved that distinguishes the two genres.

Folklorist John Dorst, summarizing Ben-Amos's contribution to the discussion of genre theory notes that for folklorists, genre research extends the investigation beyond the official literary types and has become "largely an ethnographic enterprise in which identifying recurring

patterns of behavior and repeated situations of performance is as important as recognizing the stabilities of form and content” (413). In a study of neck-riddles (1983), Dorst pushes the concept of genre even further, proposing that identification of stabilities and patterns within genres means that there are also “instabilities and ambiguities” (413) that are (or should be) areas of interest to scholars as well. He suggests utilizing Mikhail Bakhtin’s two-sided conceptualization of genre, which Dorst feels adequately captures both the intra- and intergeneric instabilities: on the one hand, genres are social (rather than purely formal) because they exist only through concrete enactment among “people organized in some way”; on the other hand, social forces and relations are themselves “enacted” through the points of view genres embody. (415)

Thus, the matter becomes complicated. There are no pure genres: “no genre exists outside the dense thickets of citation, commentary, resistance, approval, mimicry, parody, and so on, that constitute the responses of other points of view (i.e., other genres)” (415). Bakhtin’s two orientations can be summarized as external and internal, the external perspective dealing with a genre’s relationship to time and space. Dorst feels this theoretical viewpoint is especially suited to neck-riddles, as they embrace “a spectrum of dialogic accommodations between narrative temporality and riddle atemporality” (423). This applies to serial collaboration and chain objects, too, in the sense that their serial alteration or manipulation indicates the passage of time (thus lending the objects to narrative, or chronological, identification), but they also exist as objective material things as well, outside of the flow of time (similar to the riddle aspects of the neck-riddle, which are not narrative and thus have no dependence on a perception of chronology).

I am proposing that serial collaboration is not simply a site of generic conflict (as Dorst puts forth for the neck riddle) but is in fact a genre in itself. While the process certainly incorporates aspects of previously studied analytical genres of folklore—material culture, custom, game—the activity as a whole, as perceived emically by participants, is greater than a mish-mash of other forms. It cannot be described adequately using only the tools of other generic forms. This is evident in the way that participants often search for terms and phrases when trying to describe the serial collaborative activities with which they are involved.

Past Attempts at Genre Creation

In the history of folklore studies there have been several attempts to identify or define a new genre of folklore. The personal experience narrative (PEN) is a good example. Sandra Dolby Stahl reflects on the difficulty of defining a new genre of folklore, noting that her proposed 1977 definition of the personal experience narrative as a folklore genre (“a prose narrative relating a personal experience; it is usually told in the first person, and its content is nontraditional”) has been “dissected, contested, reassembled, [and] sometimes even accepted wholeheartedly over the past decade” (1989: 12). Stahl elaborates on the difficulty of her task:

My argument was that even though the narrative content of such stories could not be corroborated precisely (as traditional plots or motifs), still the values or attitudes reflected in the stories are culturally shared and thus traditional. However, claiming that embedded or even generative values are traditional is not the same as identifying as folklore the stories that reflect those values. From a conservative perspective on “What is folklore?” the *stories* themselves would not be folklore so long as their plots were idiosyncratic. A narrative based on a

teller's personal experience is not a narrative taken from oral tradition and retold by the storyteller, nor is it a folklore item whose plot or major motif can be corroborated by a folklorist, no matter how alert or patient. (13)

The lack of traditional content in these narratives doesn't, however, deter Stahl from pursuing the argument for generic classification, in large part because of the "ample evidence" provided by the emic perspective (as is the case with serial collaboration) that this is a folkloric genre. But Stahl also acknowledges that the personal narrative must exhibit the essential features of a folklore genre as identified by the etic, academic perspective, in order to be considered by scholars. To that end, she identifies the conventional features of *style*, *content*, *form*, and *function*. Stahl notes that these terms have grown from literary theory and anthropological functionalism, and also points out that all four of these conceptual constructs can be ambiguous or overlapping.

Style, Stahl observes, can be akin to Dundes's "texture" (1964), can be what Glassie (1968) describes as the choice made from among alternative content options, or can simply be a "characteristic way of manipulating content" (14). Content, similarly, has been identified as the raw materials that exist prior to the actual performance of a narrative, or it can refer to the specific allomotifs chosen to fill in a given narrative structure. Form may seem to be the most obvious feature of a genre, given that it is narrative structure that most often identifies a speech act as a narrative, but Stahl observes that even this essential quality is very abstract: genre-specific structures "tend to reflect culture-specific functions" (14), an irony that leads to the final level of ambiguity in this quadripartite conceptualization of genre. Function, perhaps more than the others, is usually etically determined and dependent upon the other features.

One suggestion Stahl offers to overcome the confusion created by this conception of genre comes from Charles T. Scott's study of genre definition and Persian and Arabic riddles (1965). Scott suggests defining genres by identifying the specific combination of the above features that is distinctive to each. Thus, Stahl identifies three features that define the personal narrative: dramatic narrative structure, an assertion that the narrative is true, and the identification of the narrator as the story's main character (this definition mainly combines elements of form, content, and style, though function is also present).

In a similar attempt, Kenneth Goldstein and Robert Bethke face the challenge of defending a newly recognized genre of folklore in their special issue of *Southern Folklore Quarterly* (1976) on monologues and recitations. Their goal, as they explain in the introduction to the issue, is to move beyond the childhood traditions of recitation, commonly recognized as folklore, and include the adult traditions as well:

Indeed, were we to indicate that the treatments [in the special issue] focused on children's declamatory playground taunts, or recited game-activity verse viewed in its performance dimensions, there would be much less call for explanation. *That* subject matter is, by wide consensus, undeniably folkloric in nature: the materials are in almost all cases anonymous in authorship and largely divorced from print; textual variants are usually numerous and follow more or less predictable patterns of evolution and devolution; schemes for generic classification are well-established, as are methods for descriptive analysis and interpretation. Such materials offer familiar grounds, often trodden. The present editors and contributors have something different in mind. (2)

Rather than beginning by using formal features to argue in favor of including monologues and recitations—often composed by their speakers or otherwise known to be non-traditional—as a genre of folklore, Goldstein and Bethke initially focus their attention more on the fact that regardless of the disciplinary paradigm, and whatever the content and origin of the performance, their subject “deserves to be recognized and studied because it exists, is meaningful to participants, and yields insights into their personalities, interests, experiences, and lifestyles” (4). To ignore this genre is “to deny one of the most widespread and persistent types of oral expression affording creative dramatic outlet” (4). As with Stahl, we again see the role that emic identification plays in encouraging the documentation of new forms of folklore.

In Goldstein’s individual contribution to the special issue, he takes on the subject of generic identification much more scientifically. He describes monologue performances as an “unreported” genre of folklore, a term that can be applied successfully to serial collaborative activities as well. As Goldstein notes, unreported genres are regularly discovered for various reasons. They may be specific to a previously unstudied culture, or, as is the case with Internet-trackable serial collaboration, “changing social and aesthetic conventions may result in the creation of new artistic forms, some of which folklorists may not be able to recognize and report until some time after they have come into existence” (7). But serial collaboration (like monologues) has been around (in non-trackable form) longer than many people realize, and Goldstein makes it clear that the most important un-reported genre situations are

those instances when genres *which have existed for considerable time* are formally recognized because changing theoretical perspectives result in the reduction of certain biases and the correction of the academic myopia which did

not permit them to be viewed earlier as properly belonging to the domain of the discipline. (7)

Folkloristics has changed considerably over time, moving from literary-based textual studies to more anthropological behavior studies, and the awareness of genres that may seem distant from the “major” genres of folklore (folktale, ballad, etc.) is growing.

Goldstein begins his exploration of this unreported genre by defining it as a sub-form of the larger general performance category of oral recitation; he then goes on to pick out the portions of the more general definition that apply specifically to a monologue. Like serial collaboration, the monologue is closely related to other forms, but stands out as distinct (in part because it is recognized as distinct by performers). Goldstein distinguishes it from the ballad (recited, not sung), and from the folktale (declamatory more than narrative, often mock-dramatic rather than dramatic). He also notes the important point that there are a number of emic terms employed by monologuists that relate to their art and serve to distinguish it from other genres. Other relevant distinguishing factors are the performance contexts, the acquisition of performance styles, and the themes of the monologues.

Building from this list of features that distinguish the monologue from other oral recitations and narratives, we can identify several aspects of a tradition that can determine its unique generic status: form, style, terminology, performance context, and themes. When considered with the previously described attempts to determine generic status, a collection of genre-defining features begins to emerge.

The study of contemporary legends provides an excellent example of the difficulties to be found when attempting to identify a new genre of folklore, and helps round out a discussion of the necessary features to consider when defining a genre of folklore. Gillian Bennett sums up

some of the difficulties that contemporary legend scholars face in her 1991 response to criticisms of the direction that the study of contemporary legends was taking. Far from presuming that the identification of a genre is a straightforward task, and contrary to the notion that a genre might simply come to reveal itself through its initial scholarly attention, Bennett observes that folklorists need to be wary of the dangers found in both the ignorance of a genre *and* the too-eager acceptance of an easy definition.

As far as I am aware, however, there has never been an enquiry focused solely and directly on the question of the genre of all this material. Indeed, this body of material seems to me to have been classified as “legend” almost by default, as a side-effect of Dégh’s 1971 essay. What should be recognised, however, is that this essay did not establish quite the case it is often assumed it did. Dégh’s central argument was surely about the generic status of “belief legend”, not the generic status of stories such as “The Hook”. Though it made a strong case for accepting “belief legend” (then defined as simple stories with “untraditional” texts but containing traditional themes, motifs and beliefs) as recognised subtypes of “legends”, it did not, and could not, establish that every story such as “The Hook” was a “belief legend” on all occasions of its telling. (188)

Bennett observes that the traditional markers of shared generic classification—features such as form, function, and context—don’t always agree between legends and the items being referred to as contemporary legends:

There is plenty of evidence that “contemporary legend” plots and motifs turn up in a wide variety of guises—dites, rumours, personal experience stories, children’s “scary stories”, folktales, jokes, photocopy lore, among many other

modes—and are told in a number of different contexts and performance modes.

(189)

Bennett points out that the issue of genre is an important one, as mis-identification risks a misleading simplification of the materials: “classification influences researchers’ expectations about the data and suggests the sort of *questions* that should be asked about it” (189). This is a shrewd warning for serial collaboration as well. If considered only as material culture, or only as custom, or game, entire realms of enquiry may be lost. Bennett feels that several major works in the study of legends have rendered enquiry into the forms and functions of contemporary legends too self-evident, leading to a lack of debate or qualification in the field, and she thus champions the “disquieting questions” (190) being asked at the time of her writing. As she says,

Viva untidiness, dissention and doubt—even incoherence—for these are the signs that scholars have ruled nothing out *a priori*, that their eyes are open and their minds alert to possibilities. That is what contemporary legend research so badly needs in the next decade. (190)

Of course, this point of view doesn’t help in the search for coherent terms by which to identify a discipline. Bennett’s praise for “untidiness, dissention and doubt” is perhaps theoretically astute, but it has not stopped other scholars from continued attempts to define the genre. A significant obstacle in the definition of contemporary legends appears to be the temporal issue involved: just what is meant by “contemporary”? Alan Dundes (1993) criticized the term on the grounds that any term indicating that something was “recent” or “new” would render the material instantly obsolete. Various scholars of contemporary legends (see, for example, Smith 1995 and Pettit 1995) responded by pointing out the nuances of the term “contemporary,” clarifying that it can

simply mean that the content of the story (the action described, or the issues addressed) and the telling of it are contemporary *with each other*, regardless of their specific location in history.

Jan Brunvand, taking part in the above mid-1990s conversation, points out that defining a genre (a theoretical pursuit) is not the same as classifying a legend (a practical pursuit). The confusion with the generic features of terminology, style, and form stands out here; even when questioning or formulating the *generic* definition, some qualified form of the term “legend” is always used to identify the materials in question. Whether the qualifying adjective addresses temporal, formal, or thematic qualities, it is never divested of the implications present in the secondary term, legend, which brings in (perhaps disruptive) questions of belief.

Paul Smith, in a 1999 article describing the definitional characteristics of the contemporary legend, points out that the mutability of the legend genre as a whole is one of the difficulties with defining the more specific sub-set. There is also, he observes, the problem of disagreement about what texts should actually be included in the canon from which the definition is being constructed. This is very similar to serial collaboration, where an individual participant (or scholar, for that matter) may choose to include a variety of activities that share several qualities (especially thematic qualities, as will be discussed later) as “the same thing” when, upon closer examination, they are decidedly not. As regards the difficulty of assigning a single, measurable genre to a given set of variable items, the contemporary legend provides an excellent parallel example.

When seeking the features of the contemporary legend genre, Paul Smith dug deep and found an impressive sixty-four definitional characteristics and noted that there are likely more yet to be uncovered. He divided his findings into two general categories: characteristics which describe the nature of contemporary legends in terms of what they *are* or *are not*, and

characteristics which describe the nature of contemporary legends in terms of what they *may* or *may not be*. These two main categories were further subdivided into thirteen headings, each of which could be considered within the realm of the two more general divisions. For example, a consideration of the “form” (one of the thirteen sub-headings) of the contemporary legend, with regard to what it is or is not, reveals that “the contemporary legend is primarily a conversational genre” (1999: 6). When “form” is considered within the second main division, however, with regard to what it may or may not be, we find that

although the contemporary legend is primarily a conversational genre, they may be found embedded in other types of traditional discourse (eg., joke, memorate, dite, rumour, gossip, personal experience narrative) and in diverse settings—ranging from news-reporting to after-dinner speeches. (7)

This acknowledgement of both the certain and uncertain aspects of genre identification provides a good model for other attempts to define a previously unrecorded genre of folklore. The primary and secondary characteristics put forth in Chapter 1 can be considered similarly.

The Generic Features of Serial Collaboration

In attempting to relate these characteristics to the commonly determined features of generic identity, a clear understanding of the genre of serial collaboration emerges. Building from Ben-Amos, Dorst, Stahl, Goldstein, Bethke, Bennett, and Smith, the relevant features to be used in the determination of this unreported genre of folklore are:

-Form: The structure or pattern of the tradition. In the case of serial collaboration this refers to the serial pattern of action or behavior as described in the primary characteristics of Contact and Contribution.

-Content: The actual subject matter of the tradition, without consideration for interpretations or representations. In serial collaboration, this would be the necessary presence of the object or objects involved, and the varying type of objects involved. In some cases, there is a required content (such as books, or paper dolls); in others, content can be much more general (trinkets, toys, etc.) but may be restricted by size (for fitting in a cache, perhaps).

-Theme: The archetype, to use Ben-Amos's term, or the underlying issue or ethic involved and promoted, regardless of the literal "content" of the tradition. As will be explored in the following chapter, the themes of serial collaboration are multifold and complex, but surprisingly consistent. As has been touched on already, issues of small-world perceptions and geography-defying connections are significant, connecting to the primary characteristics of Community and Chain Awareness. Further themes will be discussed in Chapter 3.

-Function: The way the tradition serves the participants, its meaning within their lives, the reason they pursue it. With serial collaboration, the function is often the promotion of and experimentation with the Themes of the tradition, again relating to Community and Chain Awareness.

-Performance Context: Where this tradition takes place, and among whom it takes place. This relates, as does the Form, to the primary characteristic of Contact in that it is in the landscape, "out in the world," almost always in public, shared places and spaces, where people encounter chain objects. This sense of shared locality is significant, as is the sense of distant geographic locations made close or tangible by the sharing of the object. With regard to the "who?" of the

context, the shared ethic of serial collaboration (discussed in depth in the following chapter), or the Theme, determines those who will be inclined to both initiate and respond appropriately to instances of this tradition (because, of course, just as not everyone will choose to express their opinion proverbially, not everyone will desire to participate in a small-world activity). Given that participants do not *need* to seek out and identify each other—the object bears the burden of attracting its own audience—factors of recognition such as shared terminology become a post-benefit, mostly relegated to online chat rooms, rather than serving as useful context signals. If tradition-specific lingo or jargon were to emerge unexpectedly between two people as they spoke in person, they may discuss their shared interest in the activity, but would not necessarily then engage in it together (though they may share information that would lead to separate excursions).

-Temporality: The relation of the tradition to time. With serial collaboration, the tradition is not recalling or re-creating the distant past but is rather *still* creating or enacting a quality of the present. It is also commenting on (and physically connecting the present to) the recent past and, perhaps most interestingly, the future. This is related to the primary characteristic of Chain Awareness.

To consider the notion of Charles T. Scott, that a genre definition should focus on those features that most apply to it, it should be noted that the above list of features was created with a definition and comprehension of a single genre, serial collaboration, in mind. There are certainly other features that would be necessary to define other genres that have been left out of this listing. Even among the components above, not all are equal. The Form, Theme, Function arise as vastly important when it comes to participants' reasons for the emic connection of the varied activities, and the literal Content is actually rather unimportant to the generic identification as a whole (though it obviously impacts any given instance of the tradition).

Using the concepts discussed above, an expression of the relation of various examples of serial collaboration to each other—and to similar but technically unrelated forms—can be successfully charted. While I acknowledge that several of the primary characteristics of serial collaboration are touched upon by certain features of the genre, they should be listed separately, for the sake of a complete breakdown of shared features despite overlap.¹⁰ In order to do this, the clarification of some terminology is required. When I speak above of the Themes or the “underlying ethics” (there is certainly not only one) of serial collaboration, those ethics need to be defined in order to determine whether or not a given activity evinces them. When I assert that the “meaning” or Function of this genre is contingent upon participants’ understanding of and search for the promotion of the Themes of this genre, that meaning needs to be defined. The following chapter will address the many themes and theoretical implications expressed by and embedded within the genre of serial collaboration, and the final chapter of Part 1, Chapter 4, will map all of these pieces of information and their coherent relation to one another.

¹ Deliberations about whether to focus primarily on the objects in question (which make for easy responses to the “what are you writing your dissertation about?” question) or on the process in which they are utilized (which makes responses to dissertation questions much more difficult) was a major step in the planning of this research. In the end, despite “chain objects” being perhaps the easiest summary of the focus of my study, it was the process that got the spotlight, mainly because without it, the objects lost their serial collaborative meaning. As I’ve emphasized before, it is the *process* that provides the cultural significance here, that dramatizes the abstract ideas that participants find so important and meaningful.

² Marcel Mauss’s study, *The Gift* (1967), is an excellent example of this.

³ Longenecker considered his subtype to fall under Dundes’s “commentaries” division.

⁴ Cathy Preston’s 2007 work is an excellent elaboration on this point.

⁵ The obvious similarity between this experiment and serial collaboration (especially type A) makes “small world” a suitable adjective—much like “object tracking”—to be placed in front of

various emic genres as an identifier: “small world activities,” “small world projects,” or “small world games.”

⁶ This game, playing with the popular lay theory that all people in the world are no more than six degrees separated from each other socially (if we could perceive all the links), involves linking any actor in the world to Kevin Bacon in fewer than six moves. For example, consider Harrison Ford, who has a “Bacon Number” of 2: Harrison Ford was in *Sabrina* (1995) with Margo Martindale, and Margo Martindale was in *Rails & Ties* (2007) with Kevin Bacon.

⁷ He did, however, clarify for me once that it suffices mainly as an introductory definition, for newcomers to the field.

⁸ Harris also points out that: “the first folklorists entered the American academic community as step-children with identity crises,” and that “if we can classify it as a genre, it can be ours” (510). This desire to have a clearly defined subject matter has pervaded folklore studies for some time. It is undeniable that I feel that the classification of serial collaborative creation as a unified and identifiable genre would legitimize it as a subject of folkloristic study. Even if the analytical title “serial collaboration” does enter general use, I would be pleased if “object tracking” or “small world” activities were recognized as a distinct category.

⁹ As will become clear in the case studies in part 2, there are certain organizations that have taken it upon themselves to become the “official” headquarters of various individual examples of serial collaborative creation. When I say that the genre exists without any “official” recognition then, I mean that people still unite all the individual examples under the umbrella of “the same thing,” even without having a unifying word for it.

¹⁰ For example, a particular tradition may exhibit the feature of present temporality, which, as explained, relates to the characteristic of Chain Awareness, without being a part of a chain *per se*. Thus the two qualities are listed separately.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Implications / Unifying Themes

There are several unifying theoretical themes that have emerged from the various case studies I have examined. While no single instance of serial collaboration relates entirely to every theme, each theme is relevant to several particular examples of the process, and in total, the themes all come together to generate much of the cultural meaning and significance of the general abstracted process to participants. The source of themes and functions discussed below is the data I have gathered through interviews and surveys; this data is available in Part 2 and will be visited again, in depth, in the individual case studies. The overview here provides a solid base from which to formulate a framework for thinking about the upcoming case studies and an opportunity for a literature review of the components that will be used to fully define the genre.

Space and Place

There is a clear connection between the process and practice of serial collaboration and the concepts of space and place, in that all instances of serial collaboration involve objects or people moving about the landscape. In 1977, cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan defined place as “a special kind of object.” He called place a “concretion of value, though not a valued thing that can be handled or carried about easily; it is an object in which one can dwell” (1977:12). Since then, defining “place” has been a popular activity over the years for scholars from a number of the humanities and social sciences, but Tuan’s description of place as a kind of object is especially fitting for this dissertation, which examines the possibility that objects—even those that *can* be

“handled or carried about easily,” despite Tuan’s hesitation on that point—can function as places.

Definitions of “place” have focused on a variety of qualities, the most common perhaps being boundaries, but also *value*, in the above example from Tuan, and *behavior*, as in John A. Jakle’s concept of place as “a setting that, because it contains a distinctive range of social interactions, may be thought of as inviting or inducing the continuation of those interactions” (1987:4).

The ambiguous phrase “a sense of place,” commonly used to refer to an individual’s general awareness of or connection to a particular place, can be equally diverse in meaning. Kent Ryden proposes that “a sense of place results gradually and unconsciously from inhabiting a landscape over time, becoming familiar with its physical properties, accruing history within its confines” (1993: 38). The National Trust for Historic Preservation presents the similar but more pragmatic idea that a sense of place derives from “those things that add up to a feeling that a community is a special place, distinct from anywhere else” (Stokes et al. 1997: 192). These definitions, which tie a sense of place to time spent in a given locality or membership in a given community, have been critiqued for being at odds within the context of contemporary society, where technology allows for a steady increase in virtual and geographically distanced interaction (Shields 1996, 2003; Rojek 1998; Rheingold 2000) through the use of the Internet, cell phones, and other wireless communication devices.

As has been noted, with regard to the structure of the creative process, SCCs, especially those of type B, are similar to spontaneous shrines: Individuals or small groups contribute to a vernacular object that is specifically designed to be encountered and interacted with. In trying to understand the significance of spontaneous shrines, some scholars have pointed to the way in

which the shrines dramatize and speak about ideas of presence and absence. As Miles Richardson explains,

In all cases, the objects left are more powerful than the words that their givers might have spoken. They are more powerful in the sense that their very physicality denies absence. While speech is our most direct and forceful presentation of being, it is also the more ephemeral. ... The objects we leave continue to speak that we were here and made this gift, long after we have gone. (2001: 266)

Tuan agrees: "Artifacts ... have the power to stabilize life. Transient feelings and thoughts gain permanence and objectivity in things" (1980: 463). He takes the argument further, projecting that at times, objects are *better* than the person for which they stand: "because [artifacts have] the power to embody and to manifest significant human experience, we are able to value the work even more than we do ourselves or other people" (1980: 464). Objects left at a shrine stand in for the presence (and the sentiments) of a currently absent participant, and in a symbolic way, they continually bring that participant's presence to that place.

This is also significant for geocaches and other examples of serial collaboration. The objects that are created or given meaning through serial collaboration are, as noted, neither explicitly dedicatory nor commemorative, and yet they still "stand in" for absent people by bringing a token of physical presence to a new location. Similarly, and perhaps more significantly, the objects created through serial collaboration also stand in for a *place*. Just as they invoke absent people at a particular place, they invoke an absent or otherwise needed place for actual people. They can be placed in the landscape, providing a stationary, interactive link

for mobile people; or they can be passed through space, providing a mobile physical connection for physically distant individuals.

In a society that encourages virtual socializing, whether by choice (seeking entertainment and company in Internet chat rooms) or by necessity (reconnecting with faraway family members by phone or email), it is perhaps the case that people nowadays cannot emotionally afford to be always having ephemeral, non-localized experiences of community. The creation and use of a movable “place-holding” object, a mobile locality, reassures people that the other beings they interact with ephemerally are still present and real—as tangible and as solid as the objects that are sent out. Participation in serial collaboration allows for a physical, vernacular, culturally meaningful, and most importantly *local* experience to become tangible in any given location, or in multiple distant locations at once. The objects that are used in these customs function as portable places, mobile loci of meaning and social orientation, concrete common denominators that provide a shared physical locality, and a shared sense of place, for a non-local experience. In the sense that these objects become, to use Jonathan Inda and Renata Rosaldo’s words, the shared “setting for distanced relations,” these objects *are* modern localities.

Temporary Ownership and the Lasting Connection

Participants talk about “making connections” and “crossing distances” as two of their main goals when participating in serial collaboration, and even though the objects often go to strangers, the idea that people across the globe can be made “present” is an important one to people coping with the delocalization of their cultural and familial groups. The ownership of the object is temporary, unlike a gift from a close friend, but the awareness of the chain, made

substantial by an actual object in a way no email forward could hope to reproduce, imbues the process with a powerful function of creating connections across distances.

Of course, unlike a gift, which remains with the recipient permanently, and unlike a passaround or circulating object, which the recipient can expect to receive again after giving it away, the ownership of a chain object is, by definition, temporary. One can check on the status of a chain object if it is a trackable kind, but one can never have it back as physically theirs (assuming the chain is successful). One can revisit a cache or a letterbox, but cannot take it with them, and cannot reclaim it as exclusively “theirs” for a time. So how does this fleeting ownership work to create a lasting sense of connection with the other participants in the chain? As Cathy Preston points out,

Personal experience narratives associate community-based folk assemblages¹ with commemoration of a moment in an individual’s life, with commemoration of a personal relationship, with playing a game, and with the construction of a sense of community or membership in a particular folk or sub-cultural group. (3)

There is clearly a connection that extends beyond physical ownership of the object.

Frazer’s principle of contagion in sympathetic magic—that things once in contact retain a permanent trace of that contact—helps illuminate this connection: the object I have in my hands was previously *in the hands* of a person far away from me, so now that person is, in a way, close to me. According to the principle of contagious magic, “one can carry out an action on an element that was once touched by or connected to the designated target of a magical act” (Dundes 1999: 115). So in this way,² the action of visiting new places and interacting with new people that is carried out by a chain object is transferred to the various owners.

It is interesting to consider how chain objects, almost like voodoo dolls (a popular example of Frazer's sympathetic magic—contagious *and* homeopathic), become a kind of avatar for each individual who has temporarily owned them. The experience of one BookCrosser, 45 year old Eric Jouannest, who left a French mystery novel on a bridge behind Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, is a good example of this. As he explains, "I got word of it two months later. Someone found it in Ulan Bator—in Mongolia!—and he took it with him to Buryatia" (Gecker 2005). This comment suggests that the object has become an avatar for the participant. Eric now has a tangible connection to the object's new location; in a way, he has visited that place himself.

The subject of avatars is one that has been considered seriously by scholars of computer-based socializing (an issue that will be further addressed below). The word "avatar" is from the Sanskrit language and translates roughly into "God's appearance on Earth" (Damer 1998: xv). The avatar, which in computer and video games is often "humanoid [and has] heads and bodies that can move around the space depicted on the screen" (Rheingold 2000: 196), brings an element of reality into a virtual environment. It can gesture and move its eyes while others are talking, which makes the conversation "seem more alive in a sense, when you can move your eyes toward someone's Avatar when it says something interesting" (Rheingold 2000: 197). In other words, the online avatar brings the participant bodily (in a way) into the virtual space of the online community. Similarly, the chain object brings the participant bodily (in a way) into both the new places to which it travels and the company of the new temporary owners.

Globalization and Modern Travel

This use of SCCs as avatars or icons for actual people adds an interesting new dimension to the modern modes of “travel” that John Urry has discussed in relating the “tourist gaze” to globalization (1990). Urry notes that with globalization, traffic has become magnified along several kinds of travel routes—corporeal, imagined, and virtual—by means of “the infrastructures of the global travel industry” (141); by the use of phone, radio, and TV; and through the use of the Internet, respectively. Serial collaboration blurs the boundaries of these modes, adding a tangible element to imagined and virtual travel, and offering the possibility of experiencing a place from a distance.

Globalization scholars, studying the increasing pace of global interactions and processes, have noted that while people continue to live local lives, phenomenal worlds have become global, as distant events come to have an immediate impact on local spaces and vice versa (Inda and Rosaldo 2002). Considering this, and knowing also that social interaction is increasingly taking place in virtual settings, traditions such as serial collaboration, which are both vernacular and potentially global, are especially relevant to modern life. Globalization in itself is especially relevant to the field of folkloristics. As Kimberley Lau has observed:

Because the study of folklore has been—and continues to be—organized around relationships of cultural production to local community, nationality, diaspora, ethnicity, identity, and power differentials, theories of globalization are fundamental to both the history and the future of the discipline. (55)

It is helpful here to look at the specific ways certain scholars have conceptualized the cultural implications of globalization. As was noted above, globalization alters the way we experience space and place. According to anthropologist David Harvey, globalization also changes the way we experience space and time. He describes a “time-space compression,” which “refers to the

manner in which the speeding up of economic and social processes has experientially shrunk the globe, so that distance and time no longer appear to be major constraints on the organization of human activity” (Inda and Rosaldo 2006: 6). Time, then, has been reorganized to overcome the barrier of space.

Another scholar, Anthony Giddens, has conceptualized the time-space implications of globalization slightly differently: as “time-space distancing.” By this he refers to “the conditions under which time and space are organized so as to connect presence and absence” (14). Where social interaction used to be localized, face-to-face, and very “present,” today’s communications systems have made a new kind of social interaction possible: one that is “disembedded,” which makes “place” increasingly “phantasmagoric.” Local places are increasingly immediately influenced by people and things that are quite distantly removed from them, “haunted,” as some have said, by that which is absent. As Inda and Rosaldo put it, “modern localities, then, are settings for distanced relations—for relations at a distance, stretched out across time and space” (8).

This, understandably, makes modern localities the perfect place for chain objects to flourish. Globalization has, of course, existed as long as humans have known there were other places to which to travel. There have always been travelers, individuals who have always been creating understandings of global trade and cross-cultural interaction. The main difference today is the *pace* at which global interactions can take place. As Urry observed, “traffic has become magnified” in all ways—physical travel, virtual travel, imagined travel—and people are left to readjust their social relationships as they can.

The fact that the term “super-commuters” has entered the modern parlance is indicative of a global level of daily life. As CNN reported in 2005, “With affordable air travel, a new

generation of super-commuters are joining the payroll—business travelers who are more than happy to fly long distances just to get to work” (Quest). This is a prime example of how the ease of travel has become ubiquitous (at least for certain socio-economic classes), and how the idea of a constantly mobile individual is becoming accepted as normal. While some super-commuters³ only travel a few hours to work each day, and are thus able to go back home each evening, some work so far from home that they only make it home on the weekends. As Patrick Larvie, a super-commuter between San Francisco and Hong Kong explains, “People change (while I am away) and people have different lives—they are not going to wait for me” (Quick). This kind of situation created the need for social connections—real and meaningful social connections—to occur over long distances. To connect back to the idea of space and place, chain objects are perfectly situated to fill that need. When families no longer share the same homestead, the understanding that they can still have tangible and meaningful connections with people who are far removed from them—an understanding that the mere existence of chain objects encourages and supports—is vital.

An interest in traversing the landscape serves other purposes as well. Not only is the perception that “real” connections can be maintained across distances significant, but for many people, so is the perception that there is “uncharted” landscape left to be discovered in a world of planes, trains, cars, and other forms of rapid travel. As will be seen in Part 2, the adventure and thrill of “treasure-hunting” plays a big part in the appeal of geocaching and letterboxing; being in nature, knowing of a buried “secret,” and knowing that a select group of seekers are aware of the treasure to be found in the landscape all create an appealing connection to a particular locale. Knowing that one could find a geocache in their own neighborhood and then travel to Japan and

find another one in a park there only helps bolster the perception that all the world is accessible, yet still manageable.

Imagined and Virtual Communities

There is a clear distinction between chain objects and circulating objects. In friend- and family-groups, there is direct contact and communication about the object. With the often-anonymous chains involved in serial collaboration, the objects themselves take on a much greater portion of the communicative burden. While some aspects of the process, such as Internet trackability or cache log books, allow for a deeper level of connection between members of the chain of participants, most people I have spoken with claim that they make no effort to directly contact the other people who have contributed to the object they share in common, even though they describe feeling a connection to them. I have heard from people who have actually met up with people they encountered through serial collaboration,⁴ but most people say that their interaction goes no further than a few posts online. For the most part, the members of the chain begin as, and remain, strangers to each other.

I believe anonymity is not simply an unavoidable result of the serial collaborative process but rather a desirable and sought-after quality to many participants. Cathy Preston, in her study of “folk assemblages” created on trees, fences, and phone lines, found that some contributors to these SCCs felt anonymity allowed the resulting objects to “symbolically [evoke] a sense of imagined community” (2007: 23); the lack of specific identities is irrelevant to the general sense of joint effort that permeates the chain of contributors. One columnist, writing about a serial collaborative collection of angels hung on a tree in Boulder, Colorado dubbed it “a fellowship of strangers” (2007: 8).

The importance of strangers within understandings of social relationships is an area of interest for many scholars. Notably, sociologist Georg Simmel observed the way a stranger can unify (and create a tension between) the dual qualities of nearness and remoteness, making strangers ideal recipients of disclosure. They can be near for a moment, and then be trusted to go away again, taking with them what information or experiences they may have been given or shared. Sociologist Mary E. Virnoche, explains:

The stranger's "not belonging" is established by his absence of physical presence in a particular locality or group at its beginnings. His mobility is marked by his fluidity of association: the likelihood that he will leave the area and discontinue the possibility of association. The objectivity of Simmel's stranger is assured by a lack of long-term personal investment into the happenings of the group into which he has stumbled. Free from the everyday customs and constraints of the group, the stranger invites disclosures that may be socially dangerous if made to insiders. And finally, the commonalties that the stranger establishes are abstract in nature such as nationality, race or occupation. (3)

Virnoche refers to communications technologies, especially the Internet with its numerous avenues for virtual connections, as "strange making" devices, highlighting the important role of the stranger in many contemporary interactions, and the ability for virtual interaction to promote this kind of close-but-safely-distanced connection.

Rosemary Horton describes the names chosen for various serial collaborative activities—BookCrossing, GeoCaching, Letterboxing—as "portmanteau words that try to convey a marriage of the real and the virtual" (1), thus acknowledging the importance of virtuality alongside tangibility as a component of the overall serial collaborative process. As in the above situations,

anonymity is a common quality of virtual (or online) interaction, too. As David Leever explains,

Once upon a time the computer was clearly a part of the external world, hidden behind layers of data preparation clerks and programmers. Even the recent desktop interface was reassuringly external, explicitly placed at arms length. However, the networked virtual environments that have been described . . . are not just animating the vastness of space beyond the screen, they are also punching out at us in true 3-D movie fashion and starting to colonize the “inner space” of our private mental models. (1998: 295)

Now that we have computers to allow us to act from our inner spaces, there is much more opportunity to conduct social interactions, whether casual or formal, in a virtual space where our external beings have no corporeal or tangible representation.

The concept of the “virtual” is not a new one, and is not confined to the computer age. Rob Shields, in his book *The Virtual* (2003), points out that a number of different paths from across history have offered “milieux in which rules other than those that govern face-to-face interactions of actual bodies are the norm” (11). He elaborates:

[W]e can clearly find historical types of virtual realities, fictions, simulations and perception games which tricked the mind and body into feeling transported elsewhere. Retrospectively, it is clear that there has been a history and succession of “virtual worlds” which anticipate the ability of information and communications technologies to make present what is both absent and imaginary.

(11)

Shields feels that the factor linking past forms of virtual reality with today's computer-driven forms is the concept of liminality: "Liminal zones are virtual environments or spaces" (12). He illustrates this with a folkloric example, citing the rite of passage involved in a marriage ceremony. He describes how the "movement" from one stage of life into a transitory or liminal stage does not take place literally; rather, "the rules of quotidian face-to-face life are suspended or even inverted in a carnivalesque of norms" (12). Shields goes on to connect modern online virtuality with these long-standing (even ancient) cultural modes:

Like liminal zones and events, virtual spaces are "liminoid" in that they are participated in on a temporary basis, and distinguished from some notion of commonplace "everyday life." Virtual space is not only betwixt and between geographical places in a non-place space of telemediated data networks, but participants take on specific "usernames" or identities, and many surreptitiously engage in activities that they might not otherwise consider. (13)

Of course, not everyone agrees that "everyday life" is removed in virtual environments. Scholars Atsuya Yoshida and Jun Kakuta, of the Kyoto Institute of Technology, touch on the strong place that folklore has in the study of online virtual communities when they identify the kind of interaction that takes place in online socializing arenas as "playful communication":

Historically, we have the example of the playful communication such as a wall painting in a cave and a drumming behavior to neighboring villages at a festival, while Indian's signal fire and military flag signals are the examples of task-oriented communications. (1993)

Yoshida and Kakuta are clearly describing the informal, everyday, expressive, and traditional communications that fall under the rubric of folklore (though their terminology emphasizes an

especially ludic stance). Separating this kind of communication from pragmatic communication (as Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblet did when creating her spectrum of verbal art), shows that these academics believe that the Internet is an ideal place for everyday communications as well as for the work-related communication for which it was initially assumed to be intended.

As some scholars have noted, a prominent component of many “virtual communities” that form on the Internet is that the people involved “leave [their] bodies behind” (Rheingold 2000: xvii), eliminating corporeal connections with their fellow community members. There are times, of course, when virtual relationships become “real”:

I can’t count the parties and outings where the invisible personae who first acted out their parts in the debates and melodramas on my computer screen later manifested in front of me in the physical world in the form of real people, with faces, bodies, and voices. (Rheingold 2000: xvi)

Even when this takes place, though, the incorporeality of the relationships is brought to the forefront, at least initially:

I remember the first time I walked into a room full of people IRL [in real life] who knew many intimate details of my history and whose stories I knew very well. Three months after I joined, I went to my first WELL [Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link—an online community] party at the home of one of the WELL’s online moderators. I looked around at the room full of strangers when I walked in. It was one of the oddest sensations of my life. I had contended with these people, shot the invisible breeze around the electronic watercooler, shared alliances and formed bonds, fallen off my chair laughing with them, become livid

with anger at some of them. But there wasn't a recognizable face in the house. I had never seen them before. (Rheingold 2000: xvi)

Considering that most people who participate occasionally in online communities never meet up "IRL" with the people they interact with online, those people—who may be considered friends or even confidants online—remain "strangers" in the real world. You could be sitting next to one of these friends on the bus and never know it.

Serial collaboration is similar in that a chain of people all share in the physical monitoring of the same object, can all see the alterations in form or movement that other people have made, and yet would never know each other if they saw each other in public. Even if they have interacted online, checking the status of a released chain object or a previously visited cache, they still would not *know* their fellow chain members. But this is where serial collaboration adds a *tangible* element back into the kinds of virtual interactions that people can pursue, or expect to pursue, with faraway strangers; relationships previously relegated to placeless virtuality can, through this process, gain a corporeal element (bringing Tuan's concept of place as "a concretion of value" into a much more literal frame).

Amy Shuman's concept of "small-world stories" is applicable here. Shuman defines small-world stories as "stories about coincidental meetings in everyday life" (2005: 89), meetings in which the people involved have a serendipitous, previously unrealized connection to each other. I feel that the process of serial collaboration—with its ability to create tangible connections between strangers while allowing them to remain strangers—is one way in which people create a greater potential (hypothetically, if not actually) for small-world stories in their lives. Several of the respondents to a survey I conducted with BookCrossing participants shared small-world stories with me, indicating that this was on their minds. As one informant explains:

I once saw a fellow bookcrosser who was from my very small hometown, and I sent a PM [private message] to say hi, and say that I grew up there. She wrote back that we were the same age, so maybe we knew each other. Turns out our families are friends. (Book Crossing 2005)

Not only do serial collaboration websites offer the opportunity for interaction, they also actually *provide* the connections to be uncovered in the future as small world stories. The more anonymous chains one is a member of, the more potential one has for being connected in some way to the strangers that surround one in daily life. The more tangible (and the less purely virtual) those connections are, the more significant the potential relationship is. Many participants connect SCCs to the popular theory of six degrees of separation, which posits that all people in the world are only six personal connections separated from each other, if only we could become aware of all the links. Connections may not need to be revealed or uncovered through an actual narrative; I believe it is simply the possibility and the increased probability of their existence through chain objects that allows for the perception of the world as deeply inter-connected, a perception that Shuman's stories indicate is a desirable one. The chain objects then become symbols for this more inter-connected, smaller world.

Transmission, Networking, and Serendipity

Shuman's idea of the small world is obviously related to Milgram's interest in the same topic, though they have widely differing approaches to the subject matter.⁵ It is, of course,

Milgram who popularized the “six degrees of separation” idea, and in fact, he opens his initial published study with a Shuman-style small world story:

Fred Jones of Peoria, sitting in a sidewalk cafe in Tunis, and needing a light for his cigarette, asks the man at the next table for a match. They fall into conversation; the stranger is an Englishman who, it turns out, spent several months in Detroit studying the operation of an interchangeable-bottlecap-factory. “I know it's a foolish question,” says Jones, “but did you ever by any chance run into a fellow named Ben Arkadian? He's an old friend of mine, manages a chain of supermarkets in Detroit.”

“Arkadian, Arkadian,” the Englishman mutters. “Why, upon my soul, I believe I do! Small chap, very energetic, raised merry hell with the factory over a shipment of defective bottlecaps.”

“No kidding!” Jones exclaims in amazement.

“Good lord, it's a small world, isn't it?” (1967: 61)

While Milgram certainly brought the “six degrees of separation” idea to the American public's attention and imagination, he was not the first writer to conceive of the notion. In 1929, Hungarian writer Frigyes Karinthy penned a (currently out of print) short story entitled “Chains” [*Láncszemek*], which posits no more than five links between any two people:

To demonstrate that people on Earth today are much closer than ever, a member of the group suggested a test. He offered a bet that we could name any person among earth's one and a half billion inhabitants and through at *most five*

acquaintances, one of which he knew personally, he could link to the chosen one.

(Barabási 26)

Karinthy's characters first link one of themselves to a Nobel prizewinner via the King of Sweden and two famous tennis players, and are then challenged to make the same type of connection without the assistance of notoriety or celebrity. The connection between one character and a worker in a factory pans out just as successfully:

The worker knows the manager in the shop, who knows Ford; Ford is on friendly terms with the general director of Hearst Publications, who last year became good fiends with Árpád Pásztor, someone I not only know, but is to the best of my knowledge a good friend of mine—so I could easily ask him to send a telegram via the general director telling Ford that he should talk to the manager and have the worker in the shop quickly hammer together a car for me, as I happen to need one. (Barabási 27)⁶

The similarities between Milgram's and Karinthy's scenarios are impressive; Albert-László Barabási notes that "Milgram's first paper on the subject occasionally reads like an English translation of Karinthy's "Láncszemek" rewritten for an audience of sociologists" (27).

Milgram's own work went on to inspire a great many other cultural productions:

The first popular use of Milgram's study was the Jon Guare play *Six Degrees of Separation*, which was later made into a movie. Then came the Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon game, created by college students, in which players must connect the actor to another actor by no more than six other people. In 2006 there was the TV show *Six Degrees*, which told the story of six characters who, according to the network, 'go about their lives without realizing the impact they are having on one

another.’ Even the popular PBS series *American Masters* has jumped on the six degrees bandwagon, with a Web game that allows you to pick any two of the accomplished people it has profiled through the years—everyone from Aaron Copland to William Styron—and find the links that connect them. (Devita-Raeburn 43-44)

There is strong evidence that the “six degrees” concept is popular in public imagination.

Aside from mass media, other researchers have also discovered what both Milgram and Shuman have found: the “desirability” of a small world. Judith Kleinfeld, whose works challenge Stanley Milgram’s findings on the small world phenomenon, notes that

in the intervening decades, Milgram’s findings have slipped away from their scientific moorings and sailed into the world of imagination. The “six degrees of separation” between any two people has been integrated into the intellectual world of educated people, and is has turned up in the media, movies and Websites. A variant involving the actor Kevin Bacon has become a popular parlor game. But Milgram’s startling conclusion turns out to rest on scanty evidence. The idea of “six degrees of separation” may, in fact, be plain wrong—the academic equivalent of an urban myth. (2002)

As noted in the previous chapter, Kleinfeld points out that only a very small percentage of Milgram’s packages made it to their destinations: less than 30 percent. While this may be an impressive statistic nonetheless, it does not wholly support a complete small world perspective. Though some other scholars have created models that show Milgram’s original optimism may still pan out, the easy “six degrees” idea is not as empirically strong as it is often made out to be. Kleinfeld goes on:

But if we don't live in a small world after all, why do people find this idea so easy to believe? My research suggests that first, the belief that we live in a small world gives people a sense of security, a feeling that we are all somehow holding hands. And small world experiences that we encounter naturally buttress people's religious faith as evidence of "design." (2001 par. 13)

Kleinfeld and Shuman have uncovered basically the same premise—that the existence of a small world is an appealing idea to the general population—through two different fields of inquiry.

The popularity of the "six degrees" notion of the small world is evidenced in a variety of ways: attention from the popular press and media outlets, folk traditions about connections between people, and Internet sites that track both scholarly and amateur attempts to replicate aspects of Milgram's study. A *Washington Post* article (which defines the popular perception of the theory as "the global-village notion that we're all interconnected like Tinkertoys and everybody pretty much knows everybody . . . or at least that you know somebody who knows the person who knows a guy . . . who actually knows Britney Spears" (Weeks 2002: C01)) describes some of the impact this idea has had:

The phrase gave rise to "Six Degrees of Separation," a popular play by John Guare—and subsequently a movie—in which a young man in a bloodstained shirt shows up at the Fifth Avenue home of a rich art dealer and his wife. The man claims to be a friend of their kids at Harvard. He cooks them a meal and tells them elaborate stories. They discover the next morning that he is not who he said he is.

The saying has entered American parlance. And parlors. Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon is a popular game in which players are given the name of an actor and asked to connect the dots to Bacon using movies that the actors have appeared in.

For example, Alfre Woodard. Alfre Woodard was in the 1999 movie "Mumford" with Pruitt Taylor Vince, who is in the upcoming "24 Hours" with Kevin Bacon. Degrees of separation: Two.⁷

The computer science department at the University of Virginia has designed a Web site testing the Kevin Bacon proposition: www.oracleofbacon.org, and in a popular Visa ad that first ran during the Super Bowl, Bacon proved his identity to a cashier using the six degrees theory. (C01)

Since the printing of this article, the theory has only become more popular.

As noted in the previous chapter, Duncan J. Watts, a professor of Sociology at Columbia University is currently trying to test the small world theory with an online experiment (see <http://smallworld.columbia.edu>). Building from Milgram's original idea, Watts asks participants to send an email to a specified unknown recipient by emailing someone they already know⁸ who they believe will be one step closer to the final recipient. The experiment, still going on, has been covered by almost 90 news media outlets all over the world, and has well over 20,000 willing subjects, all interested in being a part of the study.

I see this pervasive interest in the six degrees theory to be a manifestation of people's general interest in transmission networks. Folklorists, mainly scholars of contemporary legends, have written about transmission chains and transmission nets, and I believe it is these chains that are being realized and highlighted in serial collaboration. When a folksong is sung or a tale is told, there are people in the audience who take that song or story with them and pass it along to another audience at another time. With chain objects, that path becomes trackable⁹ and tangible.

In fact, there is evidence that one of folklore's early transmission theories—The Finnish School's "automigration"—remains a popular lay theory of transmission among the general public. As C.E. von Sydow explained, in a build-up to a rebuttal of the theory, the Finnish School held "that the wanderings of tales was an automigration, which takes place without any movements of persons, migrations of peoples, or historical events" (Dundes 1999: 142). While there is undoubtedly an intellectual awareness among participants that BookCrossing books and Where's George bills do not move by themselves (and thus an implicit rejection of a true superorganic perception of the movement), much of the impetus for travel is nonetheless attributed to the objects themselves; they are the main characters while all the participants are supporting actors.

This interest in transmission patterns and networking, combined with the general anonymity of serial collaborative activities leads to a very common perception of "serendipity" among participants, who often cite this one of their favorite aspects of the activities. Within a worldview that allows for seemingly endless virtual contact and yet limited physical (or "real") contact, the discovery or awareness of a physical connection to others is perceived as a happy accident—simply the discovery that an unknown someone was also putting him- or herself out there for a potential "real" connection makes the world seem smaller and more friendly.

Narrative, Ostension, and Legend Tripping

Perhaps it is because of the pervasiveness of narrative genres within folklore study combined with the lack of a formal name for this category of activities and objects, but this tradition is linked with the genre of "legend" so often that it cannot be overlooked. For example, chain objects are commonly described as having "stories" of which participants can become a

part.¹⁰ Similarly, David Hulst first classified the roaming gnome phenomenon as a legend. The International Society for Contemporary Legend Research has seen papers both geocaching and shoe trees, indicating the resonance of serial collaborative activities with legend scholars. Diane Goldstein and Diane Tye, in a study of spontaneous shrines, note the ability of a collection of objects to provide a narration of events. In the case of the spontaneous shrines that Goldstein and Tye consider, “they narrate a tragedy through their very existence” (242); in the case of chain objects, their existence narrates the meta-story of their unique, collaborative creation.

This “marriage of story and form” (Thomas 2003: 1) is not unique. Narratives permeate many non-narrative genres; this indicates that serial collaboration and chain objects are worth talking about to the people who know of them. The use of objects as a component of the genre of legendry is something worth exploring; as Gillian Bennett has observed, “legend” is a genre that almost defies definition, be it structural, thematic, or functional (1984).

In a general way, as part of a “complex” of folklore genres, serial collaborative creation is most similar to legend-tripping rather than to legends as narratives. Legend-tripping, as Bill Ellis has explained, is a performative way of experiencing a narrative, a type of ostensive action that takes place in a cultivated atmosphere of fear. Ostension is the literal acting out of a legend. Knowing that there is a perception of a narrative surrounding a chain object, it makes sense that participating in serial collaboration is the acting out of that narrative. While the atmosphere in instances of serial collaboration is certainly not one of fear, it *is* cultivated; the emotional association here is with social connection within a small world. As the travel bugs say, chain objects “pick up stories,” as they travel, and each participant gets to not simply narrate but *act out* his or her own chapter.

In 1980, in a volume on Indiana Folklore, Gary Hall introduced the concept of the legend trip, defining it as “a traditional or patterned adolescent recreation involving specific activities as well as appropriate legends.” He goes on to note that “the function of a legend trip is primarily recreational; most often each trip begins almost spontaneously as ‘something to do’ or someplace to go” (256). He also explains that it is the connection of the narrative to the place that makes for such an intense experience; simply hearing the story without being in the place, or vice-versa, wouldn’t create the same experience. The same necessary connection of place or object to narrative is required for serial collaboration, too; the idea of a shared or passed chain object is made real by acting it out, by actually interacting with the object (and thus symbolically with the other participants in the chain), and the interaction with the object is given that symbolic meaning via the “narrative” its journey has created.

Bill Ellis, in his study of Gore Orphanage outside Cleveland, Ohio, makes the interesting observation that the legend trip manages to “locate the [scary event] in a remote place” (2001: 197), thus making its implications more manageable for the teenage audience. It is interesting to think that the “implications” of serial collaboration—small world connections, communities of strangers, connectedness—might also be preferred at a slight distance. Keeping the markers of such meaning at a distance, albeit a slight one and an easily accessible one, puts a new spin on just how these objects signify to the people involved.

Sub-Cultures, Counter Culture, Anti-Commercialism

With regard to what is being “enacted” or “performed” through serial collaborative creation, another response relates to the oft-cited “counter-culture” nature of the custom. Due to the fact that chain objects are usually mass-produced commodities that have been appropriated

into a new, vernacular context—and the fact that they are sometimes objects that would otherwise have to be paid for in order to be obtained, such as books—there is a strong sense of circumventing and subverting authority and mainstream consumerism by sharing the objects.

BookCrossing once faced opposition from authors and publishers, who felt that the practice would take money away from their industry, by encouraging people not to pay for books:

In 2003, BookCrossing was criticized by Jessica Adams, author of several “chick lit” novels, who claimed that books were being “devalued” by the website as BookCrossing could lead to lower sales of books and, therefore, the reduction in royalties being paid to authors. Most BookCrossers dispute this argument, however. They claim that the website introduces readers to authors and genres that they have not read before, that the website gets more people to take up or reclaim reading as a hobby, and that some members, having read a book that they have enjoyed, will buy extra copies to distribute through BookCrossing.

In March 2005, Caroline Martin, managing director of the publisher Harper Press, said in a speech that “book publishing as a whole has its very own potential Napster crisis in the growing practice of bookcrossing”. BookCrossers rebut the link to Napster, saying that whilst music filesharing involves duplicating audio files countless times, BookCrossing doesn't involve duplicating books.
(reference.com)

The BookCrossing official website has taken the time to address these concerns, putting a notice on their homepage that is intended to reassure publishers and authors:

We know you may be concerned about all this book-sharing talk, and what it might do to your book store sales. You may be surprised to know that many, many publishers and authors are big BookCrossing fans. They've seen the paradoxical value in encouraging the sharing of books. In fact, if one were to compare the number of people who buy books based on seeing book reviews here as the books change hands, to the number of people who actually find free books, we can assure you there are far more buyers than finders.

Despite BookCrossing's warnings, there is still a sense, albeit usually a benevolent one, that somehow, in the process of sharing all these items on a vernacular level, some aspect of freedom or choice is being reclaimed from the commercial powers that typically govern (and in many ways restrict) our lives.

This leads to an interesting connection between serial collaborative traditions and recycle culture. An activity that several people mentioned during my interviews was Kyle McDonald's One Red Paperclip project. Kyle, a young man from Montreal aspiring to be a travel writer, decided to try to trade a single red paper clip with someone for something slightly better (in his case, a pen shaped like a fish). He planned to continue trading up until he got the symbol of American success: his own house. He got the house in the end, trading along the way for such things as a doorknob, a gas barbeque, a snowmobile, and a recording contract. The London *Sunday Times*, commenting in 2006 on Kyle's project, noted that it "is perfectly suited to the anti-commercial zeal of the moment" (Millard). The article elaborates:

When you factor in characters such as Reverend Billy, who runs the Church of Stop Shopping, and a growing unease about the validity of shopping as a leisure pursuit, it is hardly surprising that many people are changing their affection for

the One Stop Shop into affection for the Stop Shop.

This may be why the red paperclip notion is so appealing; it is a simpler version of eBay with a strong dash of Little House on the Prairie. In the UK the model is probably a bit less American thrift and a bit more Noel Edmonds's Swap Shop but here too the notion of trading seems to be taking off. (Millard)

Trading up aside, there are a number of other opportunities emerging (both on the Internet and off) for people to rediscover the process of bartering, removing the middle step of monetary exchange. Projects such as FreeCycle (www.freecycle.org), a waste-reduction endeavor that allows people to place online posts about the items they need and the items they have to offer others, are jumping in popularity. While these projects are not a type of serial collaboration, some informants of mine have connected them.¹¹ The reason for this is simple; many of the qualities of serial collaboration—a tangible connection with strangers, shared objects—are common to both. And because these activities encourage people to utilize informal networks rather than institutional ones in order to acquire needed or desired items, the chains and communities that form as a result are appropriately perceived as existing in opposition to the mainstream culture.

There is also a shared ethic at work in both serial collaboration and recycling and trading movements; a general sense of honesty, equality, and fairness stands in opposition to the (perceived) bias and corruption of many aspects of mainstream society. With serial collaboration, participants are evincing a good amount of trust in their fellow humans to treat the objects that have been placed out in the world with due care and consideration. Of course, many BookCrossing books are sent out and never recorded as "caught," indicating that they may have

simply been taken and included in someone's home library—very contrary to the spirit of sharing that BookCrossing promotes. And geocaches occasionally disappear, assumed to be stolen or vandalized or otherwise mistreated. But it is the successful chains that are highlighted; people bemoan but generally get over the instances where their faith in humanity is not borne out. Considering that most serial collaborative activities are available to anyone with the inclination to participate regardless of gender, age, occupation, religion, ethnicity (and these qualities, which are so often the source of bias, are removed in the anonymity of the chain anyway), the promotion of an honest, egalitarian, friendly ethic is possible.

This resistance to mainstream authority, along with the perception of being part of a special sub-culture, is a major expressive aspect of this tradition and has been observed in other activity-oriented genres of folklore as well. One reviewer of Bill Ellis's book *Lucifer Ascending* summed up one level of the meaning of legend-tripping excursions by noting that "they reflect an eternal struggle between individuals and institutions over access to spiritual and supernatural realms, and the equally eternal struggle of teenagers to resist adult authority in general and the strictures of organized religion in particular." As with legend-tripping then, the action here is a struggle against authority.

Cathy Preston notes this struggle against authority when she describes the way that panty and shoe trees can become sites of contestation within a community. Panty and bra trees at ski areas are often used as ways for young skiers to put their own mark upon what they believe to be their own territory, to make the space more their own. The powers that be, however, whether in the form of other members of the local community or management of the ski area, often take offense at the claiming of space:

Not only was Vail's original panty tree cut down by unknown assailants and Beaver Creek's panty tree cut down by the ski area itself, but the site of the Rice shoe tree has been burned down several times, the instigator of the Parker shoe fence was told by the city to remove all the shoes from the fence, and people who had placed angels on Boulder's angel tree were told by the city to remove them because the angels violated the city and county's sign law against visual trash, such as billboards and graffiti. (21-22)

Diane Goldstein and Diane Tye also noticed a similar act of "reclamation" that appeared—symbolizing resistance to perceived authorities—among the small community of Pouch Cove, Newfoundland. When a group of young boys drowned while playing in the icy ocean, the community created a spontaneous shrine—an assemblage quite similar in form and process, if not significance, to type B SCCs—on a bridge overlooking the beach. Goldstein and Tye eventually came to understand the shrine's construction and "relation to a number of critical actions that took place in Pouch Cove during the days following the drowning as constituting a *process of community resistance*" (235, emphasis added). The people of Pouch Cove used their response to their tragedy as "a central act of resistance in its validation for all Newfoundlanders of a way of life that is disappearing" (248), emphasizing a variety of ways in which local knowledge was correct and the purported authorities were wrong.

The issue of "knowing what to do" upon encountering an expression of serial collaboration is a matter of some intrigue, and relates to the idea that there is a certain "sub-culture" of people who are well-versed in the ways of serial collaboration. Chain objects exist within the context of the process of serial collaboration, and communicate from that position. As Henry Glassie has observed, "All objects exist in context. There is no such thing as an object out

of context. But contexts differ greatly in their ability to help us understand the artifact at question. In some contexts, objects beam us deep meanings from other human beings” (1999: 59). Folklorist Barre Toelken has referred to the development of audience realization as the process of “gleaning.” His study focuses on a Chipewyan Athabaskan word, the verb stem *-sas/-zas*, which is used to describe “a dog gnawing a bone until it is clean, a woman picking berries, and someone listening to—and understanding—what another person is saying” (2003: 192). While these actions may seem unrelated, Toelken notes that they “dramatize a set of cultural nuances and assumptions” (192) related to subsistence and thoroughness, and he feels the verb “gleaning” is the best English translation.

When Toelken elaborates on the berry-picking example, he notes that the women are not simply picking berries; they know where to go to look for the berries, how best to gather them, and what not to pick: stems, leaves, and roots. When related to an audience listening or viewing, this implies that being an audience member is not a simple task; it is a proactive role that requires a complex and culturally learned system of realization. An audience must know what matters and what doesn’t; cultural productions, from jokes to stage shows, may make no sense to a cultural outsider as much because that outsider doesn’t know what *isn’t* important as because he or she doesn’t know what *is*. Any successful gleaning of a cultural product can only happen when the audience is prepared to identify and separate the berries and the twigs.

In some instances of serial collaboration, such as when Travel Bugs or personal notes are attached, instructions are explicit. In the case of BookCrossing, the book’s inner label summarizes the process. In other instances, participants first encounter the custom via the Internet and then began the process. But even when instructions are provided, something must attract attention initially, in order for the eventual finder to consider approaching and inspecting

(and eventually contributing to) the object. In some cases, such as with shoe trees or rag wells, the collaborative object is so large as to stand out obviously from the landscape; with smaller or hidden objects, the communication is more subtle. The distinction between trash, which would be ignored, and a purposefully abandoned object, which might garner interest, has to be subtly recognized by all participants. If the process of SCC is as common as its many forms and iterations would suggest, and if it is present as a potential expressive form in people's minds, then it seems that any object left somewhere with a purposeful air (in plain sight, centered on a surface), in a location seemingly out of its usual context, would be acting (at least to the knowledgeable audience) as an index to the process of serial contribution.

A distinction between type A and B SCCs may be identified here. With some type B instances such as geo-caching, the finder is usually actively seeking the object. Cache-starters are often advised to make sure their cache is distinctly purposeful (or very well hidden), lest some passerby who wasn't actively seeking the cache find it and mistake it for trash, or worse. A recent article in Canada's national newspaper *The Globe and Mail* relates how a poorly hidden geocache in Ottawa was spotted by a non-participant and was reported to the police: "At least two dozen police officers, 11 firefighters and six paramedics arrived at the scene, and the cache—a metal tin containing a log for geocachers to record their find—was eventually blown up" (Agrell). Type A SCCs, which participants are not necessarily actively seeking, require the most practiced eye with regard to placement. BookCrossing.com offers its members a book of sticky notes pre-printed to say "I'm not lost, I'm free!" in large letters, to draw the attention of potential finders who might otherwise thoughtfully leave the book where they found it so that its original owner could come back for it.

Considering that what we have here are mass-produced items that are, in this context, having to be distinguished from trash as signifiers of a vernacular process, this provides an opposition to the process that folklorists call “the commodification of folklore”. Diane Goldstein explains the process:

Commodification occurs, according to Cohen, when “things come to be evaluated in terms of their exchange value” (Cohen 1988, 381). As places, events and activities evolve to meet the needs of consumers, culture and tradition are themselves redefined as commodities that can be bought and sold. (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas: 194)

As cultural products become revised for commercial success, their presentations of their meanings—and thus their meanings—become altered, no longer representing the same local communities they once did.

With serial collaboration, we see things that were once created for the purpose of having an exchange value become vehicles for the expression of localized, vernacular meaning. Here we don’t have the commodification of folklore, but the purposeful and self-aware decommodification of popular culture.

¹ This is the term Preston is using to describe what I am here calling type B chain objects. Preston’s work focuses mainly on shoe trees, other shoe collections (placed on fences or thrown over electrical or phone wires), panty and bra trees, and gum trees.

² I am not intending to claim that Frazer’s sympathetic magic is *true* per se, but only to show that the psychology that operates behind such a belief is still a common one. See Rozin and Fallon’s 1985 study of disgust reactions for an interesting example of how ideas of magical contagion are still at work in our culture.

³ The term has been applied to situations where people have driving commutes in excess of two hours, and to situations where people fly to other states—or countries—to work.

⁴ There are many opportunities for enthusiasts in any given form of SCC—usually the more formalized and far-reaching types such as BookCrossing and GeoCaching—to meet up. In fact, there are local groups in many areas with active members who regularly meet in person. While this is certainly not uncommon, it is also not representative of the vastly larger number of participants who do not take their participation to that level.

⁵ It is interesting to see the wide range of “small world” concepts that emerge from cultural and social analysis: stories, experiments, networks, and now activities or pastimes.

⁶ I am unsure how the use of Henry Ford meets the requirements of avoiding celebrity, unless this chain is distinguished by having only one famous person where the previous chain was made of entirely of famous people. I have been completely unable to locate any full texts of Karinth’s story (I felt, in fact, quite lucky to have finally found segments as extensive as those in Barabasi’s work), and thus will have to hope that it makes more sense in the original.

⁷ This game is popular both in folk settings, as noted above, and in more “official” settings, such as computer sites where true “Bacon Numbers” can be tested:

The claim is that no one who has been in an American film ever has a Bacon Number of greater than four. Elvis Presley, for example, has a Bacon Number of two. For real enthusiasts, Tjaden [creator of a Kevin Bacon game website] created a web site that provides the Bacon Number and shortest path to the great man for the most obscure of choices. In fact, Tjaden later fireproofed his claim by conducting an exhaustive survey of the Internet Movie Database, and determined that the highest finite Bacon Number (for any nationality) is eight. (Santa Fe Institute)

⁸ Terms are clearly defined in this research project: Someone you “know” means someone who “would recognize you by name (or by your e-mail address) and verify that they know you” (Small World Project).

⁹ This is especially notable in the practice of tracking paper currency—the Where’s George website, which tracks bills as they travel around the world, proudly provides maps of the journeys of its most impressively traveled specimens. This will be discussed further in the case studies in part 2.

¹⁰ These narratives, which by their context take place in historical time and the real world and are certainly perceived as “true,” do fit better in the category of legend as delineated by William Bascom than in the categories of either folktales or myths. While these narratives may never be explicitly articulated, they do exist in a form that is clearly, both emically and etically, closely linked to legend.

¹¹ Kyle himself, who has now published a book on his paperclip experiment, originally made headlines with a truly serial collaborative project, Message in a Barrel, which is discussed in Chapter 5. He felt that the two projects were linked by the spirit behind them: encouraging people around the world to connect with each other via shared or exchanged objects.

Chapter 4: A Taxonomy of the Genre

Having identified the major functions and themes of this set of activities (as derived from informants' comments—Part 2 will provide the narration that led to those conclusions), it is now possible to map out the major identifying and unifying factors of this genre. The four primary characteristics that were used to define this genre in chapter 1 serve as useful summaries of the more complex assessment of the genre's identifying features as identified in chapter 3. For example, as noted earlier, the characteristic of Chain Awareness involves the generic features of Theme, Function, and Temporality. In order to effectively map out both the summary and the expanded assessment, the charting of the genre will require both definitional schemes, even though there is acknowledged overlap.

The labels used in the following taxonomy are abbreviations (noted below) of the necessary components from the previous two chapters, summarized here:

Serial Collaborative Form (SCF): Any tradition to be included in the genre of serial collaboration will follow the pattern of behavior described by the primary characteristics of Contact, Contribution, and Community: that through physical movement in the landscape, people come into contact with objects to which they will contribute in some way and then set up properly for the next participant.

Content (C): While the specific content for any given serial collaborative activity will be different, there is a general requirement that there be a physical object involved. Any tradition that exhibits the form described above will not be classifiable as serial collaboration if there is not an object at the center of the pattern.

Performance Context (PC): For inclusion in the genre of serial collaboration, an activity must take place “out in the world,” in a public, or semi-public place. It can occur in urban, suburban, rural, or natural landscapes, but it cannot take place solely within private homes or other locations that are accessible to only a select, predetermined, or especially limited group of people. Participation is open to anyone who discovers the tradition, whether it be through formal or informal sources, and is limited only by mobility and interest in the consistent Themes and Functions of this genre. As has been noted, person-to-person interaction is almost entirely indirect and mediated through the object.

Multi-Temporality (MT): As exemplified in the characteristic of Chain Awareness, any instance of serial collaboration will be, simultaneously, communicating about the past, the present, and the future in relation to the content (the object) in question.

Functions (F): There are several consistently identified functions of this genre, as noted in the previous chapter, that contribute to an overall understanding of the tradition:

-Space and Place (SP): This refers to the function of serial collaborative activities to make the shared object into a portable placeholder for a distanced locality.

-Lasting Connection (LC): This refers to the function of serial collaborative activities to link or connect people who are far away from each other.

-Globalization (G): This refers to the function of serial collaboration to cross geographical distances, whether by moving the object through space or by bring dispersed people to a single location.

-Ostension and Narration (ON): This refers to the function of serial collaboration to allow

participants to enact and physically experience the major themes (summarized below) of the genre.

Themes (T): There are several themes, issues, or underlying ethics that are indicative of the genre of serial collaboration:

-Tangible Virtuality (TV): There is a theme of mediating virtual relationships present in serial collaboration, due to the insertion of a tangible object into an otherwise virtual connection between two people.

-Transmission Networks and Serendipity (TNS): There is a general theme of serendipitous connection between like-minded strangers at the heart of serial collaborative activities.

-Anti-Commercialism and Recycling Ethic (ACR): There is a theme of anti-commercialism, the promotion of egalitarian access to goods, a presentation of good faith in the honesty reliability of strangers, and an appreciation for recycling at work in serial collaboration.

These six features and seven sub-features define the genre of serial collaboration. While all seven of the sub-themes and sub-functions may not be present in every instance of serial collaboration, any activity that does not evince *any* of them for participants will not be classifiable as serial collaboration. While the themes and functions listed above may be subjective, they are at the root of most participants' emic connection of the varied activities within the genre, and are more commonly used as a connecting factor between two instances of serial collaboration than are the pattern of behavior or the content, as will be shown in Part 2.

Combined with the four primary characteristics of the genre, which serve as a successful summary mainly because they tie the more objective generic features (form, content, context, and temporality) to the more subjective or representational ones (the various themes and functions that provide meaning to the other features), and with the secondary characteristics (which provide much of the opportunity for the themes and functions to emerge), these generic features encompass the entirety of the genre of serial collaboration.

The following charts serve as a visual representation of how the various individual activities included in this dissertation relate to each other and to the overall understanding of serial collaboration as an abstracted concept. The list of individual activities I present here (and elaborate on in Part 2) is drawn from the listing of all of the activities that informants presented to me as “the same thing” in interviews, surveys, and casual discussions about the subject. The only obvious distinction that was handed to me was the separation between the two types, A and B, though even that was rarely articulated by participants. These charts, which note both the form and the cultural significance of the activities (both of which are used by participants as the reasons for linking different activities as the “same things”), do not distinguish hierarchically between the various generic features of the tradition mainly because my informants did not. There may at first seem to be a lack of rhyme and reason to the information presented here, as two different activities may be either included as or excluded from serial collaboration as a genre based on differing qualities, but the ability to visually render the highly complex relationships here is valuable and illuminating.

The first two charts represent the traditions that fit within the boundaries of the genre; the following two charts represent the traditions discussed in this dissertation as being related to serial collaboration but not actually of the same genre. It is interesting to note the similarities

and differences between these activities and actual serial collaboration. Often the main determining factor is in the “Chain Awareness” or the “Content”; with many of these not-quite-SCC activities, there is simply not a chain of more than two people to be aware of, or there is not an equally shared tangible object. While some informants included these activities as “the same thing” as the other instances of serial collaboration (hence their consideration here), the data I gathered in total accurately reflects the reality quite well; most people seem to be in agreement that certain factors disqualify certain activities, even when they can see the similarities.

With regard to the logic of the graph, the presence of a plus or minus in the boxes reflects that a particular activity either does or does not, respectively, exhibit that feature of the genre. An “x” in the box indicates that for that given activity, the data collected either was not enough to determine the presence or absence of the correlating feature (or revealed an inconsistent relationship), or was simply not applicable to that feature. Once the framework has been identified, the following two chapters will present and elaborate upon the ethnographic materials from which the preceding argument was constructed.

Taxonomy of the Primary and Secondary Characteristics – Serial Collaborative Activities

	Primary Characteristics				Secondary Characteristics		
	Contact	Contribution	Connection	Chain Awareness	Trackable	Technological	Personalizable
BookCrossing	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Where's George	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Flat Stanley	+	+	+	+	+	x	+
Photo Tag	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Travel Mascots	+	+	+	+	x	x	+
Travel Bugs	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Roaming Gnomes	+	+	+	+	+	+	x
Friendship Bread	+	+	+	+	-	-	+
1000 Journals	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Wrap Sacks	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Message in a Barrel	+	+	+	+	-	-	x
Geocaching	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Letterboxing	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Panty and Bead Trees	+	+	+	+	-	-	-
Rock Stacks	+	+	+	+	-	-	-

Taxonomy of the Identifying Generic Features – Serial Collaborative Activities

	SCF	C	PC	MT	F-SP	F-LC	F-G	F-ON	T-TV	T-TNS	T-ACR
BookCrossing	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Where's George	+	+	+	+	x	+	+	+	+	+	-
Flat Stanley	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	x
Photo Tag	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Travel Mascots	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	x	x	x
Travel Bugs	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Roaming Gnomes	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	x	x
Friendship Bread	+	+	x	+	x	+	+	+	+	x	+
1000 Journals	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Wrap Sacks	+	+	x	+	+	+	+	+	x	+	+
Message in a Barrel	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Geocaching	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Letterboxing	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Panty and Bead Trees	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	x
Rock Stacks	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

Key:

SCF Serial Collaborative Form
 C Content
 PC Performance Context
 MT Multi-Temporality

F-SP Function – Space and Place
 F-LC Function – Lasting Connection
 F-G Function – Globalization
 F-ON Function – Ostension and Narration

T-TV Theme – Tangible Virtuality
 T-TNS Theme – Transmission Networks and Serendipity
 T-ACR Theme – Anti-Commercialism and Recycling Ethic

Taxonomy of the Primary and Secondary Characteristics – Related Activities

	Primary Characteristics				Secondary Characteristics		
	Contact	Contribution	Connection	Chain Awareness	Trackable	Technological	Personalizable
Passarounds	+	+	+	-	+	-	+
Spontaneous Shrines	+	+	+	+	-	-	+
PostSecret	-	+	x	-	+	+	+
FOUND Magazine	+	+	+	-	-	+	+
Found Cameras	+	+	+	-	+	+	+
Mail Art	+	+	+	-	+	-	+

Taxonomy of the Identifying Generic Features – Related Activities

	SCF	C	PC	MT	F-SP	F-LC	F-G	F-ON	T-TV	T-TNS	T-ACR
Passarounds	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-
Spontaneous Shrines	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	-	-	-
PostSecret	-	+	-	-	-	x	-	+	-	+	+
FOUND Magazine	-	+	+	-	-	+	-	+	-	+	+
Found Cameras	-	+	+	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-
Mail Art	-	+	-	+	x	+	+	+	+	-	+

Key:

SCF Serial Collaborative Form
 C Content
 PC Performance Context
 MT Multi-Temporality

F-SP Function – Space and Place
 F-LC Function – Lasting Connection
 F-G Function – Globalization
 F-ON Function – Ostension and Narration

T-TV Theme – Tangible Virtuality
 T-TNS Theme – Transmission Networks and Serendipity
 T-ACR Theme – Anti-Commercialism and Recycling Ethic

PART II

Research and Methodology

In order to gather the information necessary to determine the breakdown of the features of this genre, I relied upon two main sources: popular press articles, which have been the predominant form of published material on the topic of serial collaboration, and my own ethnographic surveys and interviews, which I conducted between 2005 and 2008 (a full listing of the survey questions used can be found in Appendix I). Due to the nature of the communities being considered (geographically dispersed, collaborating serially rather than together all at once), most of my primary research was conducted in online surveys and via observation of websites and online forums. This, of course, alters of the work of the ethnographer, as the elements common to face-to-face interview and observation situations are no longer present. As much as was feasible, I attempted to create a genuine interview atmosphere with my informants. I tried to introduce myself and my project a bit before presenting the links to my surveys, establishing a rapport in the forums while responses were coming in; I observed and acknowledged the activity levels and interests of the people in the forums where I was posting; I used open-ended questions in my surveys, encouraging respondents to be as descriptive and conversational as possible while striving to be as personable and conversation as possible myself; and I made it clear that I was open to follow up questions and emails at any time. One unexpected benefit of this form of fieldwork was that the populations I was questioning were mainly groups of people who interacted with each other predominantly (if at all) in an online context as well. While on an individual level all my informants interacted with their chain objects IRL, so to speak, any interaction they had with each other, and any chance they had to

check in on their object to even become aware of each other much less communicate directly, took place via the Internet. Thus, my informants were speaking to me in a format that was familiar to them in connection with the topics I was asking about.

I utilized a popular Internet program called Survey Monkey (www.SurveyMonkey.com) to design and analyze my surveys and responses. Survey Monkey allows those users with a professional membership (which I have) to design complex surveys using a wide variety of tools—multiple choice questions (with setting for single responses or multiple responses and fill-in-the-blank “other” responses), rating-scale responses, open-ended essay questions, demographic information—and then to filter, graph, export, and compare the results. I was able to determine the gender, ethnicity, and nationality of my informants in revealing percentages, and while there were certain demographics I did not ask about—occupation and income, for example—the program’s filters allowed me to determine when such issues arose in the responses.¹ The data filters also enabled me to search with ease through my sometimes-long responses for other consistently reappearing concepts and ideas. The use of Survey Monkey provided me with a basic but professional visual template for my surveys, which put my informants at ease and allowed me to offer user-friendly features such as button-click responses and automatic submission, so that informants would not have to type out all answers nor send me personal emails. For every survey created on Survey Monkey, a unique web address is created, so that when informant click on the link, they are taken directly to the welcome page of my survey rather than having to navigate or log-in to the main Survey Monkey website. Survey Monkey has been used by countless professionals and business—including Wells Fargo, Toyota, Campbell Soup, XM Radio, and the American Folklore Society—and is, in my opinion, a very reliable, useful tool.

While collecting folklore—a cultural production that has long been associated with “oral” tradition—over the Internet, I was intrigued to find that many people (especially Internet savvy types, which many serial collaboration advocates are) consider typing to be as natural an informal, person-to-person communicative method as speaking. Just as with speech, I received many “vernacular” responses—lots of slang, informal typing skills (lack of capitalization and punctuation), and Internet abbreviations (some particular to the activity, some general to online communication). As Elizabeth Tucker notes in her book *Campus Legends* (2005), collecting folklore online is not only a growing trend with which folklorists must cope, but it can provide opportunities that traditional recording methods cannot, such as a new sort of ethnopoetics. Tucker uses an example from a Binghamton University student of collecting a legend during an Instant Messenger chat session. She relays how the conversation appeared on the screen:

butterflygirl947 (12:55:13 AM): yeah I have heard some

butterflygirl947 (12:55:16 AM): about a girls' campus

butterflygirl947 (12:55:19 AM): something about a girls' dorm being burnt down a long time ago

butterflygirl947 (12:56:25 AM): when they used lamps for light

butterflygirl947 (12:56:32 AM): and she was making chocolate with a burner thing

butterflygirl947 (12:56:44 AM): or something

matrix72 (12:56:48 AM): cool

Tucker then goes on to show how, when the usernames and timestamps are removed, the breaks that the informant naturally or instinctively put into her own narrative render a sort of poetic

form to her story, similarly to how voice inflection, pauses, and tone might shape the narrative when speaking:

yeah I have heard some
about a girls' campus
something about a girls' dorm being burnt down a long time ago
when they used lamps for light
and she was making chocolate with a burner thing
oil lamp
or something
(cool)
and it burnt down and she was killed
and now she haunts the girls' dorms
and she appears in the girls' rooms and bathrooms
and sometimes people hear screaming
(what school is this?)
and there is this door that looks like it has a face in the woodwork
(that's creepy)
and it keeps coming back (20-21)

Tucker notes how

Short, rhythmic lines tell the story in a clear, straightforward way. Six lines in a row begin with the word “and,” which provides a smooth flow. The final line, “and it keeps coming back,” marks the end of the story and the beginning of other possible legends. (21)

Because of the unique form of expression that people use when typing informally, I have left many “errors” in the segments of interview and survey responses that I include in the following section. The natural flow of the informants’ words—which, just as with speech, can reveal if they were excited, bored, attentive, or rushed—should stand out.

An interesting challenge I encountered collecting online, and one that is also common to a face-to-face situation, was the fact that in many cases, I myself was not a member of the online community I was hoping to question. This occasionally led to hesitancy on the part of some potential respondents.² For the resolution of these instances, I can only offer my most heartfelt thanks to various long-time forum posters who made supportive posts on my behalf, encouraging their peers to help out a person who was taking “official” interest in their mutually-loved hobby. These people possessed an authority within their community that I did not, and their advocacy encouraged the participation of others whom I alone would never have been able to sway. I was quite moved by the many supportive responses I received;³ I never anticipated the enthusiasm my surveys generated. This enthusiasm, in many case studies, resulted in excellent return numbers for my surveys. For my BookCrossing survey, I received 522 responses from around the world (only half were from North America) in only a few weeks. It also led to many long, thoughtful responses to my questions. There were certainly a few succinct responses, but many of my informants seem happy to go on at length about their activities.⁴ This indicated to me that I was not necessarily missing out on a greater depth of response that some might feel face-to-face

interviewing might elicit. And in any case, if my informants speak to each other at all about the subject I was asking them about, they do it in the exact format in which they were responding to me, so I am hopeful that my data is not only satisfactory but perhaps also better than it would have been if I had attempted to take people outside of the contexts in which they typically communicate on these matters.

In some instances, especially with some non-technologically trackable versions, I was able to conduct one-on-one, in-depth interviews. In these cases, I relied on people I could find in person as well as people I could track down via the Internet.⁵ This led to a somewhat lopsided presentation of certain traditions (for some I have numerous brief survey data and for others I have only a few in-depth responses), but throughout, the entirety of each experience is reflected as fully as possible based on the information available to me from each unique research situation.

¹ These additional demographics are undoubtedly relevant to any in-depth study of a given example of serial collaboration. The issue of socio-economic status alone, which affects such aspects of participation as computer ownership, expendable income, and participation in commerce, would provide an intriguing comparison among the different activities as well as additional interpretive information about a single activity. I hope that future, in-depth ethnographic work with these individual activities will take such issues into consideration.

² Interestingly, the way in which I posted my surveys played a roll in this. My first attempt to post a link to a survey in an online forum was met with removal of my post by the official moderator of the forum. Several people had already taken my survey, and their comments about it (about having completed it, that is; their responses to the survey weren't visible in the forums) were still visible to other forum visitors. The removal of my post created suspicion; luckily, I had obtained permission for the post from the site's owner and, while that clearly hadn't been explained to the forum moderator, it was sufficient to get participants to consider my survey again.

³ And by the number of requests I received for copies of the dissertation once it's completed!

⁴ In the spirit of full disclosure, I should note that not everyone was wholeheartedly supportive. In the "do you have anything to add?" section of one survey I received the following response:

“This is a poorly designed survey. Too many questions combined under one number, so you'll have a hard time distinguishing the answers when you get them. I wish you luck!” While my attempt to generate natural-sounding, qualitative responses clearly didn't sit well with this respondent, I do take comfort in the good wishes offered at the end.

⁵ Even with chain objects that don't get tracked online—such as rock stacks—there is enough of a population on the Internet who post descriptions of their travels and trips that I was able to locate people who made informal commentaries (in blogs, travel journals, etc.) about the objects.

Chapter 5: Case Studies of Type A

BookCrossing

As noted in chapter one, a particularly fast-growing example of serial collaboration is the practice of BookCrossing (entered into the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* in 2004: “n. the practice of leaving a book in a public place to be picked up and read by others, who then do likewise”). BookCrossing was a common, non-technologically mediated practice before the Internet—and still is. Many travelers leave their books in hostel rooms, on trains, or on park benches. Sometimes people inscribe their name and home location in the book, along with a note encouraging other readers to do the same so that the chain of temporary owners would be documented. The practice of BookCrossing—registering a book with the BookCrossing website, putting its serial number and a note inside it, and leaving it for others to find and read—is simply a modern version of the same custom. The website, which encourages people to “release their books into the wild,” allows new owners to enter a book’s serial number in order to discover the chain of previous readers. Once a book’s serial number is tied to a user’s account, that user can continue to track the book after passing it on to the next person. BookCrossing labels can be homemade, and while many participants use the ones offered on the website, those “official” labels are often also designed by members.

The BookCrossing website was launched on April 17th, 2001, by software developer Ron Hornbaker. He found his inspiration, as is common, in other manifestations of serial collaboration:

We've always liked sites like WheresGeorge.com (which tracks U.S. currency by serial number) and PhotoTag.org (which releases disposable cameras then tracks their whereabouts and displays the pictures taken along the way) and GeoCaching.com (where you can stash and search for items with GPS technology), and so we thought to ourselves, "okay, what's something else that people would have fun releasing and then tracking?" (BookCrossing.com)

As the history section of the BookCrossing website explains, inspiration hit quickly:

A few minutes later, after a glance at his full bookshelf, the idea of tracking books occurred to him. After two hours of research on the Internet, Ron realized, to his surprise, that nothing like BookCrossing had been done on any significant scale. And so they went to work. By 3 A.M. that night, they had decided on the name (zero hits for "bookcrossing" on Google), registered the domain, and Kaori had sketched the running book logo on a crossing sign. The rest was merely execution. (BookCrossing.com)

ЗДРАВСТВУЙТЕ!



Дорогой человек!

Вы нашли необычную книгу!
Она являлась частью мировой
библиотеки Bookcrossing!

Люди по всему миру оставляют свои книги в общественных местах, чтобы и другие, совсем незнакомые им до этого люди, смогли их тоже прочитать!
Так мы освобождаем книги!
Если Вы сейчас читаете это послание, пожалуйста, зайдите на сайт

www.bookcrossing.ru

и расскажите, когда и где вы нашли эту книгу, поделитесь своими впечатлениями.
Всем ее предыдущим обладателям будет очень важно узнать, что отпущенная ими на свободу книга не пропала зря и попала в хорошие руки!

код этой книги:



Figure 4.1. A Russian book label, featuring the BookCrossing logo.

The idea quickly became popular, as people recognized the pattern and appreciated the anti-commercialistic aspects of trading books. As of August 2007, BookCrossing had over 570,000 members and over 4 million books registered.

Many comparisons have been made between serial collaborative activities and the “message in a bottle” idea, and BookCrossing is no exception: “It’s like the web version of the old ‘message in a bottle game’ that kids often play, where they’ll put a note in a bottle and chuck it in the ocean with the hopes that someone far away finds it and responds” (The Bugel: 1). While encouraging reading is certainly one goal of BookCrossing, there are a number of other motivations that the “message in a bottle” nature of the activity speaks to. In the summer of 2005 I conducted a survey with BookCrossing members. The survey had 522 respondents,¹ and there were a number of commonalities among the responses. When asked what their favorite aspect of the BookCrossing experience is, the respondents tended to focus on sharing,

connecting, giving up material possessions, and covering distances. Some were succinct; one respondent simply replied, "The 'message in a bottle' aspect." Others, however, explored their motivations more deeply:

I like reading caught stories and hearing about the unique finds, people, and places BCers experience. One in particular (releasing books in the wilds of Scotland) has inspired me to travel there. BookCrossing is part charity part self-gratification so I think it meets multiple needs (at a very subconscious level) while giving those of us who love books a creative way to explore books and relationships with other people.

The sense of community, the sharing and caring nature of the other BookCrossers, involvement with books, encouraging generosity all appeal to me.

I used to love to find books in hostels or hotels and take them and then "release" them somewhere else, or to leave a used book I got somewhere for people. With bookcrossing, this is now a fun ritual or tradition and sometimes I get to see where one of these books ends up. I always wondered about previous books I "released" before I discovered bookcrossing. . . . I love the feeling of community that I get from dropping by the site, reading the forums and trading books with other bookcrossers. The community spirit I think keeps this so popular. It's a community based on sharing and charity and generosity and it makes us all feel good in a time where the media and government focuses on bad news and problems all the time.

It's kinda like a message in a bottle—you put it out there not knowing who will find it and it's neat to chart the book's progress and travels. Love the "serendipity" of it all! Plus I love to read.

First, I love books. Second, I love treasure hunts (such as geocaching) and surprises. I also love groups that are multicultural and global. I think this is popular because loving books can be such a solitary affair, especially for shy people who love books. This is an easy way for shy types to be part of a community.

Serendipity :-). I just love leaving a book and watching people to pick it up, leafing through it, putting it down, picking it up again... (and sometimes taking it with them). I have come across dozens of books I otherwise would never have heard of, and I even get the chance of reading books that are not available in my county. True, I could order them online, but I am very much a library person, so BC is perfect for that (read and release/send on). I have the chance of connecting to people from all around the world.

The fact that the books are deliberately left or sent to strangers, at times foreigners, to read the books and keep them moving is the most interesting part of it, as I see it. The concept of passing books is not new to me (though I personally am more attached to my books) I know several people that does [*sic*] "bookcrossing" although they are not members of the website (they even do not have internet access at all!). I think that BookCrossing has become popular because it gives people a new, broader perspective of a practice that, after all, it is

not so uncommon, in the case of people that already passes books on others, and in the case of the ones who are new to the concept, introduces a novel way to interact with people, mostly anonymously but not impersonally.

I like the concept of spreading literature. My love of books, stories, and sharing them with people. I love the spontaneity of Bookcrossing. It is popular because it is a little on the adventurous side, but still safe.

I like the idea of sharing books I have enjoyed and enabling unknown people to find them. A bit of a cliché, but there is a good deal of the old message in a bottle syndrome. I like the idea of a community based on the enjoyment of reading. My favourite aspect is sharing books and local activities and meeting people who I would not come across in my normal daily life. I think Bookcrossing is popular because of its apparent randomness - imagine getting messages from complete strangers who have found a book.

I say first to newbies, "Basically, it's a way of connecting people who have held the same book in their hands." That's what I adore about BX. It's a "time-delayed virtual book club," or at least it has that potential.

I think BXing is appealing to me because I like the idea of giving something away and possibly finding out what happened to it. I like the sense of "connectivity" BXing provides.

I think the whole concept is just wonderful. For me, the biggest appeal is probably being a part of a book-loving global community. Curiosity, too: I like to follow the travels of my books and read other people's comments on them.

It should be noted that I did not in any way prompt people to use certain phrases; the recurrence of the phrase “message in a bottle” and of the word “serendipity” indicate that these are significant concepts to participants. “Treasure hunt” is also a common connection. Ideas of a global community (and Cathy Preston’s “community of strangers”) also come into play. The “small world” idea is also present:

For [some BookCrossers], the process makes the world seem smaller. "I get a kick out of seeing one of my books traveling to some far-off country and being enjoyed by somebody I would never have met in a million years," says Steven Lenoff, a 45-year-old computer-security specialist from Huntington Beach, Calif. (Saranow 2002)

In this one example we see an expression of almost all of the themes and functions of serial collaboration.

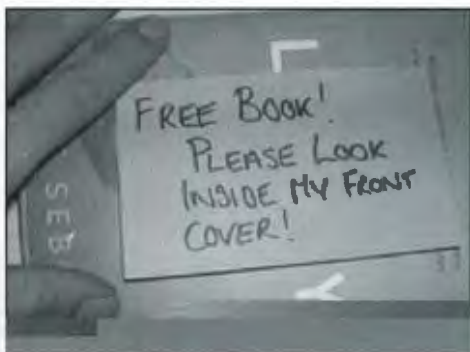


Figure 4.2. A homemade book label



Figure 4.3. An “official” label from BookCrossing.com



Figure 4.4. A homemade BookCrossing ID label from Italy

Where's George / Where's Willy

The idea of tracking an object with a number or label isn't new; it has simply been enhanced by the ease of the Internet. People have long marked paper currency² or labeled it with their home addresses, for example, requesting postcards from everyone who received that bill through regular monetary transactions. Now, people can use the currency's serial number to

track the life story of a bill over the net through websites such as WheresGeorge.com or WheresWilly.com (the Canadian version of Where's George).³ A 2002 *Washington Post* article⁴ touched on several serial collaborative aspects of Where's George when it summed up the appeal: "Anyone who's ever been fascinated by chain letters can appreciate this: a Web site that makes it possible to track currency as it passes from stranger to stranger, building links that can stretch across the country" (Saranow 2002).

Where's George has users register bills they've found and tell how the bill is faring or how they received it, filling in the gaps of the bill's life story to explain its journey from place to place. Before sending the bill back into circulation, the user marks it with the web address, either by hand or with a stamp, as a cue to future participants. As of 2002, there were about 24 million bills registered with the website, and about 1.5 million registered users.

WheresGeorge.com began in 1998, created by Hank Eskin, a web consultant from Massachusetts. He was inspired by a dollar bill he received that contained a chain letter message written around the border of the bill: "'Write this message on 10 other dollar bills and good luck will come to you.' Something like that" (Baird A1).

"I looked at it and thought, where did that message come from and how did it get to me?" recalls Mr. Eskin, who is 38. Realizing that the serial numbers on dollar bills make it possible to trace their movements—and looking for a project to teach him programming skills—he put together Where's George. (Saranow 2002)

Where's Willy was put together in 2001, for Canadians wanting to get in on the fun.

Unlike BookCrossing, there are elements to Where's George that make it more of a game than simply a pastime. The website keeps track of how many miles bills have traveled and how often people have their registered bills picked up. These statistics lend a definite air of competition to the activity, as two "Georgers" explain:

What keeps me playing is the thought of getting into the top ranks of the game in my state. Right now, I'm in the mid-30's. I'd like to get up into the Top 25, or so, but I'd have to commit to more playing time than I am right now.

I like seeing where my bills go. I think I stay involved because I am somewhat competitive and I like racking up new states, counties, countries, and higher George score and hit rates.

The survey I conducted with Where's George and Where's Willy participants had a smaller response group than the BookCrossing survey did, and the majority of respondents were fairly earnest participants,⁵ as evidenced by the numerous claims of long term participation and fact that the majority of them owned and used "official" Where's George stamps as well as labeling bills by hand. This may also be why many of the respondents described attending gatherings and meeting up in person—a wider range of survey respondents with differing levels of participation might have led to different responses to these questions.⁶

Hobbies such as coin collecting and geography came up in response to survey questions about what keeps participants active, but there were similarities to the BookCrossing responses, too:

I've always been fascinated by money and its travels, I tried painting nickels and quarters in my youth to see if I'd get them back. I find the experience not unlike tossing a bottle in the ocean...not all will be found, but those that are found can have very interesting stories.

I just think it's really cool to see where your money goes after you spend it. people at work think you're nuts until you send them a link that shows a bill they gave you went to Puerto Rico! There's also a great community of Georgers who are helpful with WG tips and friendly to chat with.

Not knowing where a bill will show up again, I can spend a bill at the corner gas station and have it show up across town in an hour or two, or across the country a few weeks latter.

I like seeing where the bills go and the idea that somebody entering a bill is somehow connected with the people entering it before and after him/her. I especially like seeing bills travel to new counties and countries that I have never seen personally and find it interesting to explore how they got there.

Since I don't travel much, my bills do the traveling for me. I love to read about the cities and states, and countries where my bills go. It's a learning experience about places I will probably never visit.

I like the geography/map angle the most. Getting hits in new places is always exciting. I think it appeals to people for a lot of different reasons. Some are interested in currency, some geography, some statistics. It satisfies a lot of

different needs in the many users My favorite aspect is the community of people that has evolved from the forums.

Appeal: It's "funky"; eclectic, and has a "community" feel to it. Interested & involved? Waiting for the next hit... can't wait to see where it's from.

The primary appeal is an almost child-like wonder at how these pieces of cloth manage to find their way all over the World. I bill that I spent at a local mom 'n' pop store turns up in Estonia three years later...a bill that I throw into the church collection ends up being "hit" 10-times over the next two years (in six States) and is last reported on an Indian Reservation in New Mexico. It's just the (almost) sheer serendipity of this crazy 'game' that has me and, I'm sure, many others totally hooked (addicted is an apt description).

If I can't go to a place at least my money can.

Here again we see the appeal of a community built around a shared object, the serendipitous "message in a bottle," concept, and the idea of the chain object functioning as an avatar of sorts (one person even felt that "this is a vicarious way of traveling," another said it was a "vicarious vacation," and one reporter described the bills as "surrogates" for the Georgers (Saranow 2002)).

Lay theories of automigration are also popular with Where's George participants:

The idea that the dollar I spend is gonna keep rattling around for years and I will hear from it every once in a while.

I like the thought of my bills traveling all over the place. I really enjoy it when one lands in some tiny little town somewhere.

It's fun to see where my money has traveled after it slips through my fingers.

I'm intrigued most by seeing where my bills will travel to next and at what rate.

This humanization of the objects is subtle (and most likely unconscious), but it stands in contrast to other responses that emphasized the action of other individuals in other places logging the bills; there were many responses that clearly empowered the bills themselves with the will or desire to travel.

Well-circulated bills that have been registered with the site have received such comments as "Found on the floor at the Penthouse Key Club," or "I work at Sonic and received it as a tip. It's in pretty good condition" and some have traveled thousands of miles. As with BookCrossing books, participants' comments about the condition of the bills and their time with it make for an ongoing narrative that is ostensibly joined by each new chain member. As one newspaper article puts it:

Each entry tells a story.

Ducharme tagged one \$100 bill which was later won at a casino by a man who said he was going to take his wife out for dinner. The next entry was from an exotic dancer who had received the bill as a tip.

"I'm not sure—did the guy go to the strip club instead of going to dinner? Either that, or a couple of entries got skipped." (Baird A2)

There is a clear distinction between those who see themselves as Where's George initiators and those who simply log on to note that they've found a bill that someone else labeled. The self-identified "Georgers" are those who initiate the chains.



Figure 4.5. Two Where's George bills, one featuring a purchased stamp, and one featuring a handwritten note.

GeoCoins are a similar idea, but they do not have value as actual currency. Usually local to a particular city, region, or area, GeoCoins are imprinted with serial numbers to enable tracking. Lacking monetary value, the emphasis on the process of SCC is heightened in GeoCoins; this is not a side-project piggybacked on normal monetary transactions. GeoCoins are common additions to GeoCaches (please see chapter 5 for an explanation of GeoCaching), but interestingly, Where's George bills—which, since they have value, will circulate anyway—are discouraged from inclusion in caches, because it can inflate the basic travel pattern the bill

would otherwise have taken through normal spending routes. This tricky relationship aside for the moment, GeoCaching was the most common other form of SCC that participants noted: 10% said they also were GeoCachers, and just over 5% specifically mentioned BookCrossing.



Figure 4.6. GeoCoins from Canada



Figure 4.7. A GeoCoin from Germany

Roaming Gnomes

One of the most recognizable traveling objects is the “roaming gnome,” despite the fact that it differs somewhat from the previous two examples of serial collaboration. Whether defined as a traditional prank, a contemporary legend, an underground movement, or a game, many people are familiar with some kind of story about a garden gnome that suddenly goes

missing, only to return sometime later with a tan and a suitcase, and perhaps some pictures of the trip he took while he was away. The garden gnome began its life as early as the fifteenth century, when statues of gnomes and dwarves were common in German and Italian gardens, but proliferated in English gardens in the mid nineteenth century (Thomas 2003: 87). Jeannie Thomas notes that starting in the 1880s, advertising helped create demand for garden gnomes, and vast diversity in form grew from there:

Catalogs from the early twentieth century depict clay gnomes that, true to their folkloric heritage, are depicted as miners, complete with lanterns and pickaxes. Gnomes are now sculpted accompanied by wheelbarrows, watering cans, and flowerpots. In addition, there are fishing gnomes, gnomes who play cards on toadstools, and even gnome orchestras. (Thomas 2003: 87)

As noted in Chapter 2, Australian folklorist David S. Hulst made the first academic mention of the “roaming gnome” phenomenon in 1988, describing it as an interesting intersection of popular culture and folklore. While not many scholars have followed his lead (for exceptions, see Thomas 2003 and Gadbois 2001), the traveling gnome has remained prevalent in popular culture and oral tradition. Traveling gnomes have been featured in several major motion pictures (most notably 2001’s *Amelie*), popular books (such as Sheila Radley’s 1986 *Fate Worse Than Death*), television shows (including a several-year run on Britain’s *Coronation Street*), and advertisements—most notably, the recent Travelocity commercials.⁷ Several satirical underground movements have also cropped up around roaming gnomes, such as the Gnome Liberation Group and the French *Front de Liberation des Nains de Jardins*.

Columnist Dale Ward relates a typical traveling gnome account:

One August day in 2002 Barbara Austin came home from work and found one of her three gnomes missing from her North Carolina front yard. In his place was a plastic bag with a terse note inside that said:

“Gone travelin’. Back later.”

Not long after that that, Barbara received her first photos of “Gnome” traveling across the United States.

On a late summer morning, less than two months after he had left, Gnome was back in the yard, decorated with balloons. He had with him an amazing photo album of his travels and a map to show where he had been. The album contained photos from 28 states, Mexico and Canada. He had posed at national monuments, been to ballgames and visited with pets and various yard ornaments along the way. Gnome had taken a trip of over 11,000 miles, yet the identities of his traveling companions were never revealed. (2005: para.14–17)

A particularly memorable and recent instance of a traveling gnome involved a gnome belonging to Marianne Severson of Redmond, Washington. Her traveling gnome was widely reported in the news media due to an unexpected celebrity encounter:

The solid concrete gnome went on spring break with some local college students. This has become a popular prank. The boys swiped Marianne's gnome, documented their trip, then returned the gnome with the pictures.

She flips through a binder showing her gnome in the arms of a San Francisco street performer. Next, he was nestled between a Las Vegas Elvis and Marilyn Monroe. "There he is on Bing Crosby's star in Hollywood," she shows us. The binder also included a copy of a *People* magazine.

"That to me is the coup de grace," Marianne says. She flips it open and shows us that her gnome made it into the pages of the star-tracking mag. Marianne reads us the caption.

"'Simple Life' star Paris Hilton shows off two new friends. A palm sized pup and a very sleepy gnome." His abductors ran into Paris at a Hollywood gas station. They took pictures with her and so did paparazzi, who sold the picture to *People*. (KOMO 2005)

All of the markings of serial collaboration are evident in the practices and narratives of gnome-napping. The gnome-stealer (though people often use their own gnomes, too) passes the gnome from person to person or place to place, collecting photographic evidence of the gnome in as many locales as possible,⁸ often using the gnome as a representation of his or her own travels.⁹ The people who contribute to the gnome's journey or who appear in photographs with the gnome each interact with the object separately, but together are linked across space by the object. The Internet facilitates a greater level of awareness of the chain—the chance to observe or perhaps interact directly with other participants rather than simply assuming their presence. A quick review of roaming gnomes on the Internet illustrates the strength of the tradition, with whole web pages dedicated to individual travelers. Nigel the Gnome (www.NigelTheGnome.com) has pictures of himself in Washington D.C., London, Paris, and on the Appalachian Trail, and

Lawrence the Gnome (www.GnomeAlone.com) has photographic evidence of his travels to Barcelona, Rome, Sydney, Venice, and parts of Ireland.



Figure 4.8. Lawrence the gnome visiting the Statue of Liberty



Figure 4.9. Lawrence the gnome in Rome.



Figure 4.10. Nigel the gnome in Paris.

Travel Bugs

A complete list of all the roaming objects (gnomes included) documented on the Internet would be impossible—there are just too many of them, if we include roaming objects such as hiking boots, computer disks, house keys, key chains, beer bottles, hats, backpacks, figurines, patches, computer hard drives, action figures, notebooks, and stuffed animals. Necessity being the mother of invention, a clever device has surfaced in order to help people keep track of all their roaming possessions. A “Travel Bug” is a tag with a serial number on it that identifies the object and allows its chain of owners to track it as it travels around the world. Travel Bugs also have a message to finders on them: “I go from place to place, picking up stories along the way. Visit groundspeak.com to learn more about me and add your own!”

Travel Bugs can be attached to any object, providing even the most mass-manufactured item with a new, vernacular context. People often leave personal notes with their Travel Bugs as well, explaining the process in further detail. This enhances the original item-passing tradition by making it possible for people to leave the object in question unattended and yet remain sure that the next owners will know what to do.



Figure 4.11. A figurine of General Lee, with both a Travel Bug and a personal note attached.



Figure 4.12. A small duck, with a Travel Bug.



Figure 4.13. Winky the dinosaur, with a Travel Bug.



Figure 4.14. A shoehorn with a Travel Bug, showing that *anything* can become a chain object.

Flat Stanley

This idea of the object as avatar rises to the forefront of the theoretical underpinnings of serial collaboration when examining the extreme popularity of Flat Stanley projects among

elementary school children. Flat Stanley is a character from a children's book by Jeff Brown. In the story, Stanley gets flattened and discovers the joy of being mailed to new locations. The Flat Stanley project (www.FlatStanley.com), created by Dale Hubert, encourages teachers to use Stanley's love of travel to inspire their students. Hubert conceived of the idea when he was seeking a way to provide "authentic learning" experiences for his grade three class. As he explains the process:

The premise is very simple—students create a paper Flat Stanley (or Flat Lynne, Flat Henry... they can be either gender and any colour. In the flat world these things don't matter) and send it to someone on the list of participants or to a friend, a family member or some person of interest. The recipient treats the FS as a guest and takes it places and does things with it and writes in a journal. At the end of the visit the little flat guy is returned along with the completed journal. (Hubert 2006)

Often Stanleys are passed through a chain of people and not just places (though, like gnomes, Flat Stanleys may also have a single main "owner" and simply visit with others temporarily). The students receive pictures of and letters about their Stanleys from all over the world and learn about distant locales in a way that makes those places far more interesting and significant¹⁰ than does typical textbook studying. Dale Hubert reflects on the importance of Flat Stanley to students:

When you give a Flat Stanley [to someone], it's as if you both have a mutual friend and something in common. Furthermore, a paper Flat Stanley invites children to use a higher level of imagination in their communication. "My Flat

Stanley likes flat food so give him lots of pizza and pancakes. He's afraid of the dark so keep a night light on. His arm is torn. That's where my dog Wrinkles chewed on him." ... Students acquire new information from those with whom they exchange Flat Stanleys and, because it is in an authentic setting, it is more memorable. (Hubert 2006)

The children who make and send the Stanleys aren't the only ones who benefit from the connections this activity makes, however. As one Stanley tour guide reports:

My nephew sent his Flat Stanley with us on our honeymoon to Cancun, Mexico," said Jen Piccotti of Aliso Viejo. "We took Flat Stanley to a bullfight and at one point we heard someone yelling at us, 'Hey! Flat Stanley!' We looked over and found that another couple had a Flat Stanley from one of their nieces or nephews. We all took a photo together overlooking the arena. (Rivenburg A1)

Flat Stanley, in his many incarnations, has certainly become a world traveler. His photographic fame has spread quickly, thanks to a growing number of famous participants. As a *CNN.com* article explains, "The paper cutout started a buzz on February 27 [2005] when actor/director Clint Eastwood carried him along on the red carpet at the Oscars" (Patterson). He's been spotted not only with celebrities but also with politicians, with astronauts on space shuttles, in Antarctica, and in Tibet (not to mention in a countless number of everyday, familiar locations).¹¹



Figure 4.15. While Stanley is most often found in the hands of everyday people, he's received much press for his more famous associations.



Figure 4.16. Stanley with soldiers in Baghdad.



Figure 4.17. Stanley on Seymour Island, Antarctica.

Amish Friendship Bread

In general, most instances of serial collaborative creation involve appropriated inanimate objects that are passed through a chain of people. The tradition of making Amish Friendship Bread adds a new twist to the procedure: it is an edible chain object. I should note that this is very different from cases of *inedible* food items becoming chain objects, like the increasingly stale fruitcakes that are rumored to be passed, unsampled, around friend- and neighbor-groups during the holidays.

Amish Friendship Bread is a food item that is not only passed from person to person, but is maintained as a living organism in the process. The basic premise, according to one popular recipe, is this:

Amish friendship bread is a yeast-based sweet bread with a starter that is kept in a covered container at room temperature. The yeast lives off sugar, flour and milk in the starter. Every 10 days it is ready for dividing into three batches. Traditionally, one batch is baked; one is set aside for the next 10-day cycle; and one is passed along, with a sample of the finished product, to a friend. And so it goes, passed on from friend to friend in 10-day cycles.

So here we can see the primary characteristics of serial collaborative creation: the bread is passed from person to person, multiple creators are involved but each handles the bread individually, and the chain of owners (or in this case, bakers) is a significant aspect of the bread's meaning as a culturally expressive form.

The name "Friendship Bread" comes from the process of sharing the starter, and the subsequent creation of a community. This is an especially interesting type of folk group in light of Linda Keller Brown's and Kay Mussell's reminder that contemporary food researchers need to move beyond the idea of ethnic or regional groups as "the main locus of differentiated eating in the United States" and "explore other socially bounded lifestyle groups as well" (11). As for any regional or ethnic connection to Amish culture, I haven't been able to find one.¹² There is usually a perception of "old-fashionedness" that goes along with the recipe, though, and as one version, credited to Mrs. Norma Condon of Los Angeles, explains:

This is more than a recipe—it's a way of thinking. In our hi-tech world almost everything comes prepackaged and designed for instant gratification. So where does a recipe that takes ten days to make fit in? Maybe it's a touch stone to our past—to those days not so very long ago when everything we did took time and where a bread that took 10 days to make was not as extraordinary as it seems

today.

Stereotypes of the Amish culture as old-fashioned, slow, and averse to modern technology make it the perfect signifier for the qualities the bread-making custom is intended to promote. Some food researchers have postulated that most people in the industrialized West “know food as inert matter dissociated from its human producers and natural context” (Meigs 104). The stereotype of the Amish evokes the idea of a living “touchstone” to an idealized, simpler past that some recipes speak of, and is, as far as I can tell, the main reason the Amish have been referenced in the name.

Bread, by the way, is not the only food with which this process takes place. Any food that involves the fermentation of live cultures can be passed along as a “Friendship” food.¹³ Cheese, yoghurt, and kefir are popular choices; and I recently spoke with a wine maker who received his vinegar culture, to which he regularly adds his unfinished glasses of wine so as not to waste them, from a friend of a friend of the Jack London Ranch staff, which was the source of the original culture.

Amish Friendship Bread deviates from other examples of serial collaborative creation with regard to two main qualities: those of *multiplication* and *ingestion*. No other chain object is actually cultivated, not in a way that allows each member of the chain to retain a piece of the original object without the original object being eventually depleted. This is a result of *multiplication*. The living quality of the starter is significant, as it changes the idea of ownership to something more like parenthood. As Lynn Harris has noted,

passing on a family recipe, or lending a neighbor an egg, is one thing. But when you share, purchase, or make and feed your own starter, you’re handling a living being, a benevolent Tribble, a Chia Pet with a past. You are procreating, co-

parenting; you are recreating what is—almost literally—the mother of all bread recipes. (76)

This idea of “co-parenting” is not that far from many participants’ experiences. It is not uncommon to find chains of bread makers who have named their yeast cultures, giving them identities of their own as living creatures: Harold, Stanley,¹⁴ Jack, and Jill are a few I’ve come across. This can add to the potential burden some people feel at receiving such a gift. Food and nutrition specialist Julie Garden-Robinson observes that,

[A] starter needs to be fed on a regular basis to keep it active, so it’s kind of like having another child. Sensing another ‘mouth’ to feed, friends may run when they see you approaching with a cup of starter and some [Amish Friendship Bread] recipes.

Indeed, while the social chains created by Amish Friendship Bread have many positive connotations of sharing and nourishing, there is also, as with any type of chain tradition, the concurrent burden of keeping the tradition going. Length of the chain is a prominent feature of many Friendship Bread recipes, with some claiming to be over 150 years old. One recipe, designed to help would-be bakers start their own chain, opens with a hypothetical situation:

If you’ve ever been given Amish friendship bread starter, you know how fun it is to keep a batch on your counter, make bread and pass it on. And then start it over. And then make bread and pass it on. And then... After awhile, what do you do with it? Throw it away? Arrggh! (The guilt that ensues.) It’s as if you can almost see that sweet Amish wife in her little starched white cap wiping a tear on her little starched white apron. How long has the batch been going? A year? A decade? A century? Is the recipe even written down? Were you the very last

friend ever to receive a batch? And *you've* broken the circle of friendship? For shame. It's worse than not forwarding chain email.

So here we can see both the stereotype of the "sweet Amish wife in her little starched white cap and apron," and the time-honored tradition of guiltig your friends into finishing your projects for you.

The more interesting element to food examples of serial collaborative creation, though, is *ingestion*. No other example allows for the physical consumption of the chain object and the resulting commensality at a distance.

As noted in chapter 3, serial collaboration is similar in several ways to legend tripping; it is a performative way of experiencing a narrative (or an abstracted concept, such as fear, danger, or, in this case, friendship). While legend-tripping creates an experiential level for a narrative, serial collaborative creation creates an experiential level for a distanced relationship, providing a tangible, corporeal element. Adding actual ingestion on top of the already-experiential nature of the process, we find in the case of Amish Friendship Bread a far more significant level of performance and dramatization.

With Amish Friendship Bread, Frazer's principle of contagion in sympathetic magic, that things once in contact retain a permanent trace of that contact, is added to the homeopathic activity of eating the object of contagion. This double-level of sympathetic magic makes for a strong symbolic aspect of the tradition. Meigs (1997) has studied sympathetic magic with regard to food ingestion among the Hua people of Papua New Guinea. She notes that their understanding of *nu* or life-force allows for qualities of one person or object to be passed into food, and thus into anyone who eats that food. As examples, she show how young men risk dry,

ashy skin by eating food that has touched ashes, or how, more specific to the current topic, young men should not eat food cooked over a fire into which a menstruating woman has blown.

I would argue that Frazer's principle of contagion is a strong Western correlate to the concept of *nu*, and that the idea of deriving emotional strength or nourishment by consuming a symbolic representation of a social relationship is something that makes sense to many people. Mary Douglas, among others, has observed the significance of substances that pass through the boundaries of the human body (1966); there is an unavoidable intimacy involved. "Ownership" becomes much more serious: one is not just taking an object into his or her home but into his or her body. Following the principle of contagion, it becomes a synthesis of the various people involved in the food's chain of passage. It makes sense then, that the edible instances of SCC rarely extend beyond pre-established relationships. Whereas other chain objects—BookCrossing books, Travel Bugs, Where's George bills—create connections mostly between strangers, abstractly conceived connections that forge new pathways of relation, edible chain objects are used mostly to reinforce connections that have already been made. They may continue in a chain rather than a circle (once one has received the starter, one does not need it again), but they will often be passed only to someone that the giver knows personally.

Knowing that Western culture has a general distrust of food from unknown sources (non-commercial Halloween treats are a prime example), it is hard to imagine someone willingly taking and cultivating a yeast starter that they found abandoned on a park bench. In this sense, there is almost *too much* intimate experience in this form of serial collaboration for a meta-chain (a chain that exists purely for the sake of creating a chain) to occur. Mary Douglas notes that "if food is to be treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relationships being expressed" (1997: 36). The type of relationship enacted by Amish Friendship

Bread sharing patterns is far too specific and intimate to serve the abstract purposes of the more generalized connection between two people that typical chain objects form. While all instances of serial collaborative creation involve temporary ownership, the “lasting connection”—and the strength of that connection—is much stronger in instances such as Amish Friendship Bread, and is thus utilized in appropriately limited circumstances. It is interesting to note, however, that the “serendipity” factor is lessened here; since the initial encounter with the object in question is usually in the form of a hand-off from one person to another rather than an individual discovery, that theme, so prevalent in other examples, is much less prominent.

Other Examples and Related Activities

Though too small and numerous to list them all, there are many other examples of type A serial collaboration taking place around the world. There is the 1000 Journals project (www.1000journals.com): “an ongoing collaborative experiment attempting to follow 1000 journals throughout their travels. The goal is to provide a method for interaction and shared creativity among friends and strangers” (1000Journals). There is WrapSacks, in which gift bags are reused and tracked on their journeys.¹⁵ As the website explains about Michael Miner, the inventor of the sack:

Born in Ecuador of a German Mom and American Dad who met in Turkey, he was always curious about the connections between the diverse people of our planet—a curiosity he once tried to satisfy by bouncing around Europe for 8 years.

Naturally, he wondered how his Wrapsacks would bounce around. "Surely a Wrapsack could connect us all," he thought. If only its journey could be followed...

And that was the birth of Track-a-Sack, grounded in the theorem that we are all connected by 6 degrees of separation. (Wrapsacks.com)

Here we see the repetition of the "six degrees" theme, as well as the idea of a global community.

Another activity that definitely plays on the idea of a global community is enacted around the Post Office Barrel on Floreana Island in the Galapagos, Ecuador:

If you want to mail a letter on Floreana Island in the Galapagos Islands, you go to Post Office Bay and drop your letter in a large wooden barrel—no stamp necessary.

There's no official postal service. How it works is like this. Whoever wants to, sorts through the mail in the barrel, finds a piece of mail addressed to where they are going and takes it to deliver in person. (Pappajohn)

This people-powered global delivery system (which, according to legend, began with whaling ships in the 1700s) inspired Kyle MacDonald (of One Red Paperclip fame) to start the Message in a Barrel project, which involved standing in the street and asking passersby to write a postcard, address it to a friend, and give it to him, so he could take it to the Galapagos and put it in the mail barrel. In an email, Kyle explained to me that he was hoping to promote the mail barrel idea beyond the Galapagos setting. He also revealed his inspiration for the project in other versions of serial collaboration:

I'm sure you're familiar with bookcrossing, geocaching, mail art,¹⁶ Where's Willy?

and all sorts of stuff like that. I'm trying to turn Message in a Barrel into a similar concept. Over the coming months and years I will hold competitions between towns and cities around the world to decide where I will place one "official" Message in a Barrel in each country. You could say it's like franchising the Post Office Barrel, except the project will not be for profit. Fun only.

Kyle's efforts, while placed on a backburner during the success of his paperclip project, have not been overlooked—he managed to get himself some camera time on NBC's *Today Show*, and Al Roker directed viewers to the project website. Kyle ended up taking 646 postcards to Floreana.¹⁷

There is also Photo Tag:

PhotoTag is a small photography project and an ad hoc community formed through the chance wanderings of transient disposable cameras. Periodically, a series of disposable cameras are labeled and released into the wild with instructions for unwary PhotoTaggers to take one picture and pass the camera on. Postage and a return address are included on the camera so that it may simply be dropped into the mail to get back home when all the film is used up.

(PhotoTag.org)

The idea of a distanced community, or a community of strangers (the website uses the term “ad hoc” community, emphasizing the singular purpose of the connections), linked through a shared object is evident here as well, as is a sense of automigration (in that the cameras make “chance wanderings”). The emic connection to other forms of serial collaboration arises in a later section of the site:

PhotoTag is something of a photographic exquisite corpse¹⁸ but is most closely related to Kevin Fox's Cameo project and Ron Hornbaker's BookCrossing.¹⁹

There seem to be a number of similar projects out there in the real world too. My cousin's daughter, who's a bit of a shutterbug herself, recently told me about a project she's doing where a stuffed animal is passed along with a small notebook attached. Folks that come across the doll make an entry in the notebook and send it on its way. (PhotoTag.org)

This description of the traveling stuffed animal is perhaps one of the most common manifestations of serial collaboration on a small scale. The popular tradition of “travel mascots” builds from the basic roaming gnome idea, and involves people taking objects with them on road trips or other journeys and documenting their trip with photos of the object in various places. Often these objects aren't trackable outside of the originator of the chain—they may appear on personal websites or in offline photo albums or scrapbooks—but such activities are astoundingly abundant. The above list of examples are a mere scratch on the surface of the rich accumulation of chain object traditions.

There is another wide range of activities that are not direct examples of serial collaboration but which have come up often enough in my ethnographic research that they bear mentioning. PostSecret (www.postsecret.com) “is an ongoing community art project where people mail in their secrets anonymously on one side of a homemade postcard.” The postcards are often artistic, and range from humorous to deeply personal.



Figure 4.18. Perhaps both humorous *and* personal.



Figure 4.19. Messages from PostSecret can deal with extremely serious issues.



Figure 4.20. In PostSecret, the idea of a “secret” is often treated in a confessional way.

The project began in 2004 with a message in a bottle type project by PostSecret’s creator Frank Warren. The project was called the “reluctant oracle,” and involved messages placed in bottles and released out in the world, to be found “serendipitously” by random people. Working with the major themes of serial collaboration, the reluctant oracle’s final message was, “You will find your answers in the secrets of strangers.” The PostSecret project began a week later. The idea has proven to be extremely popular; to date there are four official PostSecret books in publication.

FOUND magazine (www.foundmagazine.com) is another similar concept. As the website explains, “We collect found stuff: love letters, birthday cards, kids' homework, to-do lists, ticket stubs, poetry on napkins, doodles—anything that gives a glimpse into someone else's life. Anything goes.” All these things get printed in the magazine (available in both online and print formats). The idea came from a found note penned by an unknown (to the finders) woman to a man (whom she knew) whose car she discovered parked outside another woman's house. Davy Rothbart and Jason Bitner, the creators of *FOUND*, felt the note poignantly reflected the human condition (they felt it displayed “an amazing mixture of anger and hopefulness”); the site's readers feel that all the anonymous found messages in the magazine do the same.



Figure 4.21. The vitriol, combined with the plea of “page me later” in the post script to the note, make for a sad and very genuine presentation of emotions.

Another related idea is “Found Cameras and Orphan Pictures” (www.ifoundyourcamera.net). The site encourages people who have come across lost cameras or memory sticks to post the pictures online so that the original owners can reclaim them. The

result is an intriguing collection of random photographs, along with explanation from submitters about where the camera or memory card was found.



Figure 4.22. The caption reads: "We came across a small black digital camera while scrambling over the Te Paki sand dunes in the Northlands region of New Zealand. It seems like this fellow had his entire holiday on the camera, and what a trip it was! Locations photographed include New York, various places in Australia and places in New Zealand."

The Found Camera website offers links to both PostSecret and Found Magazine.

As illustrated in the latter two charts in Chapter 4, while none of the above three activities fits the primary characteristics of serial collaboration, they all have the quality of serendipitous connection between unknown individuals: in the confessions of strangers, in notes written in moments of passion and lists made in moments of boredom, in photographs taken by nameless

people on amazing trips, others can find unexpected wisdom or insight (perhaps far beyond what was intended by the original owner) and feel that the world is full of kindred spirits rather than strangers. Clearly this one theme is a powerful linking factor. One informant felt that the reason the PostSecret and Found Magazine subjects were so appealing is because they are “genuine” or “real” in their unintentionality, linking these ideas to the anti-commercialism and authenticity themes. What is missing is the chain—the tangible connection between more than a simple dyad of object loser and object finder—and the tangible connection to the object itself. The general public can appreciate the connection, or experience the shared message by viewing the things online, but the necessary characteristics of Contact and Chain Awareness aren’t present.

PhotoTag, which also deals with photographs, has the key element of the *camera* working in its favor. While the resulting photographs are available online, the camera itself functioned as the actual chain object for each participant. In serial collaboration, the entire chain of people need to physically interact with the object in question. While these activities are not clear examples of serial collaboration, the connection that people find between them helps to highlight many of the significances of serial collaboration.

Parodies

“A popular rhyme may maintain itself at two levels. Its preservation continues independently by repetition as a whole or in part, or it may suggest parody—which implies a familiarity with the original creation” (Loomis 45). Grant C. Loomis was studying parody with regard to children’s rhymes when he made the above comment, but his general idea of parody applies across all genres. The existence of any parody indicates both familiarity and proficiency with the original tradition. As Linda Degh has noted, “anti-legends” exist alongside legends.

Anti-legends are often “humorous parodies” of actual contemporary legends, which can serve to discredit or comment upon a community’s beliefs (67). Wolfgang Mieder (1987) has observed the same phenomenon with proverbs. Traditional proverbs often inspire “anti-proverbs” that challenge conventional wisdom, such as “A woman’s place is in the House and Senate.” While clearly challenging the traditional message of the proverb or the legend, a parody does so while maintaining an awareness of and adherence to generic form. As Diane Goldstein explains in an article on parody in contemporary legends (2000), this can help folklorists better identify the defining characteristics of a genre; it can reveal the emic sensitivity to generic conventions. She observes how “the rule-breaking parody finds its humour in its reflection of tradition bearers’ generic sensibility—the very stuff that forms the core of our efforts to understand the genre” (12). If a parody proves the genre, then serial collaboration is in luck. Several of the specific traditions described herein have spawned humorous (or provocative) spinoffs.

The Flat Stanley concept is a popular choice for those seeking to parody. “Flat Gareth,” claiming to be inspired by both the Flat Stanley Project and the roaming gnome phenomenon, is a cutout picture (more often digitally integrated into photographs than actually printed out and carried from place to place) of a young man holding a sign, protest-style, that reads “I’m just here for the hippy pussy.” As the website The People’s Cube (www.thepeoplecube.com—a satirical website welcoming readers to “life behind the irony curtain”) explains,

Unlike most high school students in his native Brooklyn, New York, Gareth knows exactly what he wants in life. Since the beginning of the war in Iraq, Gareth has joined every socialist, pacifist, feminist, pro-abortion, environmental, vegetarian, civil rights, or communist group on the Internet. He travels

extensively to participate in as many anti-capitalist rallies as his modest student budget allows.

They go on to explain how Gareth (seemingly a fictional character created for the parody), unable to make it to all the protests all over the world, turned to the Internet for help:

He posted his own picture on the Internet, asking his foreign friends to print it out and make snapshots of it at the leftist rallies worldwide. Gareth became famous overnight after March 19, 2005, when his pictures appeared in every major city of the world as part of the protests marking the second anniversary of the US invasion in Iraq.

The resulting pictures are both humorous and political. The site's readers can post their own Flat Gareth creations, attempting to create the most ironic or funny combinations of Gareth and setting.



Figure 4.23. Gareth in Berkeley, California.



Figure 4.24. Gareth in San Francisco, California.



Figure 4.25. Gareth in Rome, Italy.



Figure 4.26. Gareth, during a speech by past British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. The trick of showing Gareth as partially off-screen, so as to emphasize the “authenticity” of the photograph (as though catching Gareth unintentionally in the background), is typical of parodies such as these.

The Flat Gareth tradition is reminiscent of the “Doomed Tourist” tradition that spun off from a contemporary legend email that circulated in the days after the September 11th, 2001, attacks. The email claimed that an undeveloped roll of film found in the wreckage of the World Trade Center contained a photograph of a young man taken seconds before the plane hit the building. The tourist is standing on the observation deck of one of the towers, and the hijacked plane is visible behind him.



Figure 4.27. The original “Doomed Tourist” photograph.

Once the photo was revealed to be a hoax, people began digitally inserting the same tourist into photographs of other famous disasters or catastrophes, such as John F. Kennedy’s assassination and the explosion of the Hindenburg. This legend cycle earned the tourist (later revealed on Snopes.com to be a Hungarian man named Peter) a variety of monikers: The Tourist of Death, The Unlucky Tourist, and the Doomed Tourist.

Another Flat Stanley parody, also propagated by The People’s Cube, this time as a critique of the media, is “Flat Fatima.” The website explains:

Having learned of the growing trend at Reuters, BBC, and other progressive media to doctor photographs, stage events, and use choreographed footage in the best Pallywood traditions, researchers at Karl Marx Treatment center decided to make it even easier for news organization to re-educate their audiences and advance the Greater Good™.

Following the Flat Gareth model, we chose a popular image of a peasant Arab woman bemoaning the loss of her humble abode after an Israeli bombing—or rather multiple humble abodes in various locations and on different days.

Transporting a live talking elderly woman around the country and abroad for bemoaning sessions may be quite a drain on a successful photojournalist, we thought. Why can't we use the moaner's paper cutout instead? And thus Flat Fatima™ was born—laminated on a durable plastic board that can be folded and easily fits most popular models of travel bags.

Further explanation touts the ability of Fatima's "classic heartbreaking posture" to successfully manipulate audiences.



Figure 4.28. The basic Fatima image, which is offered to the site's visitors.



Figure 4.29. The brochure advertising the "benefits" of using Fatima in journalism.

Despite the claim of “No Photoshop required!” on the poster, indicating the Flat Stanley tradition of actually cutting out a physical paper doll, every example of Flat Fatima (and Flat Gareth) that I’ve discovered has been digitally created. This enables users to take the roaming gnome or travel mascot idea to new lengths—playing off the usual signification of the tradition to give greater meaning to political commentary. The lack of tangibility here is beside the point—these parodies are assuming we understand the significance of the original traditions, and so they don’t need to embody it themselves. They’re successful as long as they utilize enough recognizable markers to index the original form.

Roaming Gnomes themselves are a popular target for parody as well. The Travelocity commercials, specifically, have been lampooned in several online videos (www.travelocitysucks.info is a particularly prolific site whose logo is a garden gnome with its middle finger raised) that mock the “You’ll never roam alone” slogan using videos clips of vacations gone horribly awry. The music humor site Am I Right (www.amiright.com), which includes misheard lyrics as well as song parodies, lists a parody of Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone”: “Like a Roaming Gnome.” The person who submitted the lyrics claimed they were inspired by the Travelocity commercials:

“In time long gone, you're on my lawn
But all of those folks had their jokes, didn't they?
People'd stare, say "Gnome is where? It's not out there"
I thought they were all kidding me
We used to laugh about
The lawn gnome that was sitting out

But now you're gone

Not on my lawn

And now I'm wondering what is the deal?

How does it feel?

How does it feel?

To be taken from home?

To locations unknown?

Like a roaming gnome?"

These parodies show the general prevalence of the original traditions as communicative cultural forms. By maintaining a semblance (even if only in the presented narrative, and not in reality) of the primary characteristics of serial collaboration, the conventions of the genre are even more firmly established.

¹ 47.2% of respondents were from the U.S., 8.9% were from Canada, and 43.9% were from outside of North America (when asked to specify, the majority were from European countries, though respondents from places as varied as Singapore, New Zealand, and Israel also contributed). Respondents were overwhelmingly female (88.9%) and the largest age range represented was 30-39 years old.

² For example: "Well when I was little, I use to mark pennies with paint to see if I ever got the same penny back in change (never happened)."

³ There are a number of currency tracking sites, all over the world: www.EuroBillTracker.com (Europe), www.gderubl.ru (Russia), www.CashFollow.ch (Switzerland), www.FindLizzy.co.uk (United Kingdom), www.MoneyTracker.com.au (Australia), www.WheresMyBucks.co.za (South Africa), www.sek-tracker.se (Sweden), www.sedlen.dk (Denmark), www.osatsu.net (Japan), www.WheresRenminbi.com (China), www.WheresNT.com (Taiwan), www.woistmeingeld.de (Germany).

⁴ This same article included a list of object-tracking activities at the end, including BookCrossing and GeoCaching.

⁵ In total I had 183 responses (165 from Where's George, and 18 from Where's Willy). 66% were male, 34% were female; and the largest age group was 40-49 years old. (It is interesting to note that, according to statistics alone, women prefer to track books while men prefer to track money.)

⁶ Unfortunately, the Where's George website owner chose to only let me post my survey in the forums, rather than on the main page. Thus, my pool of informants was limited to those already active enough in the tradition to regularly visit the online forums.

⁷ These commercials, showing regularly in 2007 and 2008, involve a "spokes-gnome" who, as is common in roaming gnome photos, is filmed in front of various tourist destinations and who describes the benefits of using the Travelocity service. As the slogan goes: "You'll never roam alone."

⁸ Ward makes the interesting observation that "since photographing a small object against a large background is tricky, many of the photos are blurry and amateur, but some of the pictures are accidentally amazing. Mark my words, before the decade is through, some major art gallery or museum will have a show of traveling gnome photography" (2005: para. 21).

⁹ It is interesting to consider the use of a surrogate traveler in the documentation of a trip that one actually went on oneself as a kind of deflected presentation of self. Some may find it difficult to brag about their own travel experiences; presented through the lens of the *gnome's* experiences, it becomes much more acceptable to show off.

¹⁰ The Flat Stanley phenomenon has taken off in recent years, due to Stanley's appearance in photographs with a number of famous people: President Bush, former President Clinton, singers Clay Aiken and Willie Nelson, and accompanying actor Clint Eastwood on the red carpet (Patterson 2005).

¹¹ And now, he's been in a dissertation, as Dale Hubert pointed out.

¹² However, Simon Bronner has informed me that this is a Pennsylvania Dutch tradition, and the general confusion of that group with the Amish may have led to the naming of this tradition (personal communication, October 2006).

¹³ Actually, edible items aren't the only things that work; any small portable object that can reproduce itself can become a "friendship" object. Friendship plants are a common gift—one simply divides the plant and gives a portion to a friend with instructions to grow the plant and then share similarly. This is common practice with plants such as Queen's Tears or other plants that form rooted offshoots, or shamrocks, which have root logs that can be divided up.

¹⁴ This is perhaps a nod to Flat Stanley.

¹⁵ As strange as this may seem, there is a WrapSack that has been tracked on its journey of over 27,000 miles, starting in Pawlet, Vermont, crossing through a variety of U.S. states, and stopping off in Israel before making it to the United Kingdom. It's stated goal is, similar to many chain objects, "to travel the world, spreading peace and love wherever I go!"

¹⁶ Mail Art is a tradition, related to circulating objects or passarounds (objects that stay mostly within circles of known participants), which involves artists creating works that they pass to each other via the postal system and to which each new recipient contributes. There is a sense of anti-commercialism to many mail art circles, and the use of found objects or art is common.

¹⁷ Including one from me to my parents. It was delivered to their door by two young men, just weeks after I sent it to Kyle (so quickly, in fact, that I hadn't yet warned them they'd be getting mail from me from the Galapagos).

¹⁸ A serial collaborative Surrealist technique for the creation of art, in which each contributor is asked to add words or forms to an ongoing narrative or sculpture, often without being able to see the previous contributor's addition (through a technique such as paper folding, for example). Legend holds that the term grew out of an early instance of the game—using words—that created the nonsensical (yet striking) sentence, "The exquisite corpse will drink the new wine."

¹⁹ Further on, the website also recommends visitors try Where's George and the Degree Confluence Project, which asks people to take and submit photographs of each of the latitude and longitude integer degree intersections in the world.

Chapter 6: Case Studies of Type B

Type B versions of serial collaboration differ physically from type A in that rather than being single objects that accrue successive layers of meaning through the various stages of an ongoing “life story,” they are instead comprised of an assemblage of individual objects that come together to form an immobile yet physically malleable form. This “collection” aspect of type B chain objects is especially suited to many contemporary social uses of objects, as several scholars have observed. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett explains that

bric-a-brac, folk altars, mantles covered with snapshots, scrapbooks, and albums, and china cabinets filled with family heirlooms give to domestic interiors their intensely personal character: such environments offer access to the interior of the lives they signify and as such constitute a kind of autobiographical archeology. (1989:331)

This corresponds well with Henry Glassie’s assertion, noted in chapter 2, that the collection, in which we “create things out of things made by other people, all across the globe” (86), is a major expressive form in contemporary life:

The collection represents a victory over disorder in industrial times, when the flood of goods threatens to sweep us to madness in a rising tide of irrelevant trash, just as the house of stone represented a victory over disorder in the days when people lived close to nature, when the lean wolves came down from the heath and the night winds wailed. (86)

GeoCaching

As with the type A examples, the technologically trackable iterations of this process are the easiest to find information on and to describe. Type B serial collaboration is enacted clearly in the modern practice of “geocaching” (less commonly known as “stash hunting”), the act of placing a container with objects in it in a hidden location and then providing clues, usually GPS coordinates, so that others can find it and add their own objects to it (and potentially take an object left by someone else). The GeoCaching.com website explains what goes into a cache:

A cache can come in many forms but the first item should always be the logbook. In its simplest form a cache can be just a logbook and nothing else. The logbook contains information from the founder of the cache and notes from the cache's visitors. The logbook can contain much valuable, rewarding, and entertaining information. A logbook might contain information about nearby attractions, coordinates to other unpublished caches, and even jokes written by visitors. If you get some information from a logbook you should give some back. At the very least you can leave the date and time you visited the cache.

Larger caches may consist of a waterproof plastic bucket placed tastefully within the local terrain. The bucket will contain the logbook and any number of more or less valuable items. These items turn the cache into a true treasure hunt. You never know what the founder or other visitors of the cache may have left there for you to enjoy. Remember, if you take something, its only fair for you to leave

something in return. Items in a bucket cache could be: Maps, books, software, hardware, CD's, videos, pictures, money, jewelry, tickets, antiques, tools, games, etc. It is recommended that items in a bucket cache be individually packaged in a clear zipped plastic bag to protect them. (GeoCaching.com)

The only restrictions on what may be added to a cache deal with the object's size, its level of potential harm (such as weapons or ammunition), and its appeal to animals (food items are discouraged).

As the GeoCaching.com website explains, the practice of geocaching began in 2000, when the U.S. government stopped the intentional degradation of Global Positioning System (GPS) signals available to the public, allowing everyday people to use GPS coordinates very precisely. This made accurate GPS-based clues regarding the locations of very small items possible. While some geocaching clues utilize riddles rather than coordinates, GPS technology is the preferred method. Geocaching is very popular; according to GeoCaching.com, most major cities have upwards of 1,000 geocaches located in or near them.

Geocaching also incorporates several type A additions. On GeoCaching.com's frequently asked questions page, the response to the "Can I move a cache?" question is as follows:

Don't move the cache! Responsible cache owners often check on their caches and would be alarmed to discover that it is missing.

An alternative would be to have a trackable item, which is an item that you can move from cache to cache. An example of this is a candle that has traveled from Australia to Arizona, and a Mr. Potato head that leaps from cache to cache. For example you can purchase a Groundspeak Travel Bug, which is a tag that you can attach to an item so you can track its movements through this web site.

GeoCoins and Where's George bills have also been known to travel from cache to cache.¹

Participants' explanations of their interest in geocaching is similar to that of many type A instances of serial collaboration. There is a pattern of connection to treasure hunts, messages in bottles, and serendipity,² with the added feature of survival skills due to the orienteering aspects of geocaching, and an explicit appreciation for nature and the outdoors:

Finding your way around in the woods is so neat and tracing and showing it on a map is totally cool. I love to go places I have never been and trust the hider to take me somewhere really neat. There is always much more to see/learn coming and going to the cache. I love to bushwack—that means hiking without a trail straight thru the woods when the underbrush is not in the way. I know so much more than I did before caching, about the woods and not getting lost. No Fear! Now! Still lots of respect! It is truly neat to be able to find spot in the woods from home and know you can go to it with a GPS.

Everyone likes a surprise, a bit of a challenge and the thrill of the hunt. So much of modern life is lacking in these things, I think that is reconnecting to the hunter/gatherer in all of us.

Being taken to unusual locations, getting to see interesting places and things, learning about stuff in my own backyard I never knew was there. There's also a social aspect of it that's fun too.

I love the thrill of the hunt. Included in the thrill is seeing new parts of the region, keeping things secret from muggles,³ figuring out puzzles and clues and occasionally racing others to the find.

Why do I think Geocaching is so popular? I think it provides a connection for people with others that have the urge to explore.

Being outdoors and finding new places to explore. The adventure and exploring new places keep me interested. I think geocaching is popular since it appeals to the primitive "hunt" instincts of humans.

I love hiking and I love scavenger hunts—Geocaching meshes two of my interests perfectly! My favorite part is visiting places that I never knew were there. No one in my immediate circle of friends and family is interested in Geocaching at all. The people I go Geocaching with, when I'm not alone, are people that I met through Geocaching.

I like the treasure-hunting aspect of it, and the fact that it takes me to places I wouldn't ordinarily go.

Finding something hidden by others that most people don't know is there.

I enjoy the "secret society" aspect of it.

I think with the concept...It is finding thing, its a treasure hunt and most people in some way shape or form has a desire or curiosity as to what "treasure" hunting

would be like and we actually get to do it. I love being outdoor and it gets my 4 year old outside and exploring in nature. I always love exploring and finding new things so that is what helps keep my interest. My favorite aspect is being outside and connecting with others that share my love of nature.

I love finding the treasure. It's part of the little kid in me that hasn't grown up yet. I enjoy the experience of spending time doing something as a family. I think these two reasons are some of the most popular reasons you will find, along with the joy of being outdoors.

I think the part I like the most is finding new places. I am often amazed how I never knew a park existed that was so close to me. Or if I've been there before, which happens more now then it used to ;) that I never knew that park had so many trails and/or what was on the "far end".

The hidden treasure aspect of the game is what keeps us going. The treasure is often not the cache, but the story of the area or the location itself. I love to find some hidden treasure while traveling only to find out that I know about a great spot that most of the locals are unaware of. When I hide caches I try to highlight some local history or hidden location to share this experience with fellow cachers.

I like the hunt, going to new places I've never been and exploring the area. Travel bugs and geocoins are also neat to move around and watch travel the country.

I like getting my kids out of the house and away from the TV and game systems. I like exploring new and interesting places that I'd have never found if not for a cacher placing a cache there. My favorite part is the people. Cachers are the best

people. I think it's popular because it combines the old with the new. The old being treasure hunting, we all played hide and seek as kids. We loved the idea of finding hidden treasure and dreamed of finding some stash somewhere that would make us rich. The new is the gps and computer technology that makes geocaching possible. Blending the two is a way to appeal to a wide variety of people.

It is interesting to note the emphasis here on a “secret society” mentality. The idea of a sub- or counter-culture is prevalent in participants’ descriptions of their enjoyment of being in a select group that knows the location of objects hidden from the mainstream population. It is also noteworthy that the care a cache receives at the hands of the people who encounter it is important to cachers. As one article on Geocaching’s growing popularity explains, this honor system is well suited to a small group of practitioners: “because geocaching depends so much on participants acting honorably—by not moving, defacing or revealing the location of a cache—[some participants are] a little worried that the activity's growing popularity could also be its undoing” (Williams WE60). The perceived subculture of geocaching is set apart from mainstream culture by these ideas of respect and consideration among the participants—we can see clearly here both the hope for and the reassurance that the “small world” of strangers out there is, at least in part, a friendly bunch of people.



Figure 5.1. Morgan Leishman of Logan, Utah, using GPS to locate a cache in a cemetery.



Figure 5.2. Morgan and Connor Leishman, opening a small cache.



Figure 5.3. The cache, well-camouflaged inside a small tree.



Figure 5.4. The Parent-Leishman-Schicker family, inspecting cache contents and filling out the log book.

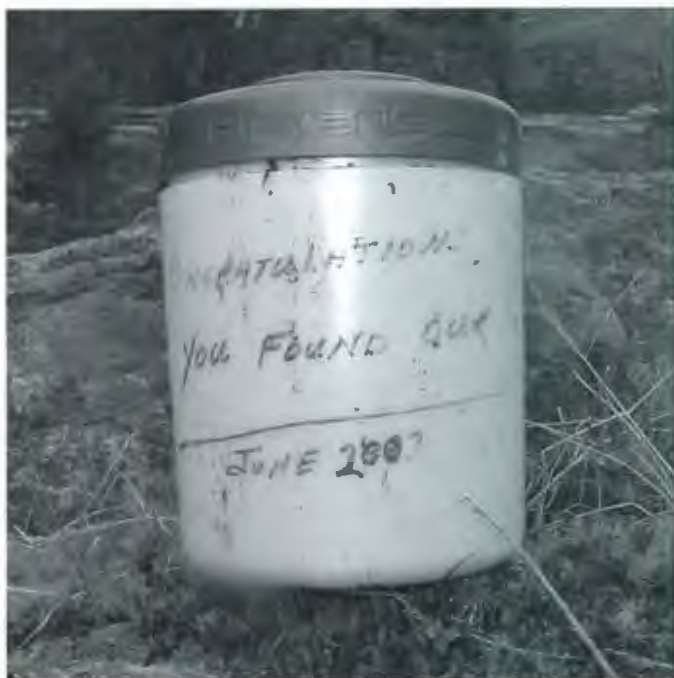


Figure 5.5. A typical cache, found in St. John's, Newfoundland.



Figure 5.6. The contents of the above cache, in a plastic bag to protect from the elements

Letterboxes

Letterboxing is a similar custom that was made popular in the United Kingdom and has spread to many other countries. Its origins are fairly certain: “Letterboxers trace their hobby back to 1854, when a Victorian gentleman walker put his calling card in a bottle and stuck the bottle into a bank at Cranmere Pool, in a remote part of Dartmoor” (Granstrom 1998: 3). As the Atlas Quest Letterboxing site explains in more detail:

The year was 1854, and a Victorian guide named James Perrott placed a bottle in the wildest, most inaccessible area on Dartmoor, England, along the banks of Cranmere Pool. In it, he included his calling card so future visitors could contact him and leave their own calling cards. Little did anyone know, this small act would become the hobby we now know as letterboxing. (Carpenter 2007)

A hike to Cranmere Pool in 1854 was no easy task, and people who made the journey added their calling cards to Perrott’s, as a marker of their accomplishment. The activity proved popular enough that it was revised and encouraged in later years:

In 1888, a small tin box replaced the original bottle. Visitors left self-addressed postcards and the next person to visit the letterbox (except if it was a same-day visitor) would retrieve the postcards and mail them back from their hometown.

By April 1905, another upgrade was in order—particularly a means by which the increasing number of visitors could record their attendance. For the first time, it included a logbook, and a zinc box replaced the tin box. (Carpenter 2007)

Like geocaching, letterboxing now involves hiding a box and leaving instructions (usually couched in riddles or clues—GPS coordinates are not utilized much here) for others to follow to find it. The box contains a journal and a rubber stamp with an inkpad. Letterboxers have their own personal journals and their own personal stamps as well. When participants find a letterbox, they exchange stamps. The box's journal contains a record of all stamps from visitors, and the individual's journal carries a stamped record of all the boxes visited. The stamp aspect, while not original to the process, is still long-standing:

The first suggestion for a rubber stamp appeared in the logbook on July 22, 1907 by John H. Strother who wrote, "Reached the pool at 7.10pm, misty day with cool breeze, and would suggest that a rubber stamp, something like the post office stamps for postmarking letters or rubber stamp for putting the address at the top of a piece of notepaper be provided and kept here. If this were done it would be proof that cards posted had really come from Cranmere." The letterbox finally reached the point as we largely know it today as a box containing a logbook and a rubber stamp. (Carpenter 2007)

In 1998, when *Smithsonian Magazine* published an article about the British hobby of Letterboxing in Dartmoor, Americans got interested in the activity, and its popularity boomed.

When letterboxers speak about their experiences, they tend to focus on ideas such as treasure hunts and "secret" hidden boxes, puzzle and clue solving, craft work (with regard to the stamps, which many people make themselves) and, again, the serendipitous nature of the activity:

I love the treasure hunt aspect, and know that there are things hidden in the woods that not everyone knows about.

One of my favorite aspects is discovering places that you never knew were there - even in your own "backyard".

Initially, it was a way to get out and get some exercise, and now it has evolved into a couple of things. While I still appreciate the exercise, now I plan to leave small pieces of art hidden for the curious. There is something appealing about the notion of hiding a hidden gem that the unwashed masses pass by every day.

I really love that there is "hidden treasure" everywhere. The first one I found was on the college campus where I work. I'd walked past it (literally) hundreds of times but didn't know it was there until I learned about letterboxing and started looking at clues for my area.

It's a secret from most people. Many many people walk by LB's everyday and have no idea that they are there or what they are. That is neat!

I enjoy the surprise of seeing the stamp images when I've found a box, also the satisfaction of deciphering clues.

I've always loved treasure hunts, especially in the outdoors and in new locations. Each handmade stamp has some unique quality of the person who planted it. Each one is a surprise and a thrill to find. And I love to create stamps and hide surprises for others, as well as hear from them when they find my boxes.

I like the "treasure hunt". I like looking at a spot and to know that there is a secret there that not many people know about. I like the surprise in the box. I like seeing

who's been there before me. I like looking on atlasquest⁴ and seeing who came after me. I like carving the stamps.

Goal oriented hiking! The creative aspect keeps me interested. I feel letterboxing is popular in part because it combines healthy exercise and a direction to go when getting out of the house with a level of creativity that encompasses many areas of interest (ie: research, carving, bookbinding, papercrafts, etc) Plus what's more fun than a treasure hunt?

I love the art form. I like carving, and challenging myself and my skills to carve. The treasure hunt is what first got me hooked though. I love the outdoors, and love finding new places to explore. I think letterboxing is popular because people like to "collect" things.

When I asked letterboxers why they thought letterboxing was popular, I was surprised to hear several of them say (at times emphatically) that it is *not* popular:

Letterboxing is NOT popular. Very few people actually know about it. Geocaching is FAR, FAR more popular. I've always had to explain to people what letterboxing is (you just don't meet people that know).

I don't think that letterboxing is that popular. After all, in a country with approx. 250 million people very few letterbox.

Perhaps there is a sense that letterboxers are part of an elite network. This would be supported by the sense of being in on a "secret" that so many other of my informants mentioned.

Like GeoCaching, Letterboxing has incorporated a type A element into the process.⁵

Letterboxes can include hitchhiking (HH) stamps (much like GeoCoins or Travel Bugs) that are designed to travel from box to box. One letterboxer explains:

When I find a HH in a LB, I stamp the LB's stamp image into the HH's log, I stamp the HH's stamp image into the LB's log, I stamp my sig [*sic*] stamp into both, noting in the HH's log that I found it at thus-and-such LB, also noting in the LB's log that I found and am taking the HH. I then put the HH in my pack and replant it in the next LB I find that will accommodate it (doing all the cross-stamping again because not all letterboxers are meticulous that way).

At the heart of all this effort is the simple excitement of gaining not one but two stamps:

2 stamps in one box. Bonus!

I think HH are a good addition to letterboxing, they add an extra surprise to finding the boxes.

A little extra "treasure" to find!

It's exciting to find a little "extra" in a box.

The use of stamps in general adds an element to this activity that isn't present as much in other kinds of serial collaboration: art. While all forms of SCC involve the manipulation—and in type B cases, the formation—of objects, letterboxing is the only one that actively encourages people to utilize unique and individual artistic skill that, when incorporated in the chain, reflects them personally. Some people make their own stamps by hand, and this craft is emphasized on letterboxing webpages; some people purchase a stamp that they feel represents them:

I am on my third signature stamp, which is an image that incorporates my trail name and my love of cats. My first sig stamp did not really reflect my trail name; my second used multiple colors and proved to be too time-consuming to use on the trail. I also have a sig stamp for my non-boxing partner - if he helps with a find, he gets stamped in too!

You need a stamp that people can relate you to, so I chose my car. I own a 1990 Miata and made a stamp of the car. My letterboxing name is my license plate "MYMIATA"

My trail name is colls and I sign with a shamrock. Doug's is a picture of a parachuting money bag with a small plane flying away, it is a reference to DB Cooper, the first hi-jacker.

I use a store bought ladybug stamp. My carving abilities are a little on the beginner stage, but I am practicing more and more - maybe i should think about buying stock in stamp eaze. I have a picture of what I would like my signature to be eventually, but it will be a difficult carve for me, yet. Someday! I just like the ladybug. It was "naturey".

I use a signature stamp that I carved. It is based on an image from a 15th century emblem book. I like it because it is somewhat cryptic and unlike any other signature stamps that I have yet seen.

My trail name is "sweet n sour" and my signature stamp is the parrot from the margaritaville logo. I chose this because of my extreme love of margaritas. I chose my trail name because it is so descriptive of my personality.

We use a stamp with our trail name printed below a family tree. It is our signature stamp and represents our love of family.

Interestingly, while almost all of the letterboxers I heard from mentioned geocaching as a similar activity they've participated in (though use of the GPS system and the fact that there's no stamp reward at the end of the search were both cited as being downsides of geocaching), none mentioned any type A activity outside of those connected to letterboxing. One informant, however, related experience with other type B activities that were new to me:

Geocaching, terracaching, and cisting. Terracaching is the same as geocaching but more exclusive; it's too exclusive, will fold up soon, I probably won't do any more. Cisting is a French stashing game that uses text clues like letterboxing but the stashes contain toys like geocaches. It's not very popular in the US yet, other than in Tennessee for some reason. I have planted one here in Tallahassee though for any cister that happens to be passing through.



Figure 5.7. The original letterbox, at Cranmere Pool, from www.waymarking.com.

Rock Stacks

As was noted in Chapter 1, serial collaborative activities are commonly linked by participants according to a given activity's place along the spectrum of trackability to non-trackability. Most often, it is the batch of Internet-based "object-tracking" activities (BookCrossing, GeoCaching, Photo Tag, etc.) that are grouped (or at least vocalized) as being the "same thing," regardless of type. Interestingly however, there are a number of untrackable (or less easily tracked) type B activities that match the characteristics of serial collaboration perfectly and to which people commonly attribute the same kinds of significance. There are also, as has been noted previously, numerous non-technologically-trackable type A chain objects

circulating in the world as well, but the interesting distinction here is that non-trackable type A chain objects are generally the same kinds of objects as those used in trackable type A activities: decommodified, appropriated, mass-produced objects. They may utilize a non-Internet-based method of tracking (like the chain letter written on the dollar bill, or the book with a handwritten note in the cover, which the original owner can't check in on), or they may simply have a marker or note that indicates their travel but does not ask for a record of the chain (painted coins, for example). Basically, in order to be recognized as a traveling object, some level of complex signification (an out of place object drawing attention to itself, a note, a Travel Bug) is required. Non-technologically-trackable type B objects can vary much more greatly upon the spectrum of natural to cultural; the most basic and natural of movable objects—rocks, in this case—can be incorporated into serial collaborative activities. Since type B objects do not move about the landscape, they can be checked back in on by their original creators regardless of explicit labeling, a luxury unavailable to originators of non-trackable type A objects; this is most likely why non-trackable type B objects are more common than their type A counterparts.

With regard to the dichotomy of nature/culture, Barbara Bender, in a discussion of landscapes, touches on this divide: “The way landscape came to be understood was part of a wider process of individuating people, of separating out people-culture and land-nature, and of asserting control over land-nature” (135). Nature is wild and free; culture is controlled and contained. To use Yi Fu Tuan’s terminology, nature is space and culture is place. He says as much himself in his exploration of landscapes, *Landscapes of Fear*, when he notes that “every human construction—whether mental or material—is a component of a landscape of fear because it exists to contain chaos” (1979: 6). Human constructions are products of culture—manipulations of nature—and provide secure “places” in the chaos of natural “space”.

Mircea Eliade, in *The Sacred and the Profane*, makes the above distinction in terms of sacred versus profane space. Sacred space “ontologically founds the world” (21), creating points of reference and a much needed sense of orientation. Profane space is “homogeneous and neutral; no break qualitatively differentiates the parts of its mass” (22). Eliade describes how human beings are constantly creating “fixed points” in the space around them to fend off the profane and the chaotic. These fixed points are places, according to Tuan, and come into being when a person manipulates the natural environment and creates an object of culture.

While the categories of nature and culture do exist in opposition to each other, it can be more useful to think of the dichotomy in terms of a spectrum, with some cultural creations being much farther from nature, much more worked by humans, than others. A bookcase may be constructed out of wood, but the more the wood is treated and stained, and the more ornamentation that is applied to the basic design, the more culturally expressive the bookcase becomes. Similarly, when wood is shredded into sawdust and reconstituted with glue to create particle board, an object that is perhaps not as decorative or valued an art object as a hand-made bookcase would be, it is still at the far cultural end of the spectrum, due to the numerous levels of human interference that occur between the initial natural product and the resulting finished cultural object. It can be seen then, that rock-stacks are at the far natural end of the nature-culture spectrum; they reflect the most basic level of a human’s manipulation of nature. By the simple yet obvious manipulation of natural forms (rocks wouldn’t stack themselves—the form is evidence of human contact), the message of serial collaboration is conveyed.

Inuksuit

I remember being out on the tundra with my friend Alan, and we were talking about inuksuit and what they were for, and he said that the most important part was to tell other people that a person had been there. It's like, 'I was here and I have something important to say about this place.' And it might just be that we were here—that might be the important thing—but some of the other inuksuit we saw were marking harbours, so that if you were out in a boat you would see the harbour. Or it would be a sight line, a series of inuksuit on high points, and if you followed them, you would get to a good caribou hunting ground. (Hill)

Trying to describe inuksuit (the plural of inuksuk) can be difficult, because the more one learns about them, the more one realizes how they are both simple and complex. They are one of the most basic forms of SCC, barely above cairns or shapeless rockstacks in the spectrum from nature to culture. They utilize the most basic of materials and human skills, and yet possess a timeless presence that even the most unknowledgeable observer can sense. The best way to become familiar with these objects is through people's descriptions of them and their experiences with them, like the above from a student who lived in the arctic for several months.

The word inuksuk (correctly pronounced "in-ook-shook" and alternately spelled "inukshuk") is Inuit for "to act in the capacity of a human being" (Hallendy 1994: 385), and refers, at the most basic level, to stacks of rocks constructed in natural spaces. Their most typical action in the capacity of an absent human is to mark a location or to point the way to a location; their construction often incorporates a component used for directionality. They are found all over the arctic regions—Alaska, Canada, and Greenland—and have been used by the Inuit for thousands of years.

Inuksuit are always made of at least two or more rocks, usually rocks that are available in the immediate vicinity of the builder at the time of the building, and they are always stacked in some way that requires the rocks to balance. Technically, an inuksuk can be any balanced stack of rocks that catches a traveler's eye—Inuit elder Jerry Sillitt explains that “an inuksuk can be made any way at all, according to personal taste, as long as it can be easily seen from a distance and can be identified as an artificial construction” (Clark 1996)—but during my fieldwork I encountered a general concern with issues of authenticity of form. This is an issue that will be explored more in depth later, but suffice it to say for now that several of my informants seemed to be concerned with the “right” way to build an inuksuk. One noted: “I don't really think what we created actually even resembled a real inuksuk” (Gillette). Another described her sense that certain inuksuit on the road were “really *real* ones,” implying that others may not be.

There are no size requirements for inuksuit, though it is the larger ones that most often manage to withstand the test of time. Smaller inuksuit can be transitory creations, subject to the elements, although the resulting spread of fallen rocks still meets the requirement of being recognizable as a human-made construction. Larger inuksuit can be so long-standing that they become permanent facets of the environment, as evidenced in the following narrative by an Inuit Anglican priest, in which he describes a journey he took with a friend:

Coming upon a huge inuksuk with a great round boulder perched on top, my partner stopped his sled and refused to go any further. To do so, he explained, would attract great misfortune if we did not show it our respect. He went on to tell me the story of how this inuksuk was placed there along time ago by a powerful man just before his death. It was said that travelers thereafter must attempt to move the great stone on top of the inuksuk or suffer terrible things on

their journey. So there I was, an Anglican minister, standing before an inuksuk believed to have the power to harm the disrespectful. As you know, only the foolish take chances on long journeys; and besides; anyone who worked so hard to make such a big inuksuk should be complimented for his efforts. (Hallendy 1995: 2)

An inuksuk large enough that it can't be moved is an impressive construction; but whether large or small, all inuksuit are beguiling in their very palpable sense of purpose. They blend so well into their natural surroundings that their delicate balance is almost uncanny.

While earlier inuksuit had no required shape, contemporary versions, at least the ones that can be found in and around St. John's, Newfoundland, tend to take the form of a person, a design that the Inuit call *inunnguaq*. Some Inuit people feel that inuksuit were never made in this style before the first non-Inuit whalers arrived in the arctic, while others claim that such structures have been in existence for several hundred years (Wallace 1999: 17). Regardless of how long this design has been in practice, it is certainly a popular form for contemporary builders on the Avalon Peninsula. In the examples I have seen, there are at least five, usually six, rocks required for a person-shaped inuksuk: two for the legs, one for the body, one long stone or two shorter ones for arms, and one for a head. More stones can be added at any point to increase size or stability (see figure 8—roughly one foot tall—from St. John's, Newfoundland, and as a comparison, figure 9—many feet tall—from Vancouver, B.C, for two vastly different sized *inunnguats*).



Figure 5.8. A small inuksuit from Signal Hill, St. John's, Newfoundland



Figure 5.9. Large inuksuk at English Bay Beach, Vancouver, BC; photo by M. Jassak

The person-shaped design seems to have influenced the construction of non-human shaped inuksuit as well, with regard to the creation of legs; basic cairn-like rock stacks (see figure 10) are often elaborated on to create an initial arch that then supports the basic stack (see figure 11). The Inuit describe a particular kind of inuksuit, a *niugvaliruluit*, that features a sighting hole—an

opening in the structure that draws a viewer's attention to an important place or object—but the contemporary creation of archways appears to be a more aesthetic choice than a functional one. Another aesthetic choice seems to be the preference for delicate, single stacks over more heavy, pile-style stacks.



Figure 5.10. Basic rock stacks.



Figure 5.11. An arch supporting a rock stack

Around the city of St. John's, Newfoundland, the construction of inuksuit is a popular pastime for visitors to outdoor sites, as evidenced by the abundance of these figures along walking trails and hiking trails, on beaches, and at campgrounds, and it is in these contemporary creations that the process of serial collaborative creation really becomes prominent. I first encountered inuksuit in a natural setting during a visit to Signal Hill, and was intrigued to witness the appropriation of this enigmatic object; I was fairly certain, after having spoken to several non-Inuit people who had created inuksuit, that the majority of these objects were not being constructed by Inuit residents of St. John's. The collaborative nature was evident: passersby had either added smaller rocks to pre-existing inuksuit or had built their own inuksuk near a group of others.

As discussed in preceding chapters, scholars have noted that "the use and meaning of an artifact can change radically depending on the context in which it is placed and the perspective from which it is viewed" (Babcock 1992: 207). Asa Berger expresses a similar idea when he asserts that "texts, in a sense, do not exist, but rather are entities that can be brought into being only by readers" (1995: 24). (And here it is important to point out Henry Glassie's observation that texts are both "things made of words and things made of earthy bits" (1999: 45).) Keeping this in mind, inuksuit created by non-Inuit people on the Avalon Peninsula could conceivably have an entirely different meaning than the ones created and viewed in the arctic by the Inuit. Meredith Wilson and Bruno David, in the introduction to their compilation of essays entitled *Inscribed Landscapes*, state that they feel a multiplicity of meanings is especially prevalent in rock art research (1), due to the many layers of communication taking place: natural landscapes, sociocultural influences, and artistic representation. One of my informants spoke to this discrepancy in meaning, describing her experience at Gros Morne National Park:

There was no obvious Native American connection, yet there were about 20 small piles of rocks, placed in different styles and arrangements. We made our own little pile but I often think that people do this out of our 'sheep' nature . . . we all follow the one before us. (Butt)

My own observations support this. It is almost impossible to pass a stack of rocks, decorative or functional, without seeing evidence that others were compelled to contribute to the pile. What does motivate the construction of these objects? Wilson and David refer to these creations as products of the “humanization of landscapes” (vii). Is the non-native creation of inuksuit a genuine humanization of the landscape, or simply a “sheepish” mimicking of someone else’s tradition?

Like creators within many vernacular traditions, people who build inuksuit are both following a learned pattern and expressing their unique creativity. A few people with whom I spoke suggested that there wasn’t much to the experiences of building and encountering an inuksuk; one woman felt they were simply “kind of cute, and certainly photogenic” (McCuaig). Others, however, expressed a deeper connection to the objects, common to most serial collaborative creations. One of my informants, who described adding stones to existing inuksuit that she came across as well as constructing her own near preexisting groups, indicated that there is a sense of companionability to the objects; they not only keep you company themselves, but

They remind you that other people have been where you are before, and that you’re now connected to those people and share something with them. And when you put a stone where other people put stones, it’s like you’re contributing a part of your presence to something that stays behind when you leave. (Butt)

This sense of contribution is important; it tells us that despite the direct translation, the inuksuit are acting in the capacity of several people at once, embodying not a single being but the entire chain of people who have come before. While not nearly as complex as a GeoCache or a Letterbox, the same quality of cultural significance is present.

It also renders many inuksuit perpetually incomplete, works of art that are always in progress and never finished. People who contribute stones are both the audience and the artists for an ever-changing creation. As with all instances of SCC, the awareness that other people's hands have touched the stones yours have touched creates a deeper sense of companionability than the initial creation of a new object. More specific to inuksuit is the fact that every person's added stones must balance with the rest, a fact that highlights the underlying symbolism of community and connects well to this sense of group contribution.

Interestingly, these emotional responses often lead to or are tied to assumptions about inuksuit's religious significance to native populations. Apart from the basic meaning of "acting in the capacity of a human" and their general function as signposts, people have, over the years, attributed many different meanings and uses to these objects, some of which are more spiritual than utilitarian:

During my travels in the arctic, I heard that some inuksuk were believed to have spiritual qualities. However, my attempts to learn more from Inuit Elders met with limited success at the outset. Often I received an outright denial that inuksuit possessed spiritual qualities. Sometimes I would be given a charming story or scary tale which nourished my imagination, conveniently leaving no opening for questions. More often than not I encountered the side-stepping "ah-choo?" meaning "who knows?" (Hallendy 1994: 386)

Keirsten, one of my informants who lived in the arctic for several months, encountered similar dismissals of any possible spiritual significances of inuksuit:

As far as I'm aware, there's nothing spiritual about an inuksuk, which seems to be this major area of misunderstanding here in the south. A lot of people seem to think they mark sacred spots, and that is, as far as I'm aware, completely untrue. They don't use them to mark that sort of thing. They're used in an everyday sense, you know, to mark the lake with the good fish, or the path to the harbour, or the good caribou hunting ground. They're not used to mark sacred spots; people just know where those places are. (Hill)

Keirsten's perception, developed after having lived in an Inuit village, that there are no spiritual meanings for inuksuit could stem from the reticence of the Inuit people when it comes to such matters, as evidenced by the preceding quote from Norman Hallendy, a researcher who has devoted much attention to inuksuit. Hallendy did eventually find that there are types of inuksuit that mark sacred, or even forbidden, places. This does not mean that Keirsten's perception is necessarily incorrect; there could easily be different traditions in different places. With the kinds of inuksuit found on the Avalon Peninsula and created by non-Inuit people—contexts of creation that are far removed from traditional Inuit situations—it is not difficult to see how such a representation of a person could come to embody a sense of spirit even without the presence of a commonly shared belief system. The borrowing of the form from an “exotic” culture alone could begin to explain people's expectations of religious significance.

Other reasons to build an inuksuk can be to represent accomplishment; if one has come to a place that is difficult to reach, leaving something that acknowledges that one has been there is an expression of pride, and the future contributions serve to create a community of people with

similar achievements. Norman Hallendy explains that inuksuit are one among many kinds of *utirnigiit*, “traces of coming and going,” to the Inuit people. He found that their respect for things that represented and expressed the will of their ancestors was immense, and inuksuit were one of the most respected of these traces. While the people I spoke with did not indicate any awareness of such a tradition among the original creators of inuksuit, some did touch on this idea of not just marking places that would be important to others, but places that are important to oneself. One woman I spoke with, Heather, described her arrival on the Avalon Peninsula. She was moving here, and when she got her first view of her new home, her boyfriend stopped the car and they got out to take a closer look:

We climbed over this huge rock until we were at the top and we could see all around us. It was very strange. We were in a place that was completely foreign to us, and yet we had felt like somehow by climbing all the way to the top and looking over the panorama that it somehow belonged to us. Everything—the landscape, the conquest, the experience. There were small rocks strewn everywhere, and one of us, I don't remember who, said that we should build a little inukshuk [sic]. It would have felt disappointing to climb all the way down and not to have anyone know that we had accomplished what seemed like this great thing. (Gillette)

That sense of accomplishment was validated when another student described how she had driven into St. John's shortly after Heather, and had seen the inuksuk still standing:

Someone told me they had seen my inuksuk where we had built it at the beginning of the Avalon. They said they remembered it because of my description of the landscape and also because several others had been erected beside it. That

made me feel very happy. I just thought it was cool to have others who felt the same way, or wanted to be like us even though they didn't know us. (Gillette)

This process of marking achievement—the arrival at a significant or faraway or hard-to-reach place—is common. Visits to sacred wells can be marked with rags or ribbons tied to surrounding foliage. Coins, a common token object, are sometimes placed in natural divots or cracks in rocky landscapes by visitors who want to leave a mark of themselves in a “special” place.

It is interesting to note that all of the people I spoke with who built inuksuit around St. John's (though my fieldwork was definitely not exhaustive) never mentioned the Inuit people. If they saw this as an appropriated tradition, they did not tell me about it. What I did get was a strong sense that inuksuit simply are what they are, non-culturally-specific (or at least, not specific to the Inuit culture, as perceived in the minds of the non-Inuit informants with whom I spoke) expressions of a person's presence, objects that can hold an identity, a message, or an emotion, long after the maker had gone away.

The perspective was understandably different for the one informant I spoke with who had made inuksuit only with Inuit people while living in the arctic. Keirsten, a graduate student at Memorial University, lived in the arctic town of Whale Cove (or Tikirarjuaq as the Inuit call it), a native resettlement village in Nunavut, for six months while her mother taught in a local school. Keirsten, with the company of her Inuit friend Alan Boise, Whale Cove's garbage man, built an inuksuk for traditional Inuit purposes:

Alan and I made one one afternoon. We went out fishing and we had this horribly disastrous ice fishing trip and at the end of it we were really fed up and we climbed to the top of this really high hill and we built an inuksuk there. Alan said it was to tell people that the fishing was no good there. (Hill)

The inuksuk that Keirsten built was small, “maybe two feet [60 cm] tall, max, just a little pile of balanced rocks. It didn’t have arms and legs or anything cool like that,” but she definitely felt that it was in line with the appearance and purpose of traditional inuksuit. When I questioned her as to why she had never built an inuksuk since returning from the arctic when she, more than many others, had a closer connection to the “real” tradition, she expressed discomfort at the idea of building them anywhere else:

It seems kind of, I don’t know, it seems out of context. Having been there, and seen them, the real ones, and people who actually use them to navigate, it seems kind of hokey, and totally out of context, to build one on a beach, or in my backyard. I mean, it’s supposed to be fulfilling a specific purpose, and what would it be doing in my backyard? Pointing to my backyard? (Hill)

Unlike those who have built inuksuit only in non-Inuit contexts and who see the objects as very symbolic, Keirsten views them as completely utilitarian. This of course leads to the question of how one knows the meaning of an inuksuk when it is created for purposes other than the basic marking of presence. The answer to this may be found in the history of the form: back when inuksuit were the only means of waymarking in the wilderness, the audience for any given inuksuk was likely the very same person or people who built it. Thus, the specific message could be *remembered* from the specifics of the inuksuk’s construction, rather than having to be initially *determined* by it. Now, given that inuksuit are no longer serving such a clear, utilitarian purpose for a localized cultural group, the more diffuse message of companionship and camaraderie, which is fairly easy to discern structurally, has become dominant.

Another interesting inuksuk case study—one that is totally symbolic and quite official—is the inuksuk that stands outside the Bartlett building on the campus of Memorial University.



Figure 5.12. The C-Core inuksuk outside the Bartlett building; photo by D. Christian

The Bartlett building houses C-Core, an engineering research and development company, whose 20th anniversary fell on the same year that C-Core sponsored an Inuit studies conference on the Memorial University campus. To commemorate both the events, Jack Clark, president and CEO of C-Core at that time, suggested that an inuksuk be built outside the building. Denny Christian, C-Core's director of technical support and logistics, was asked to build the inuksuk, and began the task with thorough research, knowing it was a serious object that he would be creating. He wanted to make the inuksuk as authentic as possible:

Originally, we were going to get the rock from Labrador, from the quarry in Nain. I knew a ship, and they were going to bring it back for us, and then the ship sank. So we went up to Buchans, where they were quarrying—they still do granite there—and these were the pieces that they used to cut up for export, and we got the pieces that were left over. (Christian)

While all efforts were made to be authentic, some “cheating” (as Denny put it) could not be helped. They cut the granite to the right size, rather than leaving it as they “found” it, and they fastened the pieces together with bolts, to ensure that it would withstand environmental pressures.



Figure 5.13. The granite used for the C-Core inuksuit; photo by D. Christian



Figure 5.14. Cutting the granite for the inuksuk; photo by D. Christian

C-Core's inuksuk is roughly five feet tall and is constructed of 12 separate pieces of stone. Denny and his student assistants planned their inuksuk carefully (see figure 15 for Denny's designs), and even invited Inuit students to be a part of its creation.

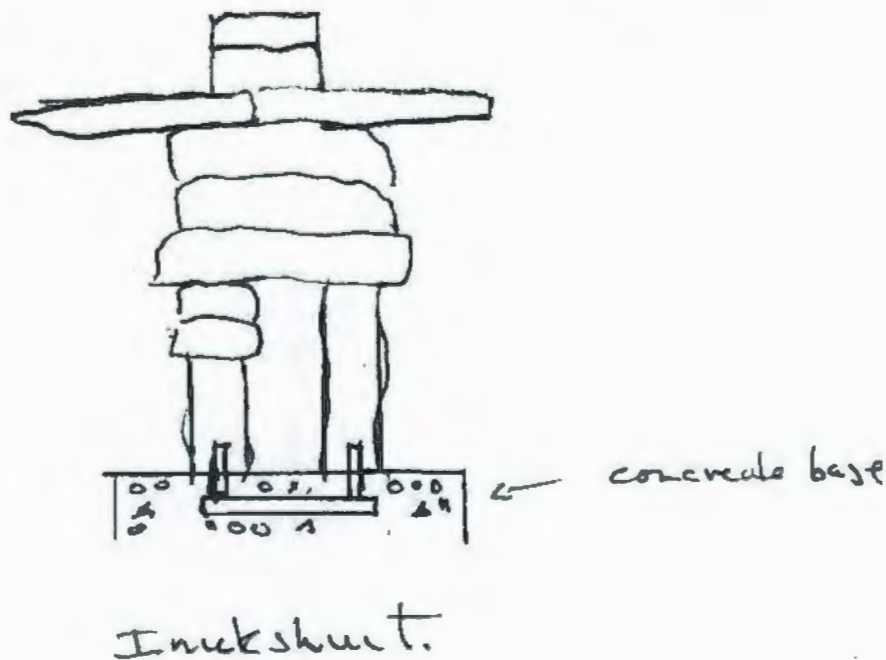


Figure 5.15. Denny Christian's plans for the inuksuk; image by D. Christian

According to Denny the students weren't too excited, though C-Core did end up getting an impressive spiritual endorsement from an unexpected source:

We got some of the local students from Labrador to come over, but they didn't say much. And then, this elder was here—he had to be here because he was in dialysis—so he came over and we told him we were building an inuksuk and at first he didn't say much at all. He said "Huh. Pile of rocks." Anyway, then he said "When you get it built, we'll come back and bless it for you if you'd like." They came back and this guy who had [previously] just grunted a bit, he gave the nicest talk, it was unbelievable. We had a Labrador flag and he spoke in Inuktitut

and had a translator. He talked about how significant these things were to the people and how spiritual they are. It was great. (Christian)



Figure 5.16. The blessing ceremony for the inuksuk; photo by D. Christian

While this inuksuk is not a personal informal creation, it is definitely a symbolic one more than a utilitarian one.

From just the above few examples, it is plain that the ways in which inuksuit are built and the things they communicate can be quite varied. I feel that despite the individual contexts of creation, the unique responses to the objects, and the diversity of experience with them, there is a consistent message being expressed, at least at the most basic level of representation.

Collaborative figures, as noted previously, speak to ideas of community and connection across distances, meanings that are evident in both the formal and informal examples explored above.

Ducks, Cairns, and Steinmann

While not all cultures create inuksuit with the same patterns or cultural contexts as do the Inuit or even the Newfoundlanders, stacks of rocks, and the practice of adding to them, are almost a world-wide phenomenon. There is a variety of terms available to reference this type of creation: cairn (derived from the Scottish *carn*), Steinmann (German for “stone man”), even “ducks.”



Figure 5.17. A trail-marking cairn in Arches National Park, Utah.



Figure 5.18. A collection of rock stacks on the island of Maui, Hawaii.



Figure 5.19. “Ducks” in a Northern California park

Here, a hiker recounts his discovery of “ducks” in Robert Louis Stevenson State Park in California:

We espied a bunch of tall rock stacks in a valley a short ways below us; since that's where our trail appeared to go anyways, we went thataway. A short and slippery descent brought us to a flat area that had quite a number of very tall man-made “ducks” (stacks of rocks, often used to mark faint trails, but purely decorative here). . . . There was a neat spiral of rocks, and the trail was lined as well—somebody (or bodies) had spent quite some time here arranging the rocks. It seemed appropriate to contribute our own modest rock stack, so we did, finding it fairly difficult to assemble rocks in a tall configuration without undue interference from gravity. Having finished this, we hiked back the way we'd come, returning to the trailhead at 2:15. (Paul 2005)

The use of the term “ducks” to mean “cairns,” is fairly common in Northern California, and here we can also see the common practice of adding to the collection and connecting with earlier visitors.

Considering practicality, the most common contemporary use of these rock-stacks are for navigation; they line hiking trails or point to the correct fork in a road. I recall being taught by my Girl Scout troop leaders to build cairns in case I got lost or needed to forge a trail into unmarked territory, and to add to cairns that I came across, to make sure that the cairns stayed noticeable. In the past, cairns have been used to mark graves, and there is Scottish saying referencing this: “Cuiridh mi clach air do charn,” or “I’ll put a stone on your cairn.” Leaving stones on graves is also a Jewish tradition. Practicality aside, there is an undeniable aesthetic quality to these stacks just as with the inuksuit. There are several artists who specialize in rock-stacking, but their impressive rock-stacks are less likely to be contributed to by passersby. I find that the vernacular creations are no less intriguing and aesthetically pleasing than the professional ones.

The rock stacks’ presence at the most natural end of the nature-culture spectrum allows for their important identification—by a very broad range of people—as “artificial constructions” within a natural landscape; they do not have many other cultural constructions to compete with and therefore stand out. This is significant when considering, as was addressed initially in chapter 3, how one “knows what to do” when confronted with an example of serial collaboration.

If one were sitting in a friend’s living room and saw some rocks piled on the floor, the pile might look especially (and perhaps inappropriately) nature-ish in contrast to the highly cultured setting of a living room. If a cultural outsider were sitting in the living room however, he or she would first need to know what was considered “normal” for such a culture-dictated

setting before being able to notice objects that stand out. But in the wild, in chaotic nature, rocks moved into an unnatural pattern—even when there has been no other significant manipulation of form or materials—stand out as cultured creations; the natural context highlights the slight and subtle intrusion of culture, making the least of efforts speak volumes. Brian Osborne has observed that “there is no inherent identity to places,” and that understanding the meaning of a culturally constructed place “requires insights into people’s traditional knowledge, cultural practice, forms of communication, and conventions for imagining place” (42). This is undoubtedly the case for many complex cultural constructions, but one does not need a highly specific level of cultural learning to recognize this understated ordering of the normally disordered natural wilderness found in the rock-stack.

Other place-creating practices, such as the traditional naming of particular natural locations, are abstract and require fluency and experience in a particular culture in order to function; the fact that a certain natural place is named is not apparent to a cultural outsider. In comparison, the level of comprehension required to recognize the human presence behind a stack of rocks is shared by many people of diverse cultural background; many people are prepared to glean the necessary information from this type of serial collaborative creation. There are, of course, numerous other levels on which a rock-stack can communicate to people who do have more specialized cultural knowledge, but the meaning expressed by the basic form in its physical context is accessible to a wide majority.

Other Examples

While rock stacks may be the most prevalent example of non-trackable type B serial collaboration, there are others as well, all of which tend to lie somewhere in the middle of the nature/culture spectrum. Cathy Preston, as noted previously, has studied several serial collaborative forms which she calls “community-based folk assemblages” and which she considers to be related to personal narratives, public space, a sense of place, legend, contestation, and visual aesthetics. She described her subject matter as follows:

Trees covered exclusively or in some combination with panties, bras, and beads tend to appear in ski areas and can be found across the United States at, for example, Breckenridge, Colorado; Windham, New Hampshire; Jackson Hole, Wyoming; Brundage, Idaho; and Snowbird, Utah. Shoe trees have been sighted across North America, Central America, and in England, most frequently along open roads and highways. Perhaps the most frequently photographed of these are the Middlegate, Nevada shoe tree alongside US 50 which is commonly referred to as the “loneliest road in America” and the Rice shoe tree in California along highway 62. ... Shoes, as Jeannie Thomas has discussed in detail in her book *Naked Barbies, Warrior Joes, & Other Forms of Visible Gender* (2003) have also appeared on fences ..., and they perpetually appear tossed over telephone and electrical wires in cities across the country.... Gum trees flourish in cities, ... though they may be found in more rural spots [as well]. Gum walls seem to be almost exclusive to city landscapes such as San Louis Obispo, California’s “Gum Alley” and Seattle, Washington’s Pike Place Market “Gum Wall,” while the sprouting of angel trees in Boulder, Colorado seems to be an isolated event. (2)

All of Preston's examples follow the pattern of serial collaboration in their creation, and all display the required characteristic of having an awareness of the chain of participants as a significant aspect of the object's meaning. Preston considers this awareness of co-creators to be one of the main reasons that these sites become places of contestation in communities;⁶ they can provide a powerful, collective voice—sometimes an unattractive one, in some people's minds—for those who feel they cannot otherwise be heard.

There are other examples as well, and while some may seem unexpected, or too deeply entrenched in their own dominant genre, emic association encourages their inclusion in the genre of serial collaborative creations. When I explain my research to people, I often hear about their own serial collaborative experiences, and a common one I've encountered is guest books at cabins or bed-and-breakfasts. Oftentimes, places that are hard to reach, places for which the simple act of arriving there is perceived as a special accomplishment (such as isolated mountain cabins), will have guest books that people feel are especially related to serial collaboration. This attention to "achievement" is notable. Much like Heather's above description of building an inuksuk to represent the accomplishment of climbing a hill, many popular outdoor destinations feature "achievement collections" located in hard-to-reach or especially significant places. For example, the natural formation called Delicate Arch in Arches National Park, Utah, features a serial collaborative collection of pennies that have been placed in a large crack in the arch by people who are daring enough to walk down the steep and slippery slope to the base of the arch itself. It makes sense that the community of people who push themselves to go beyond typical or average travel experiences is smaller, and perceived to be more elite, than the general community of travelers, and so chain objects that seem rather mundane in a normal setting (a typical B&B

guest book) become much more symbolic of a “special” status when a part of a “special” destination (such as those that reside in backcountry yurts or in remote alpine cabins).

While these examples of type B chain objects may seem quite different from the type A examples from the previous chapter, I believe that the similarities—especially in the perception of the activities by participants—is evident. The key ideas summarized in Chapter 3 abound when people speak about (and, often, when scholars or journalists write about) their experiences with serial collaboration: ideas of the landscape, and space and place; the lasting qualities of temporary ownership; issues of travel, mobility, and global access; the small world theory (both official and lay versions); perceptions of transmission such as auto-migration and transmission nets; and ideas of serendipity, ostension, and other experiential relationships to perceived narratives.

¹ The GeoCaching.com website, in its “related links” section, mentions Where’s George, Where’s Willy, EuroBillTracker, and Letterboxing.

² It is interesting to note here that while the “serendipitous” aspects of most type A activities had to do with unexpected connection to people, the serendipity described with geocaching is just as often connected to the spontaneous and unexpected discovery of a *place* as an end in itself as well as the discovery of a *person* who has shared that place. This is surely due to the fact that type B SCCs have permanent locations in the landscape rather than being mobile like type As.

³ Derived from the *Harry Potter* book series by J.K. Rowling, the term “muggles,” which in the books refers to non-magical people, is often appropriated by geocachers to refer to non-geocachers. This use of the term to designate outsiders is also common to other small groups.

⁴ AtlasQuest (www.atlasquest.com) is a popular letterboxing website that posts box locations and clues and has forums in which participants can communicate.

⁵ I find this tendency to include type A activities within type B activities very interesting. I suspect that the sense of ownership of the chain object is greater with type A activities, since the participant is singularly responsible for it for a time, and putting a type A object in a type B collection allows for that level of connection.

⁶ Preston's study of these objects focuses in part on how these sites become a place where multiple voices from a community speak. One group will use the chain object to express their presence, their opinions, or their perceived ownership over the space, while another group will vocally object to the display as being unattractive or unsightly.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

From the level of cross-referencing evident among the case studies in the previous two chapters, it should be apparent that there exists a clearly defined genre of serial collaboration. Analyzing and understanding this collection of activities—gleaning the related strands from the vast variety of manifestations of the process, as laid out in chapter 4's charts—helps to create a sense of a coherent genre with a coherent set of unifying themes. In fact, while a single pre-existing genre is not named within the tradition, people who participate in these activities have clearly identified an idealized ur-form of the genre—the “message in a bottle,” a phrase repeated regularly in interviews—thus creating a conscious folk history for their own activities. The implied narrative of the message in a bottle, offered upon reflection in interviews but not necessarily a component of initial participation, hearkens to a number of the unifying themes of this tradition, and provides a basis for the emic linking of these activities. When they connect activities such as Geocaching and Where's George (and it is notable also that participants in one activity consistently tend to take part in others as well) to timeworn concepts such as “treasure hunts” and “messages in bottles,” participants are articulating a consistent set of values and features that are grouped within a clear generic sensitivity. Upon analysis, there is ample evidence that serial collaboration is a distinct genre of folklore.¹

Dell Hymes, in his 1975 article on folklore's nature and the Sun's myth, put forward the idea that folklorists must reconceptualize “tradition” to be a part of social life—as both Goldstein and Bauman have also noted—rather than a chronological concept. As he explains,

Let us postulate that the traditional is a functional prerequisite of social life. Let us consider the notion, not simply as naming objects, traditions, but also, and more fundamentally, as naming a process. It seems in fact the case that every

person, and group, makes some effort to “traditionalize” aspects of its experience.

To “traditionalize” would seem to be a universal need. (353)

We can see this traditionalizing effort being made by participants in serial collaboration as they strive both for precursors to their own pastimes and for multiple contemporary re-creations of the same process. In this effort we can also see consistent forms, themes, and functions being recognized by participants, and, as per Bakhtin’s social perception of genre, we find both an emergence from a social (or para-social) base and a distinct point of view being represented and reaffirmed.

Chapters 3 and 4 served as a summary of the dominant functions and themes of this process; chapters 5 and 6 attempted to illustrate the ways in which those issues arose in the ethnographic data gathered for this dissertation. While not every theoretical issue arose in every case, the individual manifestations examined here are linked (much as Stanley Milgram’s *a*, *b*, *c*, and *d* small world network members) through and because of each other. Individual case studies served as especially good conduits for certain meanings and significances of the process in general: Flat Stanley is an especially good example of a chain object acting as an avatar; Amish Friendship Bread is an especially good example of the principle of contagion at work in developing a sense of connection; GeoCaching and BookCrossing emphasize the “small world” perception; inuksuit and cairns are an especially good example of how the issue of space and place is addressed; Where’s George bills are an especially good example of the expression of lay understandings of transmission. All of these themes are present in at least some fashion in almost all of the manifestations of serial collaboration discussed here. Unifying the thematic elements of all the individual processes helps to understand the greater significance of the abstracted concept as a whole.

As noted above, one theme that unifies all the activities examined here is that of the “message in a bottle,” that metaphorical representation of a serendipitous connection between two strangers. It is here where we begin to see that serial collaboration exists, in the end, as an ideal tradition to address the needs of contemporary people. We live in a time of rapid global travel and communication, when family and friend groups may live at a great distance from one another. Globalization scholars argue that local places are increasingly immediately influenced by people and things that are quite distantly removed from them; as Inda and Rosaldo phrase it, “modern localities, then, are settings for distanced relations—for relations at a distance, stretched out across time and space” (8).

Because of this, our sense of place, and the way that sense relates to our social comprehension of concepts such as “home,” is altered. Despite people’s various uses of chain objects and their varying levels of familiarity with the entire span of serial collaborative activities, it seems apparent to me that chain objects are being used in all cases as markers of orientation to create places within spaces, whether to differentiate the parts of the chaotic mass of nature by building a rock stack, or to orient and anchor themselves in a fast-paced, ever-changing global culture by tracking a BookCrossing book. Tuan’s description of the sensation of being lost in a natural space illustrates the idea more abstractly:

I follow a path into the forest, stray from the path, and all of a sudden feel completely disoriented. Space is still organized in conformity with the sides of my body. There are the regions to my front and back, to my right and left, but they are not geared to external reference points and hence are quite useless. Front and back regions suddenly feel arbitrary, since I have no better reason to go forward than to go back. Let a flickering light appear behind a clump of trees. I

remain lost in the sense that I still do not know where I am in the forest, but space has dramatically regained its structure. (1977: 36)

The light in the forest is the chain object, offering orientation, shrinking the chaotic world, and pointing the way out. The contemporary construction of serial collaborative creations speaks to the makers' needs to create order within chaos, to orient themselves and others inside a defined and desired worldview, albeit in a subtle or figurative way. Returning to Asa Berger's observation that a text's meaning is created at least in part by its readers, and Barre Toelken's explanation that extracting meaning from cultural productions is an active rather than a passive activity, it would be necessary for any inherent meaning in a chain object, if it is to be evident and effectively communicated to a wide audience, to be a message that the majority of viewers have the ability to decode.

Belden Lane, in his study *Landscapes of the Sacred*, reflects on the fact that "[h]uman beings are invariably driven to ground their religious experience in the palpable reality of space" (3). I would argue that it is not only religious experiences that drive us to mark places within spaces. The mundane and the everyday,² the basic fact of presence and existence, especially in places where nature and culture, individual and society increasingly collide, are expressed well through the creation of a chain object, a form which has the capacity to be small and unobtrusive as well as large and attention-getting. As Paul Tacon observes, all "landscapes" are a blend of natural features and cultural creations. The natural spaces that are most often noted or commemorated with cultural recognition (whether via a physical monument or simply intangible respect) are often "places where incredible change is emphasized or experienced—the boundary zones between forms of vegetation, rock, water, and sky" (123).

C. F. Blake discovered something similar, observing that graffiti tends to appear in liminal places: bus back seats, elevators, toilets (96). That quality of edge-ness is something that I feel is counter-acted by the process of serial collaboration; by becoming part of a chain of creators, one situates oneself right in the middle of a small, cozy worldview, whether by abandoning a tagged stuffed animal on a park bench in an impersonally busy city or by balancing a rock atop an inuksuk on the coast of Newfoundland. Knowing that the drive to create a chain object is based in a multipart blend of natural and cultural forces, and knowing that those forces can often be vastly divergent with regard to borrowed traditions, appropriated objects, and contested spaces, it is impressive that there can be any common denominator in the meaning of this tradition. As Wilson and David note, “the more informed the “receiver” of an image within the sociocultural milieu in which [an object] is found, the more likely the image will trigger recognition” (2).

So when a person creates a chain object, he or she is creating an easily recognized point of orientation within a chaotic setting, a small worldview within an undifferentiated global culture. Heidegger has defined a “person” as a “being-there,” espousing the philosophical opinion that a sense of place provides people with a much needed “existential foothold” in the world (Lane 1988: 4). The creation of a chain object allows us to be always “being there,” perpetually keeping distance and disorder at bay. Rather than needing traditions that take place entirely locally, around hearths and kitchen tables, we also now need traditions—folklore—that can span the same space and time that our daily lives do. In the process of serial collaboration we see a negotiation of the distancing of social relationships, one that utilizes the facts of modern life just as much as it tempers them. We see a recognition of the rapidity of physical travel. We see a worldview that reassures us of the interconnectedness and tangibility of a society that has

grown increasingly virtual. We see anti-commercialism fighting against the commodification of vernacular life. We also see a grappling with the deterioration of strict cultural categories.

Even back in 1975, Dell Hymes recognized that the growing influence of technology on the modern world was opening the door, not to a tradition-less future, but to new kinds of traditions:

Our present world may seem increasingly a world of technology and mongrelization of culture in which the traditional has less and less a place. The sense of such a world no doubt affects efforts toward pluralism, toward maintenance of identity on the part of Native Americans and many others. This pervasive motivation is a major reason why it is so important for folklorists to take the lead in developing an adequate conception of the traditional as a process, as a functional imperative. (353-354)

The cultural imperative to “traditionalize” aspects of group life is ever-present, not tied to a particular model of society that alone encourages folk expression. When genres begin to emerge that do not resemble the familiar “major” or “minor” genres of folklore, it becomes the task of folklorists not to throw in the towel, but to discover the new forms that traditionalization is producing.

One of the conditions of contemporary life is postmodernity, which I use here to refer to the general breakdown of the previously distinct (as least as they were perceived and discussed) strata of folk, mass, and high culture (see Dorst 1997). We find folk art in museums, high art reproduced in mass manufactured products, folk melodies in pop music and vice versa, television and movie quotes entering into folkspeech, traditional cultures and practices being institutionalized in mass media. As Cathy Preston eloquently explains in her examination of the

postmodern use of fairy tales, while the idea of the authoritative, hierarchical original certainly still exists, contemporary texts cumulatively achieve a competitive authority—"one that is fragmented, multivocal, fraught with contestation, and continually emergent" (2004: 212). As she observes, contemporary texts (including objects and processes) are fragmented; while scholars may impose etic categories on the bits of information (putting a singular image such as a glass slipper or a crowned frog in the genre of "folktale"), emically and practically, it is "free-floating cultural data" (210) that can be invoked in any form.

In serial collaboration, we have mass produced objects being reappropriated into new folk meanings. The content and structure of the activities reflect the source from which they are being derived: no longer the neat and tidy, cleanly categorized world of the past, but a place in which people are free to construct their own worldviews as they choose from whatever cultural materials they like. While it could easily be argued that this is an idealistic statement, the question of greater freedom can be removed and we are still left with a situation in which people are offered cultural goods that are much more jumbled than they were once presented to be. Thus the traditions that will serve the needs of these people will likewise need to be jumbled: mixed bags of transitory, unanchored, collaborative, discursive meanings.

Architect Amos Rapoport thinks of places as eliciting "place-appropriate behaviors" (Jakle: 8), which leads to a limited range of potential behaviors for a particular place. This is interesting considering how many chain objects are items appropriated from their intended use; but it also allows for a "place" to be less concrete, more "phantasmagoric," as Anthony Giddens suggests. Building from this idea of place as more than a single, immovable locality, Margaret Rodman (2003) proposes the term "multilocality" to accurately describe what used to be known simply as "places." As she says, "places are politicized, culturally relative, historically specific,

local and multiple constructions” (203). E. Relph (1991), uses Foucault’s term “heterotopia” to capture this same sense of place as multiple, “that is to say it is pluralistic, chaotic, designed in detail yet lacking in universal foundations or principles, continually changing, linked by centerless flows of information; it is artificial and marked by deep social inequalities” (104-105).

It should be clear by now that the concept of “place” can be successfully applied to a multilocal, portable object. If “home” is a concept that is increasingly unanchored, then “home” must simply become something we can take with us when we travel. If we conceive of home as Tuan does, as a location where we have a complex experience of place, then the ability to have familiar places—places where we can have vernacular, native experiences—become portable is necessary. The tradition of serial collaboration allows this to happen.

As has been noted, participants in serial collaboration are often very interested in the chains of people that are created by the sequential ownership of the object. Unlike other collaboratively created vernacular objects, these exist only for the sake of creating that chain; shrines have a dedicatory focus, barns raised by a community are meant to be utilized or lived in, even narratives constructed by a group are meant to pass information, or entertain, or express an abstract idea or set of ideas. While they all certainly create a group of people linked by common creation or participation, they all have explicit purposes beyond that result. The objects considered here create a chain of people whose only purpose is to exist as a meaningful chain, across time and space, and it is the creation and acknowledgement of that chain that can create for us a small-world scenario, that can reembed us in our social relationships without having to deny the global and distanced nature of modern life.

In order to maintain our sense of a shared “everyday life” with the people we consider to be members of our communities and folk groups, we’re finding ways to reject the completely

virtual nature of the modern web of people—strangers and friends alike—that spans the globe, and as such, have reinserted a vernacular process of shared creation into the scenario. Santino has said of spontaneous shrines that they fight depersonalization; they “insert and insist upon the presence of the absent people” (370). The objects examined here do the same thing for every member of the chain of participation. If we can place an object out in the world and witness the repeated individual care with which it is treated as it travels the globe or is visited by global villagers, we can be reassured that the world really is physically as small as the speeding up of time makes it appear. As its most basic level, serial collaboration is a process that takes a global community and makes it a physically localized and tangibly personalized folk group.

¹ As for the common-use name of this genre, I would suggest the terms “small-world activities” and “object-tracking activities” in place of the more technical “serial collaborative activities,” since these are typical descriptors in normal, emic explanations.)

² Not surprisingly, these are the elements of culture often considered to be the domain of the folklorist.

Epilogue

This dissertation has attempted to identify and define a new genre of folklore, to illustrate how that genre is especially suited to function within—and dramatize the concerns and values of—a contemporary and emergent global society, and to begin to analyze and interpret some of those functions. This clearly opens the door to further research. The case studies presented here, while sufficient to illustrate the unity of the genre and the major themes that grow from a study of it, could each sustain (and would certainly benefit from) individual in-depth, ethnographic examinations. The importance of emergent forms of folklore cannot be underestimated. When Dell Hymes observed, over 30 years ago, that *all* people feel the drive to express their joys and sufferings in culturally resonant forms, he also expressed his hope (as many folklorists have done before and since) that folklore studies could take a leading role in the academic study of traditional culture. As the ever-present tension between tradition and creativity, between the conservative and the dynamic forces within folklore, may at times lean more towards staid convention and at other times toward rapid variability, taking the time to fully consider new traditions is what will keep the discipline of folkloristics relevant in a culture of increasingly rapid social change. It is my hope that this dissertation contributes to that effort.

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Appendix I: Surveys

BookCrossing:

How did you first hear about BookCrossing? Describe your experiences with it (how long you've been involved, how much time you spend on it, how often you participate, etc.).

What about the concept of BookCrossing appeals to you most? What keeps you interested and involved? What's your favorite aspect? Why do you think BookCrossing is so popular?

Is one aspect of BookCrossing--either the online stuff (monitoring releases, chatting) or the "hands-on" stuff (releasing, seeking, and prepping books)--more appealing to you than the other? Why or why not?

Describe the connections you've made with other people through BookCrossing. Do you chat with them online? Do you ever meet with them in person? How often do you use the forum areas on the BookCrossing website?

How, if at all, are the connections you make with other people through BookCrossing different from connections you make with people through other websites or forums?

Do you participate in any other activities that are similar to BookCrossing? If so, what are they, and how are they similar to BookCrossing?

Where are you from?

Are you male or female?

What is your age?

If you would be interested in participating in further research on this topic, please provide me with your name and email address (please note: this is entirely optional; no one is required to give their name or contact information). If there's anything else you think I should know, please include it here, too.

GeoCaching:

How did you first hear about GeoCaching? Describe your experiences with it (how long you've been involved, how much time you spend on it, how often you participate, etc.).

What about the concept of GeoCaching appeals to you most? What keeps you interested and involved? What's your favorite aspect? Why do you think GeoCaching is so popular?

Is one aspect of GeoCaching--either the online stuff (monitoring caches, chatting with other geocachers), or the "hands-on" stuff (making and placing a cache, seeking caches)--more appealing to you than others? Why or why not?

What is your favorite kind of cache to make or to seek?

Have you ever used a Travel Bug or another kind of hitchhiker (either in connection with a specific cache or on its own)? If so, please describe how you used it. Do you think hitchhikers are a good (or fun or interesting) aspect of GeoCaching? Why or why not?

Describe the connections (if any) you've made with other people through GeoCaching. Do you chat with them online? Do you ever meet with them in person?

Do you participate in any other activities that are similar to GeoCaching? If so, what are they, and how are they similar to GeoCaching?

Where are you from?

Are you male or female?

What is your age?

If you would be interested in participating in further research on this topic, please provide me with your name and email address (please note: this is entirely optional; no one is required to give their name or contact information). If there's anything else you think I should know, please include it here, too.

LetterBoxing:

How did you first hear about Letterboxing? Describe your experiences with it (how long you've been involved, how much time you spend on it, how often you participate, etc.).

What about the concept of Letterboxing appeals to you most? What keeps you interested and involved? What's your favorite aspect? Why do you think Letterboxing is so popular?

Please describe your signature or personal stamp(s). Why do you use that/those stamp(s)?

Have you ever used a cuckoo or a hitchhiker? If so, please describe how you used it. Do you think hitchhikers are a good (or fun or interesting) aspect of Letterboxing? Why or why not?

Describe the connections (if any) you've made with other people through Letterboxing. Do you chat with them online? Do you ever meet with them in person?

Do you participate in any other activities that are similar to Letterboxing? If so, what are they, and how are they similar to Letterboxing?

Where are you from?

Are you male or female?

What is your age?

If you would be interested in participating in further research on this topic, please provide me with your name and email address (please note: this is entirely optional; no one is required to give their name or contact information). If there's anything else you think I should know, please include it here, too.

Where's George:

How did you first hear about Where's George?

Describe your experiences with Where's George (how long you've been involved, how much time you spend on it, how often you participate, etc.).

What about the concept of Where's George appeals to you most? What keeps you interested and involved? What's your favorite aspect? Why do you think tracking bills is so popular?

How often to you put the Where's George web address on clean bills that you receive?

When you put the Where's George web address on a bill, do you use an official stamp, or do you write it on by hand?

Describe the connections (if any) that you've made with other people through Where's George. Have you ever gotten in touch with someone who received a bill you're tracking?

Do you participate in any other activities that are similar to Where's George? If so, what are they, and how are they similar to Where's George?

Where are you from?

Are you male or female?

What is your age?

If you would be interested in participating in further research on this topic, please provide me with your name and email address (please note: this is entirely optional; no one is required to give their name or contact information). If there's anything else you think I should know, please include it here, too.

Where's Willy:

How did you first hear about Where's Willy?

Describe your experiences with Where's Willy (how long you've been involved, how much time you spend on it, how often you participate, etc.).

What about the concept of Where's Willy appeals to you most? What keeps you interested and involved? What's your favorite aspect? Why do you think tracking bills is so popular?

How often do you put the Where's Willy web address on clean bills that you receive?

When you put the Where's Willy web address on a bill, do you use an official stamp, or do you write it on by hand?

Describe the connections (if any) that you've made with other people through Where's Willy. Have you ever gotten in touch with someone who received a bill you're tracking?

Do you participate in any other activities that are similar to Where's Willy? If so, what are they, and how are they similar to Where's Willy?

Where are you from?

Are you male or female?

What is your age?

If you would be interested in participating in further research on this topic, please provide me with your name and email address (please note: this is entirely optional; no one is required to give their name or contact information). If there's anything else you think I should know, please include it here, too.

