(RE)MAKING PLACE ON SALT SPRING ISLAND, BRITISH COLUMBIA: A TALE TOLD TWO WAYS

by

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Abstract

This PhD dissertation is an ethnography of Salt Spring Island, British Columbia. Based on fourteen months of fieldwork, this dissertation explores how people define, imagine, and create place on Salt Spring Island and why creating place matters. I use the importance my research participants place on local food as a particular lens to give focus to this exploration of how place is made and re-made. Definitions of Salt Spring Island are complex and often contested and competing. On an island known for its physical beauty as well as an “alternative” approach to social relations and politics, Salt Spring Island is also a place where economic development competes with environmental preservation, affluence intersects with poverty, and residents grapple with concepts of insider versus outsider. Using in-depth ethnographic research methods that included long-term research in residence on Salt Spring Island as well as participatory visual ethnographic methods, I explore these contestations of place and examine how people mobilize various means to define Salt Spring Island for themselves. Using Salt Spring Island as an example, I attempt to show that the creation of place is one fraught with conscious and unconscious arguments about who has the right and the power to define place. Ultimately the place that I describe within this ethnography is one that I have co-created with my research participants during a particular space in time and it is therefore unique, as all of our experiences with place must be. In addition to the ethnography, this dissertation also attempts to tell a story about Salt Spring Island in an experimental manner using photographs made by participants and researcher, constructing a purely visual ethnography that is meant to be interpreted by the reader. In so doing, an additional definition or experience of place is created by each reader, thus further developing the exploration of how we create place.
Preface

The research and writing of this dissertation was conducted wholly by the author under the approval of UBC’s Okanagan Research Ethics Board, Certificate Number H10-01991.


All material contained in this chapter comes from ethnographic research I conducted while at UBC. I wrote the entirety of the manuscript.
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Dedication

To Salt Spring, home of my heart, and her people—you totally helped manifest this.
PART ONE: An Ethnography in Words

Introduction

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world.
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.
— Margaret Mead

“I can’t believe THAT!” said Alice.
“Can’t you?” the Queen said in a pitying tone.
“Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.”
Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said: “one CAN’T believe impossible things.”
“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”
— Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass

Prelude

Come. Let’s go on an adventure to a magical place. We have to leave the city’s soaring crystal towers behind us and move out across a sapphire blue ocean. Don’t worry about the big, blue-black ravens that have hitched a ride with us. They’re seasoned travelers here who will wait for an opportune moment to swoop down and grab up forgotten bits of snacks human passengers have left behind. If you watch carefully as we head on our way, you might just see dolphins trailing us, or even more magical, a pod of orcas, their dorsal fins jutting high out of the water. Do you see? There, up ahead, flashes of green? They look like fuzzy green backs of giant turtles from another age. As we move closer they begin to take shape, scattered small islands blanketed in evergreen trees, here and there the twisted trunks of arbutus pitch out at impossible angles over the water, their peeling maroon bark revealing smooth bright lime green underneath. We wind our way in between them, dull-black
cormorants remaining passive in our wake. Quick, look at that dead tree on the edge of that small islet. A bald eagle observes our passing with mild interest. But here, pay attention. We are almost at our destination. We are coming into a small harbour ringed with evergreen trees and crystal-clear water. We dock at a tiny village with small, brightly coloured buildings clinging to the hillside. Your stomach might feel a bit topsy-turvy just at the end of our journey (well, actually the beginning). It might be from seasickness or perhaps it is due to an almost intangible magic emanating from the island. Can you feel the change when we step onto land? A calmness that comes over you? People will tell you it happens to many who arrive here, and often those who feel it strongly never leave again. The island exerts a magical pull on those she wants to keep. That is what the locals say, anyway. We have arrived at our destination. 48.8333° longitude North, 123.5000° latitude West; 19,663 hectares (48,587 acres) filled with brazen deer, hooting owls, woodpeckers of all persuasions, singing frogs, soaring eagles, fluffy sheep, marauding rabbits, not a single traffic light (although there is one four-way stop), and around 10,000 human characters, some might call them eccentric, others might simply call them Salt Springers. Welcome to Old Salty, the Rock, Salt Spring or, for more formal occasions, Salt Spring Island. Be careful, you may never want to leave.
Illustration 1.1: Google Map of Salt Spring Island and Surrounding Area
Foreword
My research at its most macro level uses food as a means for understanding how and why people construct both individual and place identity. Food provides powerful insight into links between and among people and systems (both social and environmental), into how cultural meanings are manufactured, as well as into the constructions and interdependencies of place and identity. At a more detailed level, I am interested in exploring social activist efforts surrounding local food and how that activism reflects cultural resistance, resilience, and transformation. My research explores how and who creates renewed, often defiant, visions of local culture and what role food plays in those creations of locality. On a broader level, I am also interested in how the form research takes – traditional ethnography, for example, in the form of long-term immersive research in an exotic location – in turn informs the definition of place as well.²

Given that my research interests are centred on food, place and identity, and the fact that everyone eats, inhabits a particular place at a particular time and has a sense of self, choosing a location for my field research was fairly wide open. However, as any anthropologist will tell you, fieldwork is filled with unexpected outcomes and changed plans, often influenced by serendipity. And, of course, by practicalities like funding, time, research ethics boards, supervisors and committees. I personally wanted to explore the idea that what anthropologists do is make the everyday into the exotic and the exotic into the everyday. Therefore, I decided that I wanted to do research close to home, in a place that was almost everyday to me but where I could explore the idea of the everyday being exotic. I also wanted a place that had a strong community focus on local food and was considered just enough outside of the mainstream of North American culture to be called alternative.³ I live in British Columbia, so there were a couple of communities that fit the bill, but the one that jumped out the strongest was Salt Spring Island (see Figure 1 on page 10 for a map of Salt Spring Island and surroundings).

It is difficult to find anywhere in Canada that has a more alternative reputation than Salt Spring Island. In addition, because of its mild climate it has the longest growing season in the country, making it a great place for local food as farms do not get completely covered by snow for several months of the year. I arrived on Salt Spring Island in August 2012, my first official visit for field research. It was on a Tuesday, in order to catch the Tuesday Farmers
Market; I was eager to get started right away. I was not living on the island yet, but instead a short 25-minute ferry ride away in the city of Victoria. Originally, I had grand plans to conduct fieldwork both in Victoria and on Salt Spring, in order to compare an urban experience of local food and place with a rural experience. I was extremely lucky that my dissertation research was funded and that I had a flexible supervisor and committee who allowed me to follow the threads of research that I gathered that first Tuesday on Salt Spring and which quickly led to my full-time research focus there during my 14-month residence conducting fieldwork on how Salt Springers conceptualized community and built and nurtured it, particularly through activities surrounding local food.

Ultimately, what this dissertation is about is my fourteen months living on that beautiful island and making and finding a place for myself in the community. It is about intersections and relationships, friendships and welcome, community and exclusion, all filtered through my own personal and anthropological lens, as I cannot tell the story any other way. I can attempt to share what my research participants kindly shared with me, but ultimately it is always through my own filter. I think that this is a particularly important caveat to make right at the beginning, one I hope readers will keep in mind as they read through this work. I also want to underscore that, while this ethnography does include some facets of auto-ethnography, it is explicitly not an auto-ethnography or an ethnography that focuses primarily on the researcher’s own experience, rather than as a piece of the larger analysis of the practices and beliefs of a larger group of people. Although this focus on the personal subjective experience is the focus of much of the literature on auto-ethnography, I would argue that all ethnography is in part auto-ethnography, especially today. As anthropologists conducting ourselves in the 21st century, we are taught to be reflexive above all and include ourselves in our narratives, we accept that ethnography does not exist within a bubble where we can remove ourselves as researchers and expound from on high. Reflexivity is in a way a kind of auto-ethnography. Therefore, while I do not consider this a full auto-ethnography, it does contain much of my own story of fourteen months on Salt Spring and my experiences as a researcher; however, I could have written it no other way.

There is no way to fully encompass everything that I learned and experienced during 14 months within the confines of a dissertation. Some anthropologists use the information they gather during their dissertation research to form the backbone of decades of publications, as a
dissertation can only cover a minute portion of the experience. Therefore, this dissertation focuses only on a small part of my time on Salt Spring. I have chosen to focus on a small number of themes here, although that does not mean that they are the most relevant ones for Salt Spring Island nor that this dissertation is meant to be the definitive description of Salt Spring and its inhabitants. Due to space and time constraints, as well as my own limited experience and filter, this document is only one representation of a particular space in time. It is organized into the following areas:

- Chapters 1 and 2 outline the methods and the theory behind this project;
- Chapter 3 gives a brief history and description of Salt Spring Island;
- Chapter 4 provides a literature overview to provide context for my research and analysis;
- Chapter 5 explores the changing relationship between humans and our food and lays the foundation for the importance my research participants place on local food;
- Chapters 6 through 10 dig deeper into my research and how place is constructed on Salt Spring Island;
- And finally the conclusion, where things are wrapped up nicely with a bow, or as nicely as can be done in the messy work of ethnography.
Chapter 2 The Methods in the Madness or the Theory and Methods Behind Making Sense of 14 Months of Research on Salt Spring

While much of anthropology’s work in the past has attempted to work with meta-theory, it is clear this has become increasingly problematic for contemporary anthropology. As we acknowledge that our research participants do not exist within a temporally and geographically bounded sort of magical place, I believe we must also acknowledge that no single theoretical explanation can apply to all anthropological work. I see my theoretical approach as a kind of patchwork quilt making, taking pieces from different theoretical approaches that fit the particular situation of my particular research. As such, it is difficult to say that X theory(ies) forms the foundation of my theoretical approach. As Knauft observes, “Increasingly, anthropological work pursues mid-level connections by linking individual facets of large-scale theories, topics and methods to particular but not entirely local objects of study” (2006:411). My theoretical approach and analysis was built in the act of doing the research and continues to develop as I write. By moving to what Knauft terms a “softer theoreticism” (413), which melds ethnographic, historical and personal perspectives, versus working with a single meta-theory, opens up anthropology to more creative, innovative and, perhaps, groundbreaking work—at the very least, more locally relevant work.

While I approach theoretical analysis with a sort of locally-informed quilt-making model, it does not mean that I draw from every bit of anthropological theory floating in the academic ether. My theoretical familiars, if you will, tend to have interpretive, feminist, symbolic, even some post-modern, blood running through their veins. Clifford Geertz, Sherry Ortner, Bruce Knauft, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Sarah Pink and others might seem a strange and disconnected family of familiars. They range in time, space and gender and, at times, criticize and contradict each other. However, I draw something from each (some more than others, like Geertz) that helps to create a personal working model of anthropology.

I embrace the idea that there is no single truth. However, there is something that we can make sense of and with which we can make connections. This frees the researcher from having to discover and leaves us to describe. It leaves us to produce “messy texts that have some degree of verisimilitude; that is, texts that allow readers to imaginatively feel their way
into the experiences that are being described by the author” (Denzin 1997:12). My paradigmic position assumes and incorporates historical, social and present cultural context and values, as well as the importance of voice, both of the narrator and of the people whose stories are being told. This position incorporates a global, transnational approach and accepts that culture is fluid and not necessarily geographically located.

However paradoxical it may sound, physical place remains critically important. The English phrase “putting down roots” is widely used and many people talk about wanting to put down roots somewhere in order to feel connected and grounded. For Salt Springers, this is an especially important notion shared throughout the community and by all of the people with whom I spoke during my time on the island. For those who choose to make the island their permanent home, putting down roots becomes a literal, physical act for many through planting vegetable gardens, through which they feel as if they are becoming part of the island’s soil itself.

Ironically, a virtual space, the Salt Spring Exchange, also serves to connect people to each other and to the island. This online bulletin board, discussed in more detail in Chapter 8, acts as a communication centre for many islanders, helping to define personal and Island identity. Using the Exchange myself as a researcher and as a resident of Salt Spring quickly became part of my daily routine. I found a place to live through the Exchange, recruited participants, met friends through answering ads for pet sitting and more. Anthropology at its core is about studying how humans operate in our worlds and therefore studying and using the online world, including a forum like the Salt Spring Exchange, seems almost a given for any ethnographic project. While my research was not solely focused on the Exchange, I did make use of it not only for the same kinds of activities Salt Springers use it for, such as finding a place to live and getting free fruit. I also used the Exchange to recruit participants for the participatory photography portion of my research, read the Exchange daily and used my observations to inform my analysis of my research. In the sub-field of cyber-ethnography or virtual ethnography, virtual spaces become incorporated into our conceptions of “the field” (Keeley-Browne 2011:331), which was definitely the case for my research. The Exchange is for many Salt Springers an essential space that forms the Salt Spring experience and I incorporated it and used it as such in my research experience. However, it is important to note
that I did not approach my research as cyber-ethnography and thus did not use the theoretical discourse surrounding cyber-ethnography to inform my theoretical approach.\(^5\)

Sherry Ortner’s concept of practice theory also informs my research. Ortner’s version of practice theory brings a feminist, minority perspective into the frame and focuses on the ways in which power relationships are ambiguous and contradictory (2004). It draws on political economy, which looks at large-scale regional political and/or economic systems, and how these external forces impact communities at the local level. Practice theory attempts to explain the ways in which societies change or evolve, largely in adaptation to those external impacts, while also integrating local historical context and personal agency. I assume that all human beings exercise agency, whether through resisting dominant modes of operating in society or by deciding to operate within societal norms and strictures, even if those strictures are inhuman and unjust.

As Ortner notes, “it is our location ‘on the ground’ that puts [anthropologists] in a position to see people not simply as passive reactors to and enactors of some ‘system,’ but as active agents and subjects in their own history” (1984:143). Every person has agency but this does not mean that we are each completely free, unfettered individuals. We are always engaged in enacting agency in concert with others, within social relationships with family, friends, teachers and others. Our analyses must focus on both actor agency and large-scale social and cultural forces (Ortner 2004). Ortner’s framework of practice theory is one in which neither individuals nor social forces have more impact than the other; rather, there is a dynamic, powerful and even transformative relationship “between the practices of real people and the structures of society, culture and history” (133). Practice theory attempts to understand the ambiguities found in agency and resistance and to place those ambiguities in social, historical and political context. As such, it provides a good working model for investigating the complex nature of how and why people are building a local food system and the varied intersections of social, historical and political forces that influence those efforts.

I presume whose voice to include, how and why, is the choice of the writer and represents a specific interpretation and presentation of understanding. Nevertheless, I earnestly attempt to include as many voices as possible and try not to mask those voices with my own. Ultimately, my work is still the presentation of one person’s thoughts and I take full responsibility for the texts I produce and the ideas and understandings contained within them.
Like culture, my approach is not static and fixed; above all, it is not only personal but also local and contextual.

**Specific Methods to the Madness**

Writing (let alone reading) a minutely detailed day-to-day account of what I did during fieldwork would not be an intensely interesting read. However, the details are a necessary evil, so to speak, for they ground the work and give it credence, which in ethnography is all important since, as a discipline, we rely on somewhat amorphous data like people’s stories, feelings, the way the air felt and other intangibles. My methods are grounded in my patchwork of theory but they also adapted and changed throughout my time on Salt Spring as I felt it necessary to do so. As I mentioned above, one of my goals with the research was to conduct a traditional field research foray in a somewhat exotic locale. To that end, my primary method of data collection was what Geertz (2001) called “deep hanging out” or an immersive, long-term research experience in the field. This entailed:

- 14 months of participant observation, 13 in residence on Salt Spring Island. 2 weeks of that time were spent off island, one at an American Anthropology Association conference and the second on campus at UBC in Kelowna;
- Research participants:
  I generally focused on recruiting participants who were deeply engaged in the local food community, for example local farmers or those who attended grower meetings or the farmers market. Most of my participants were gathered through a snowball effect—once I met one or two people they introduced me to another person and so on. I directly recruited participants for the photography portion of the project, consciously not placing any required attributes on participants other than that they agreed to work with me on the study.
  - 15 research participants (those who signed consent forms and who actively participated in my research versus the many people I interacted with on a less intensive level throughout my time on Salt Spring);
  - 6 participatory photography participants (in addition to the aforementioned research participants) recruited via an advertisement I placed on the Salt Spring
Exchange, resulting in over 300 photographs and 18 hours of recorded semi-structured interviews;

• 14 months of reading the Salt Spring Exchange and documenting multiple threads of conversation;

• An impossible-to-count number of conversations with people who knew what I was researching and who shared their opinions in small snippets; and

• Innumerable cups of coffee, tea and tasty treats at Café Talia, Salt Spring Coffee and Penny’s Pantry.
Chapter 3 Picturing Salt Spring: Using Photographs to Construct a Shared Narrative

Research of any kind, but particularly anthropology, I think, requires a deep interest in not only the subject of research but also the methods behind it. I love anthropology because at its heart it is about people and about taking what we as anthropologists learn about people and putting that knowledge into words. However, I am also fascinated by how human beings use images to create definitions about themselves and the world around them (think of the phenomenon of selfies and the myriad things that has to say about contemporary states of being and self-expression). Salt Spring is visually rich—an explosion of natural beauty that can literally take your breath away—and that visual richness is part of the story of the place. It would not make sense, therefore, to attempt to construct an ethnography of Salt Spring without examining the role the visual plays in Salt Spring as a place and in how people define the island.

Ethnography, if we break the word down, literally means writing about people, so it might make sense to wonder how we can do “ethnography” without words, but with pictures instead. The fact is, ethnography is about observation, and our vision plays a vital role in that observation. However, when it comes time to analyze our observations, we turn to words and theories about what we have seen, or at the most micro level we explore theories about words. However, this kind of analysis belies the fact that our observations in many cases were made with our visual faculties. How, then, to share what our eyes took in and our brain and psyche processed? When teaching visual anthropology I ask my students how they know if what they see is the same as what someone else sees. Is the blue of the sky I see the same as the one the student with the long black hair sitting at the back of the room sees? Many initially say yes, of course, if you’re both looking at it at the same time. I then tell them a story about an argument my mother and I had over several years about the colour salmon. I argued that it was a pinkish, rose-hued colour. She argued it included much more orange than that. She is an artist, so she had artistic colour theory on her side, but I just couldn’t understand how she could say the colour salmon was orange-ish. It’s the colour of a piece of salmon, which is definitely not orange; I wondered how she could possibly make the argument when we were looking at the same colour. Well, a few years later she had eye surgery and lo and behold, she
came to me and said that I was right, salmon was in fact pinkish and didn’t have any orange in it at all. It turns out we were seeing a different colour when standing side by side looking at it—the early cataracts she had had created a yellow film over everything she saw.

It is my contention that although we assume, when reading, that we are reading “the Truth,” or at the very least the author’s truth, there is always a sense of fiction within any account. The brain and memory is a complex, fickle, and creative thing. As readers, we impose our own interpretations and our own vision, if you will, on the author’s words. So, I can tell my story in words but each person who reads it is going to “see” that story differently based on their own experiences and opinions. Without being there at the exact time I was there, how can you as a reader know what my experience (of Salt Spring, in this case) was truly like? Indeed, without being in my head and in my body, how can anyone know what my experience was truly like? At its best, ethnography attempts to get at that very personal, internal, embodied experience of the researcher. Incorporating visual research methods into my research was my attempt to create a shared ethnography in images, my own and those supplied by my research participants. If Willy Wonka’s smell-a-vision actually existed, I would have made full use of that as well. Alas, no one seems to have developed it yet, so pictures will have to do.

Photography has a powerful claim to realism and despite what we now know about photo retouching and editing, we still tell ourselves that you see is what you get, especially when the photographs seem to show something as mundane as a sheep in a field or a harbour filled with boats. As Ball and Smith write,

photographs of people and things stand as evidence in a way that pure narrative cannot. In many senses, visual information of what the people and their world looks like provides harder and more immediate evidence than the written word; photographs can authenticate a research report in a way that words alone cannot (1992:9).

However, the photographs are not interrogated as data themselves, but rather as factual representations of time, space, and place. It is this unconscious use of photographs that I wish to interrogate here, because as researchers (and as research participants) we choose to frame or crop photographs in a particular way. We choose one photo over another to help us tell our story and we place it in a particular way, on a particular page,
within the story. As Ball and Smith so cogently remind us, “it is people and not cameras who take pictures… photographs are not unambiguous records of reality: The sense viewers make of them depends upon cultural assumptions, personal knowledge, and the context in which the picture is presented” (18).

Sarah Pink argues that researchers “should attend not only to the internal ‘meanings’ of an image, but also to how the image was produced and how it is made meaningful by its viewers” (2003:186). For my purposes what was most important to me was to look at how my participants imbued the photos with meaning and, in turn, how those images are further imbued with meaning by my reading of the images and the stories behind their production. Like Sarah Pink, I do not see the written word as the only or as a superior form of ethnographic representation (2007:4). Images hold a very real power on their own, just as the written word does. As readers of these images we construct a story of space and time that will differ from every other viewer; we can’t ever know exactly what someone else is seeing, just like that salmon colour my mother and I argued about. It is with this belief in mind that I analyzed the photos my participants and I made of Salt Spring, knowing that I saw them in a different way than my participants, even though they had recounted to me what the photographs meant to them. However, as Sarah Pink’s visual ethnographies also show, as ethnographers we inherently mix text and images and create yet another way of presenting our ethnographic interpretations.

The images that comprise Section 2 do not attempt to literally reproduce the written ethnography you will read, but instead constitute a different sort of journey through space and time on Salt Spring. Knowing what you know once you’ve read this document, you will of course bring a different interpretation to the images than if had you looked at them before reading the written portion of this tale told two ways. I ask that, as you view the images, you attempt to think about how you read the story contained within them and how that story might differ from the one I have told in writing and how what you read might be different from how another reader might have read it. The idea is a bit like Alice going down the rabbit hole, I grant you, but one that applies to all ethnography, I think, for ethnography is only as good as the story teller’s ability to express in words their very personal, visceral experience and the reader’s ability to hear and see that story themselves.
Section 2, the second method of telling a tale of Salt Spring, is as close to a cooperative form of ethnography as I believe I could complete. However, it is still my construction and my organization of the photographs, so my mark is more firmly and patently on the story that follows than any one of my participants. I think it is important to remember that photographs and even video, are not truth any more than words are. They are instead someone’s visual statement about the world they live in and their experience (Worth 1980:20). Images, particularly the photographs we make and share, uncover what is culturally and socially significant for us (Ball and Smith 1992:32). However, there is something about participatory photography that I think provides an advantage, in that ever-illusory search for objectivity, because it explicitly acknowledges the role of human observation. Indeed, Ira Jacknis has written that this is the only way research with human subjects can attain objectivity (1988:171). I do not particularly agree that it is possible to attain objectivity in work like ethnography—it involves humans at its very core and humans are not objective, nor particularly rational, beings—but I do think that bringing in participatory work, particularly visual, helps in that goal. Initially, I could not explain exactly why I thought that was so; I just instinctively felt that bringing in another sense would help add another layer of experience to the research and thus, add a further sense of “being there,” of thick description, if you will.

Some visual ethnography research shows the part of the brain responsible for processing visual information, developed evolutionarily before the parts that process verbal data. The researchers interpret this to mean that “images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain’s capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words” (Harper 2002:13). Regardless of whether one agrees with this interpretation, the work with my research participants definitely elicited what I would describe as more layered, more deeply thoughtful conversations when we were reviewing their photographs than when simply talking with no visual cues. As celebrated ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall notes in an interview about his work,

there is always an ambiguity about the way a film implies something. It suggests, it draws possible connections, it creates reverberations and harmonics. But this is also one of its strengths, because that sort of complexity is also characteristic of much of our social experience. Something with a meaning in one context will have a different meaning in another, but it
will nevertheless drag overtones of its other meaning into the new context (Barbash and Taylor 1996:374).

Substitute still photographs for film in MacDougall’s quote and I think we could make the same argument. MacDougall goes on to argue that conventional academic writing is built upon descriptive statements and hypotheses; whereas, visual mediums create implied meaning, sometimes in very subtle ways, such as placing a photograph next to another on a page and letting viewers make their own connections and conclusions (Barbash and Taylor 1996:374). This is exactly my goal with the “ethnography in pictures” in Section 2. I could write an entire dissertation about the participatory photography experience with my participants and compare it with that of more classic ethnographic work and the nature of ethnographic knowledge, but that will have to wait for another book or article. Instead, I would ask that you approach the images and my process, with an open mind and imagination to think about what you might know about Salt Spring Island after just viewing these images, as if you had no knowledge of the place and its inhabitants beforehand. There is no accompanying descriptive text for each image, guiding you to read them in a particular way, simply the name of the person who took the photo. The photographs do not attempt to reproduce the written ethnography that came before them. Instead, I hope they tell their own story, one that will likely be different for each viewer. I hope that it proves a worthwhile experiment.

**The Nitty Gritty Details of My Participatory Photography Experiment on Salt Spring**

Initially, I put a call out on the Salt Spring Exchange for participants, asking for people who wanted to tell, in pictures, their story of how Salt Spring. I asked participants to take photographs as “if you were going to tell someone who has never been here all about Salt Spring, about your experience here and what the island is like.” My first volunteer also wrote freelance articles for *The Driftwood*, the local newspaper, and asked if she could pitch a story to the paper about my project. I agreed, despite feeling a bit odd being on the other side of the interview table, so to speak. It’s not a natural desire, I think, for ethnographers to be the subject of study or of attention, so having an article in the paper, with my picture, explaining my project as someone else interpreted it was an enlightening, if not altogether comfortable, experience. That is a subject that could be an entire PhD project alone and, although I find it
interesting, it is off topic; so, rather than take a giant academic parenthetical path let’s keep to the current one, shall we?

I had ten people respond to my call for participants. I sat down with each person who responded for about an hour initially, explaining my project and interviewing them about Salt Spring, how they came to live there, and their impressions of the island. These interviews are included in the overall data for the research project, however, not all people who responded ended up participating fully in the photography aspect of the project. Two people took photos but I was not able to successfully schedule a second meeting with them to review their photos. Two people took part in the initial interview but opted not to participate further. Ultimately six participants completed photographs and agreed to share them with me for this research. My own photos were taken over the course of the full 14 months; the majority of my participants took their photographs over several months in late winter/early spring 2011.

After our initial meeting, I sent participants away—all but one with their own cameras—to take the photos on their own time. One participant didn’t own a camera, so I supplied her with a disposable one. In the visual ethnography literature this approach—having participants take pictures of a particular subject—is generally described as photo voice. However, I like to think of it a bit differently and use the term participatory photography. Participatory to me implies an active role on the part of the research participant, which is not always the case with photo voice. In photo voice methods, participants can be given fairly explicit instructions about what they are to take photos of and why. Rather than imposing my presuppositions on the experience and telling my participants what photos they should take—for example, telling them to take pictures of food on Salt Spring was not part of my basic instructions—I wanted the participants to lead the process, not only in what and how they chose to photograph but also within the interview process itself when we discussed their photos, so that they were working with me to build a shared understanding of a shared experience of place. As Sarah Pink notes,

when informants take photographs for us the images they produce do not hold intrinsic meanings that we as researchers can extract from them… they are derived from photographic moments that were meaningful to the people who took the photographs … when our informant-photographers discuss these photographs they place them within new narratives and as such make them meaningful again (2007:91)
I asked for 10-20 photos from each participant, but only two were able to stick even close to those numbers. One was the participant using the disposable camera, so she was limited to the 27 exposures on the camera and the other was a participant who, as a health researcher, said she was by inclination fairly structured and interested in following research protocols, even the limited ones I set out. The rest of the participants told me that they had real trouble narrowing down to the number they took, as well as others they pulled from their personal archives. One participant shared her stacks of scrapbooks she had carefully and lovingly compiled to document the process of moving their family from Toronto to the West Coast in order to pursue farming. In the end I had over 700 photographs made by participants and I to winnow down in order to tell the visual story I do in Section 2.

In an ideal world, I would have liked to sit down with all the participants in a room at the same time and create a group photo essay, but just as a written ethnography is most often the product of the researcher and not a group writing event, Section 2 is a primarily a product of my selection and interpretation and must be viewed as such. I also would have presented all the photographs from this participatory piece of my research to stand on its own visual story of Salt Spring—a visual ethnography of the island co-created not only by my participants and me but also by you, the reader. However, due to confidentiality concerns by the university, not all the photographs can appear in this dissertation. Confidentiality is always of concern when doing ethnography, and when you introduce a camera into the mix it only becomes messier. We need to ask whether our participants might be taking photographs of people without those subjects knowing or whether we might be exposing something photographic subjects do not exposed, even unknowingly. Children are photogenic and often the most approachable of our subjects, but photographs of minors hold even more ethical dilemmas than those of adults. A discussion of the ethics involved in ethnographic photographs is a long and complex one, indeed, but suffice to say here that I have erred on the side of caution with this document at the request of the university. The selection of photographs, and which ones are safe to include, adds an additional layer to how meaning is constructed and who constructs that meaning. In the case of this ethnography, not only was meaning constructed by my participants and me, but also by university bureaucrats. Instead of completely excising the photographs, they have been blanked out, leaving empty spaces within the visual ethnography where they once appeared.
Chapter 4 Salt Spring Island: Some Background

Salt Spring Island sits amid a string of islands off the coast of southern British Columbia. The largest of Canada’s Gulf Islands, it is accessible only by ferry and float plane. Salt Spring has a year-round population of just over 10,000 people, which swells during the tourist-heavy summer months to more than double that. It takes about forty minutes of driving to go from the far north end of the island, Southey Point, to the southern ferry terminal in the village of Fulford. The island is part of the traditional territory of the Saanich, Cowichan and Chemainus First Nations whose use of the island as a seasonal residence for gathering abundant foodstuffs, like oysters and seaweeds and fishing for salmon. Indigenous use dates back over 5,000 years.

In the late 1850s, colonial governor James Douglas opened the Gulf Islands to settlement despite First Nations’ claims to the land. Douglas christened the island Salt Spring Island, believing that the salt springs he had found “would be of greatest importance and become a wealth to the country” (Salt Spring Archives 2013). Douglas was not the only British explorer to name the island, however. Captain George Henry Richards, who, from 1857–1863 was responsible for charting much of the northwest coast, tried to rename it Admiral Island in honour of Rear Admiral Robert Lambert Baynes, the commander of the British Navy flagship the H.M.S. *Ganges* (Salt Spring Archives 2013). The salt springs won out in the end, though, capturing popular imagination and the name Salt Spring Island stuck. The name Ganges lives on as the name of the central town (and really only “town”) and harbour on the island. Ironically, for an area known for yoga, alternative lifestyles and philosophies inspired by India, Salt Spring Island’s Ganges is not, in fact, named in honour of the Ganges River in India as people might assume but, instead, after a British colonial warship. Early colonial settlers cleared much of the Douglas fir forests and established farms and orchards in the island’s rich soil. By the early 1900s, Salt Spring was well known for its productive orchards and agricultural lands, particularly for its tree fruits, especially apples, and spring lamb (Kahn 1998; Arnett 1999).

While today Salt Spring is almost entirely reliant on food shipped in on ferries, the growing and consuming of food on Salt Spring Island remains integral to how the island is defined, both by residents and outsiders. While there are quite a few small farms on the island,
they cannot keep up with the demand from island residents, and the primary reliance on outside food makes local food security a shaky proposition at best. Indeed, members of the Island Agricultural Alliance told me their estimates show that there is enough production to feed all residents for only one day per month. Today, the small but growing artisanal food industry builds on the island’s food past, both from the agricultural roots of early settlers and also the island’s importance as part of the seasonal rounds for First Nations people. Apples remain an important crop, some of the first apple trees planted by settlers still producing small crops today. The Salt Spring Apple Festival each October is an important event drawing locals and visitors alike to apple orchards across the island. Salt Spring Island lamb still holds pride of place on several spring restaurant menus and can be found in the freezers of those who know a sheep farmer. Salt Spring Island mussels are commercially cultivated in the water off the island’s shores and sold across British Columbia and beyond. Salt Spring cheese produced by two companies—one focused on goat’s milk cheese, the other on cheeses made from Jersey cow milk—has gained a cult following amongst foodies and a growing audience of cheese lovers. While the number of active farmers on the island today has followed the worldwide trend of decline, there is a movement on the island to rebuild the farming industry, centered on organic production by young, innovative and inspired farmers. People are experimenting with long-term farmland leases in order to get around the prohibitive cost of land ownership for most aspiring farmers.

It is also an island where food plays a central role in community events—what you bring to potlucks and parties matters and people put a lot of effort into what they bring, not only to please others but also to maintain their reputation as a purveyor and consumer of whole, local, organic and delicious food. Many Salt Springers are foodies, but not in the urban sense of the word of seeking out the latest obscure trend or critiquing the restaurant of the moment. Instead, they are foodies in their appreciation for food, whether it is raw, organic or macrobiotic, and how it can support our wellbeing. This is not to say that islanders don’t enjoy tasty food and things like cakes, cookies and meat; they definitely do. However, there is a bit of an old-school approach to food, if you will, that values food because it comes from work you or your neighbor put into it. On an island where everything costs more because of transportation and infrastructure costs, it also just makes financial sense to think about the food you eat, where it comes from and how to make the most of it.
Salt Spring has a reputation as an alternative kind of place. It has a long history of outsiders making it their home, from freed slaves who immigrated to the island in the late 1850s, to artists and hippies in the 1960s and 1970s. Salt Spring Islanders have a reputation among British Columbians and, indeed, other Canadians, as being quirky, independent, socially liberal thinkers and actors. While I can’t speak for all island residents, my research experience shows that most islanders take pride in this impression outsiders have of them and do think of themselves, in some fundamental aspects, as different from other Canadians.

In addition to its colourful population, an additional particularity of Salt Spring’s is its form of governance. Salt Spring Island falls within the Capital Regional District of British Columbia but is also under the jurisdiction of the Islands Trust. In the 1960s, Pender Island converted 240 hectares of land into 1,200 residential lots. This development sparked worries about the dangers of unchecked development in B.C.’s Gulf Islands. In 1974 in response to those worries, the province created the Islands Trust Act. Under the Act, the Islands Trust divides the Gulf Islands into fourteen groups, each governed by a committee of three trustees, two elected locally and one from another Gulf Island group whom is appointed by the Trust Executive based in Victoria. The mandate of the Islands Trust is, according to the Act,

*to preserve and protect the trust area and its unique amenities and environment for the benefit of residents of the trust area and of the province generally, in cooperation with municipalities, regional districts, improvement districts, other persons and organizations and the Government of British Columbia (Islands Trust 2013).*

Each local trust committee is given authority for land use planning and regulation within their local trust area. The Capital Regional District in Victoria is responsible for things like water, sewage, roads, building permits and inspections, transportation, the fire department, and library as well as plans for economic development. On the surface the Islands Trust, although unusual, seems like a reasonable approach to protecting the environmental sustainability of the Gulf Islands. However, the Trust is one of the most contentious issues on Salt Spring Island, polarizing many members of the community into distinct camps who support or do not support the Trust. The conversion of Salt Spring to a municipality has been floated several times since the inception of the Trust, but voters have vetoed the switch to a municipality each time. Even under a municipal government, Salt Spring would still be required to abide by Islands Trust
guidelines, so it remains somewhat unclear to me why proponents of a municipality are convinced it would solve the governance challenges on the island, although it would likely remove the immediate frustrations people feel with the Trust on a day to day basis.

The acrimony that comes with the Trust is an integral part of what makes Salt Spring Salt Spring. This acrimonious relationship between the Trust and Salt Springers can, I would argue, be traced to the mandate of the Trust and how that mandate gets interpreted. Within the Act, trustees are required “preserve and protect” above all and to address economic development opportunities based on their compatibility with “conservation of resources and protection of community character” (Government of BC 1996). However, “community character” is not defined and is left to the trustees to determine how to interpret the term. As I discuss later, terms like community and character can be slippery, nebulous, and very personal. Part of what defines the character of place on Salt Spring is the very governance system that relies on a nebulous and readily contested concept like community character.

Despite disputes about the effectiveness of the Islands Trust as an effective form of governance for a living, changing, active population, supporters and those who despise the Trust would agree that it could be credited for preserving much of the bucolic rural character of Salt Spring. This sense of a peaceful, incredibly beautiful retreat from urban life is what attracts visitors and is what entices those visitors to stay, or at least buy a vacation home on the island. This attraction has of course, as it does in so many pretty and pleasant places, contributed to rising real estate prices as Salt Spring was “discovered” by people with readily disposable income who wanted to live the good life away from the rat race. Salt Spring is filled with dream homes nestled in the woods or resting peacefully along secluded shorelines. Many owners only live in these homes part-time and employ caretakers, either for money or in exchange for free rent, the rest of the year.

Although Salt Spring has become a haven for the wealthy, with real estate prices skyrocketing in the past twenty years, there are many residents who exist right on the edge financially. They may be land rich but finance poor or very simply poor, choosing to live on the island for lifestyle benefits that do not exist in larger urban areas. The majority of my research participants spoke to me about a general shared poverty or, a lack of material wealth amongst many islanders, despite a growing population of wealthy residents. Several of my participants were caretakers of the aforementioned homes, switching to a different house-
sitting job when owners came to the island or sleeping on couches until their next house-sitting gig started. Islanders work creatively to make a living, mixing wage work with growing their own food, house-sitting in exchange for free rent as well as exchanging other goods and labour. Similar to attitudes Sharon Roseman (2002:25-26) found among villagers in rural Galicia, Spain, who disdained those living outside the village, quite a few of my participants expressed a sort of pride and feeling of superiority over those who live off island.

People who have lived on Salt Spring for more than thirty years told me that, in the past, growing one’s own food, gathering local shellfish and gleaning apples from the many orchards was a way to feed your family with very little money. A long-time resident and local business owner remarked, with pride in her voice, that Salt Springers “are really good at working with nothing and making a little go a long way.” In the past, there was no food bank on the island, although there was a local farmer who would put out baskets of food free for the taking to anyone who needed it. With his death that practice ended, much to the detriment of the community and the feeling of being connected to each other, as a participant sadly told me. Today, between 110 and 150 residents weekly use the island’s small food bank, which relies solely on community donations and struggles to meet the demand of needy families (Salt Spring Island Community Services 2012). Despite the seeming valorization of struggle, using the food bank is not something most islanders I spoke with want others to know they do.

From my regular review of the island’s electronic bulletin board, the Salt Spring Exchange, I also found it not uncommon to see struggling families post emergency requests for food, particularly during the lean winter months. Struggling to feed your family is an intensely personal topic, partly because it is directly tied to the very intimate, very human connection we have with our food.

Like our connections with food, ethnography is also deeply personal, driven by individual interests and passions. One of my defining characteristics is an interest in food and how what we eat, how we eat, where we eat, and with whom we eat makes us who we are. Food has served as a central vehicle for my interactions with people since I was a small child. Sharing foods with friends and family, often what were then considered unusual things like Indian curries, homemade yogurt and even pit-roasted goat, were a regular part of my childhood. I made my first French pastry – a Pithiviers, puff pastry filled with almond paste – entirely by hand when I was ten, for a dinner party my parents were giving. I brought piles of
homemade chocolate chip cookies to school, ostensibly for everyone but ultimately to endear myself to a boy I liked. When I started travelling in my early teens, I discovered the magnificent joy of foreign grocery stores, just as fascinating to me as giant thousand-year old Buddhas and tiny temples at the tops of mountains. My research then (both for the PhD and my earlier MA), naturally flows out of my personal passions and how I negotiate the world. I used food to help me understand people and places, an approach that was central to my research on Salt Spring. Why food plays such an important role, not only for the people of Salt Spring but also for human beings the world over, is a long-standing area of examination for anthropologists. For me, the food I eat, prepare and share is woven deeply into the threads of my personality, my self-image and my values and, because of that, food frames all of my research. The truth is, even if on the surface the research doesn’t seem to be about food, I always find myself coming back to the food.
Chapter 5 Literature Overview

Over 200 years ago, Brillat-Savarin famously said that, “the destiny of nations depends upon the manner in which they feed themselves.” With statistics that show, for example, British taxpayers paying up to £2.3 billion each year to repair the damage industrial farming does to the environment and human health (Honoré 2004), attempts to build local food systems and distinguish communities as different from the mainstream system are more than minor, symbolic acts of resistance. Local identity, tied with food and its responsible production, has long been a focus for political and social movements (Wilk 2006); but, today, movements that protest and resist or seek to change globalizing processes hold more relevance than ever. My research from a small island on Canada’s Pacific coast is intended to contribute additional understanding to the broader cultural discussions of identity, globalization, environmental responsibility and how people react to those forces to forge a place for themselves and their communities in the future.

Globalization/Localization/Alter-globalization

Examining what, how, when, where and why we eat the foods we eat, provides, perhaps better than almost anything else, valuable insight into how human identities and our larger world are shaped. Globalization processes and the reaffirmation of local identity exist in concert with one another. Local communities respond to products from outside with the production of their own products or with the adaptation of outside products to fit their own images. This is more than simply passive resistance by clinging to traditional behaviors. People are constantly redefining their identities in a new global context. In doing so they often adopt new elements from outside while also holding onto elements of local traditions they believe are essential to their identity. Some may reinvent the past and create new traditions to shore up their defined identities. The irony is that, in attempts to resist global forces, people cannot help but react to them. There is no way to remain untouched by global forces, but the reverse is also true. *Global forces are themselves enacted upon, adapted and changed at a local level.*

Globalization provides communities an opportunity to emphasize and sometimes reinvent distinct cultural expressions of time and place (Caldwell 2006). Ironically, Salt Spring also
relies on this image of alternative, authentic and local (and those three terms are as heavily debated on the island as in academic literature) for its economic lifeblood—tourism.

The move towards an emphasis on local, regional and specialty foods can be seen as an attempt to recreate a time before mass production and mass consumption existed (Roseberry 2005:141). As Theodor Bestor has noted, “globalization doesn’t necessarily homogenize cultural differences nor erase the salience of cultural labels. Quite the contrary, it grows the franchise” (2005:18). Local, regional foods, such as artisanal cheeses, gain cultural and economic cachet for both their producers and home countries because they are unique and available in limited quantities, unlike global, mass-produced products. It is the politics of cultural authenticity in market globalization that enables genuine, locally produced products to be maintained, revived and/or reinvented precisely because their value lies in their localness and authenticity (Terrio 1996) in direct contrast to mass produced, inauthentic foods that one can find almost anywhere. While there are important contrasts between local and global food systems, particularly in their organization of production and distribution, the contrasts between the two are often over-simplified and confusing (Pratt 2007). Of central importance is the realization that in attempts to reestablish connections between consumption and production as local food advocates do, foods are given a history, one that is often highly romantic and linked with notions of the local, traditional and authentic. However, despite these conceptual linkages, mainstream and alternative food systems are not in fact completely distinct, separate economic circuits as we might be led to believe. Instead, they each shape each other and often overlap in significant ways. As Pratt notes, “alternative food chains are not simply survivals from a pre-industrial age, they emerged in parallel with the revolutions in farming and processing; their values (such as ‘organic’) are not those of a peasantry, but emerge as a counterpoint to industrial agriculture and commodification” (297). Despite seeming to reject a global system dominated by value for money, money-value remains key within an alternative food system because it is often the guarantor of quality or authenticity. What appears to consumers as a reconnection with food and its producers is a much more complex process. Examining how the commodity form tends to “recolonize the alternative spaces that emerge” (299) when challenging that very form remains an important aspect of research into food systems. Rather than thinking in terms of dichotomies – local versus global; authentic versus inauthentic; virtuous versus sinful – researchers who examine food systems and resilience and
how the concepts of community and place are leveraged, need to take a more critical view of how things intersect and flow, rather than viewing things as bounded and static.

The importance of food production, preparation and consumption on Salt Spring really cannot be overemphasized. Food is integrally tied to most social interactions on the island and the consumption and valorization of local food is an important way people define themselves and Salt Spring itself. Many visitors come to Salt Spring to sample the local food—cheeses, apples, baked goods, produce—and define Salt Spring through the kinds of artisanal, local foods produced on the island. Access to local delicacies—read those with the financial means to purchase them—like Salt Spring cheese or organic lamb also defines particular sectors of the Salt Spring community and slots people into insider and outsider based on what kinds of food they consume. The customs, descriptive language used, and production techniques that surround foodways help to define place and people the world over and Salt Spring is no exception.

With globalization, local culinary systems are gradually diminished (Mintz 2006). Many disappear entirely. With growing food globalization, “what one eats is increasingly muddied and who one is becomes subject to questioning” (Srinivas 2007:87). The old adage “you are what you eat” has never been more confusing nor more useful as an identity marker than it is today. In response to the loss of local culinary systems, we also see the reverse of the coin, with efforts to revitalize, or indeed even invent, local culinary systems in order to distinguish place outside of the generic global. The majority of Salt Spring restaurants and, increasingly, the two supermarkets, highlight the local ingredients and produce they use and sell in an effort to establish their authenticity and localness. Amongst those who buy as much local food as possible, as well as grow their own food, there is also the sense that this creates a more authentic local than someone who consumes food from outside. Exotic (read imported, expensive, not easy to access) is no longer a marker of superiority; local (expensive for some and not easy to access relative to the supermarket) has supplanted exoticism as the marker of the elite, at least for some people on Salt Spring Island.

As Paige West has noted, “Almost all the literature about circulation and on food as commodity is interested in using the circulation of commodities to tell us something about globalization” (2012:21). However, that is specifically what I am not attempting to do here. I could take the way people relate to local food on Salt Spring and analyze how its circulation
within the community is used to construct identity. I could then extrapolate these things into a meta-discourse about disaffection and a 21st century urban malaise, and then combine that with what I observed on Salt Spring as a reaction to or result of globalization. However, that is not what my research was about. At its core, my research is not a larger, meta-discourse on the state of the world but, instead, is a smaller examination of how people create and define place and in turn create and recreate their identities on one particular island in the Western Canadian Pacific. I use food as a means for understanding that creation of place, both as a tool for my own understanding and as an object of examination, looking at how Salt Springers use food as a tool to define the island. I do not intend Salt Spring to stand for a larger global analysis, that isn’t really my approach to anthropology; but Salt Spring Island exists nevertheless within a larger global discourse about place and identity and therefore cannot be entirely separate. It is part of the whole and that part influences the whole just as the whole influences the part.

Balancing tradition and change, borrowing cultural forms and hybridizing them, resisting cultural imperialism and homogenization—all of these things challenge and confuse identity, and Salt Springers are no different from other groups in other parts of the world in this regard. The media shows viewers images of French farmers dumping loads of manure outside the door of a McDonald’s or Czech students marching against and vandalizing various fast-food restaurants in Prague as examples of anti-globalization sentiment (Steager 2009). However, our assumptions about what generates these protests are not always correct. We need to question whether they are simply attempts to preserve local identity in the face of assaults from global forces or whether they are something more complex.

The entry of Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) in Bangalore, India, serves as an interesting example when advising against making easy assumptions. The arrival of KFC in Bangalore resulted in picketing by local farmers. Journalists and social scientists assumed it was the local—“fresh, healthy, authentic and pure”—versus the global—“the bad, the unhealthy, inauthentic and mass produced” (Srinivas 2007:90). However, when asked why they were protesting, the farmers responded that they were protesting because KFC’s GMO chickens didn’t taste as good as native, organic, free-range chicken. For farmers, it wasn’t about globalization versus anti-globalization but about the “right to have differences in taste” (90). Globalization in Bangalore, as elsewhere, in the sense both of the spread of local foodways throughout the world and the arrival of foodways from elsewhere, is framed by
existing experiences and history. The reaction to the globalization of food in Bangalore has also been two-sided—the growth of a connoisseurship of both local and/or ethnic/caste-based foods and of foreign foods (Srinivas 2007) and, at its core, about conscious identity construction. Bangaloreans function in “a multidimensional global space by constructing selves that engage both the local and the global” (102).

Although at first it may seem counterintuitive, the strengthening of local identities and global mass-market capitalism can be seen as two sides of the same coin (Castillo and Nigh 1998; Lewellen 2002; Wilk 1999). We can see this through the common cultural concept of insider vs. outsider, local vs. foreign; our culture vs. the powerful and dangerous other culture. It is through these juxtapositions that the halves of each of these dichotomies is created. One cannot exist without the other. As one of my research participants so aptly noted, “Well, it’s that difference, you know? The difference between us here as Salt Springers and everyone else outside. People come here because it’s different, because you can be different than the rest of the world. There are no chains here. It’s like a safe haven from all of that stuff” (Arwen, 11 June 2012). Richard Wilk views the contrast of globalization and localization as “an extremely potent drama because it has no solution—it is an external struggle, where each pole defines its opposite” (1999:248). This is a somewhat simplistic or, perhaps too dualistic, a model for my tastes but it nevertheless describes the impossibility of separating globalization and localization into two unique entities. It is only at a local level that we can truly understand globalization and any movements toward an alternative to the hegemonic economic model. Neoliberal globalization brings fragmentation and differentiation but the local has to be produced and constantly reinforced; it does not just exist on its own. It is also in contrast to globalization, or the image people have of globalizing forces, that the local is defined, as Arwen’s description of Salt Spring explains.

In contrast to the concept of globalization is alter-globalization. While globalization always implies some sense of global flows of information, goods and people, exactly how that happens, the impacts of such flows and how those flows are adopted, adapted and resisted may be defined in many different ways. Anti-globalization implies resistance to all things global, a desire to reject global flows and transnational connections and a kind of defensive localism. Alter-globalization, instead, says that there are alternatives to neoliberal capitalist globalization and multinational capitalism that can support “participation, solidarity, diversity,
human rights and social justice” (Williams-Forson 2008:4). Alter-globalization supporters tend to view a neoliberal capitalist form of globalization as one that is impersonal, standardized, commercialized, commoditized, privatized and where the global economy and trade liberalization are driven by World Trade Organization (WTO) standards (Williams-Forson 2008). When I use the term “neoliberal globalization” throughout this document, it is with this definition of the term. Those who resist neoliberal globalization and embrace a notion of alter-globalization actively and consciously form allegiances, networks and solidarities with other like-minded activists across the globe. This is certainly true for many people on Salt Spring, particularly those who work with local volunteer groups that address global issues at a local level through local branches of global organizations like 350.org, which battles climate change; or, Transition Towns, which works to build local independence from global petroleum-based economies. Those advocating for an alter-globalization are part of a decentralized network that mobilizes and uses global flows of information and ideas to promote and push for a citizen/local-level challenge of the current global model. The Transition Movement is an example of the kinds of social efforts that are linked through an alter-globalization movement.

**Transition Movement**

Permaculture teacher, Rob Hopkins, developed the Transition Towns initiative in Kinsale, Ireland in 2005. The underlying premise behind the Transition Towns movement is that responding to climate change and peak oil requires action on a global, national and local scale. Transition Towns communities seek to answer the question,

- for all those aspects of life that this community needs in order to sustain itself and thrive, how do we significantly rebuild resilience (to mitigate the effects of Peak Oil and economic contraction) and drastically reduce carbon emissions (to mitigate the effects of Climate Change) (TransitionNetwork.org).

Transition Towns philosophy asserts that the primary action for the answers to this question must come from “vibrant communities driving the process, making unelectable policies electable, creating the groundswell for practical change at the local level” (Hopkins 2009:15). The Transition movement actively leverages the concept of resilience as a key ingredient of the strategies that will be needed for communities in the Western world to thrive in the future. According to Transition philosophy, resilience
has seeped away as the age of cheap and abundant energy has allowed us to disconnect from our community and our landbase. Consequently, we’ve become collectively unmindful of how our consumptive behaviours are depleting resources and causing environmental damage in distant lands that we have no connection to (TransitionNetwork.org).

Thus, resilience is not simply an ecological construct but one that has important social links. By reconnecting with community and the land through things like food, Transition philosophy would argue that people can become more resilient in the face of the challenges coming from climate change and peak oil. These challenges can either be seen as an enormous crisis or an opportunity. The opportunity, argue Transition adherents, is in a model for communities that will lead to a more satisfying future, with stronger community and interpersonal links and fewer of the feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction that modern Western society seems to inspire. By moving from the individualism of the West, to a more collective, interdependent society, we will not only build increased resilience to future changes but also build a happier, more fulfilling society (TransitionNewMexico.ning.org; TransitionNetwork.org; Hopkins 2009).

Building local resilience by increasing local and national food security and local manufacturing and energy infrastructures, while at the same time decreasing dependence on foreign trade and economic linkages, is at the centre of the Transition model. Hopkins, the Transition Towns founder, does not believe that building increased local resilience in the West would necessarily lead to increased impoverishment in the so-called developing world as some believe would happen. Citing Amartya Sen’s work, Hopkins (2009) notes that famine is due more from the way in which food is distributed and social and economic inequality, rather than from food shortages. In general this is true, but it is a fairly simple view of the global food distribution challenge. This is not to say that the Transition philosophy completely ignores global context or global social responsibility. Transition philosophy argues that all communities need to build more resilience in the face of coming challenges from climate change and peak oil, so that no one is more vulnerable than another. Indeed, Hopkins astutely points out that tying poor, small-scale food producers in to the globalized trade system, often leads to increased vulnerability to economic and environmental crises (2009). Not focusing on regional distinctiveness and creating one-size-fits-all approaches to regional development actually makes regions less resilient (Bristow 2010). Locality is key to a movement that so
strongly leverages a sense of place and community and where the local and unique place-based contexts play a vital role in the development of resilience. Local, place and community, however, can be problematic, contested concepts and, in order to fully understand how they relate to resilience, need to be understood on more than a surface level. The notion of what constitutes genuine locality can be quite a contentious idea, no more so than on Salt Spring where locality is an oft-discussed and contested idea. As Julia, one research participant notes,

So there’s this notion that Salt Spring’s a hippy place that, it’s alternative and that it’s accepting. And it is for some things. But I’ve got some friends who’ve experienced some quite extreme racism, just randomly walking down the street, from people who belong to the ‘I’ve-lived-here-forever-you-haven’t camp’… Oh yes, it’s an accepting place. If you’re white and wealthy, yes, yes, yes (Julia, 17 August 2012).

Julia echoes what I was told by many people, both in passing and in longer, more intimate conversations. Salt Spring is not simply what it appears on the surface – of course no place is, which is one reason why we do ethnography – and its residents are well aware of that.

**Place and Community**

Promotional images of Salt Spring as an island haven just minutes from urban Vancouver, include quaint shop fronts; colourful farm stands; wildflower-strewn meadows; placid, fluffy sheep; beautiful and delicious local foodstuffs; and, iconic wildlife, from orcas to eagles. However, these types of images belie the fact that Salt Spring is also a living, breathing, changing place, with every day inhabitants who have every day worries and concerns.

Understanding how the place that is Salt Spring Island is constructed—and who has a say in its definition—requires an understanding not only of local conceptions of Salt Spring but also of larger socio-political efforts to define it in a particular way. As Appadurai observes, tourist sites

create complex conditions for the production and reproduction of locality, in which ties of marriage, work, business and leisure weave together various circulating populations with various kinds of ‘locals’ to create localities that belong in one sense to particular nation-states but are, from another point of view, what we might call *translocalities* (2003:339).

Despite or perhaps because of the translocality of Salt Spring, local residents actively resist and incorporate outside definitions of their island to create a sense of place that belongs only to true locals. Tourist areas are often defined and marketed globally by the state and extra-
local economic organizations for a leisured class of tourist, not local residents (Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003). As a result, local residents “may develop strategies of resistance to mitigate the effects of the tourist presence, even as they participate in the tourist enterprise, by creating physical or temporal boundaries to protect a ‘backstage’ area for private use” (23).

While my research on Salt Spring did not focus on tourism specifically, understanding how the island is defined as a tourist location is critical to understanding the definitions of locality Salt Spring residents have created. Salt Spring is a contested space, not only between tourists and locals but also between locals and locals. With a population that includes residents who have lived on the island for generations, permanent residents who have moved from off island and part-time residents and tourists, finding a single definition for Salt Spring Island is impossible. All places have a unique reality for each inhabitant. Those meanings may be shared with some, but not all others, creating competing meanings of the same place (Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003; Rodman 2003). Whose meaning takes precedence becomes an important issue when considering social justice issues and who has a voice in defining and creating place.

Despite vociferous efforts to lay claim to a space that is defined by local residents and not outsiders, my research showed that Salt Spring locals also define and create place in an image similar to that which is promoted to the outside. This image is not something unreal or virtual, rather it is the existing natural physical beauty of the island. I can personally attest to its power. The beauty of the island is tangible, something you can literally touch in the soft, spongy velvet of mosses in the forest or the smooth stones reached for through cold, stunningly clear water on the beach. It is a natural beauty that wraps you in an intangible cloud and enters into your body, calling to you like a siren’s song, urging you to sink into it, listen to the owls hooting and the chorus frogs singing on a moisture-drenched spring evening, and stay. The siren song of Salt Spring’s natural beauty is like the mythical Siren’s song in that it has a dark side as well. It is not simply natural, untouched beauty but has been transformed into another commodity to be consumed and used by locals and visitors alike.

It’s just beautiful. It’s just the most beautiful place I’ve ever been. I can have a bad day and then I go for a walk and I’m reminded just how lucky I am to live here. I mean, look at this place. Just look. It’s amazing. People come here and they see, I think the beauty, it, well, it somehow…the nature, it heals people, you know? I’ve lived here 30 … oh, wow, more than 30 years … and I'm still struck by it. It's part of who we all are here (Dusty, 14 June 2012).
Much of my conversation with Dusty, one of my photography participants, revolved around the beauty of the island. With her photographs, she constructed a place where beauty was at the foundation of everything. Even while talking about people who seriously struggle to make a living, Dusty’s description of Salt Spring was still infused with adjectives of beauty and the notion that it is the natural physical beauty of the place that keeps people on the island even when life is difficult. My own field notes, even when describing the challenges of living on a small, isolated island, reference the wild and powerful beauty of the place:

There have been wind warnings for the entire week. Life on an island - sailings get cancelled, people get stranded, either on this island or on Vancouver Island or on the mainland or vice versa because ferries can’t sail because of the wind. Driving home tonight from book club, power’s out at the north end of the island, just north of cinema. Power lines have fallen and fire trucks are out in force with their lights flashing. They’re the only lights in what is otherwise complete darkness. The moon is new so there is no moonlight to guide you. The powerful wind has actually swept away the clouds that lined the sky earlier, so there’s only starlight to see by, an inky black ceiling covered with a blanket of stars. I had to drive home along a different route one of the firemen directed me to, back along a tiny, narrow bumpy road filled with potholes and bumps from tree roots, slowly navigating my way around branches that fell, wondering if a tree was going to fall on me next. Living on an island teaches you to never underestimate the power of Mother Nature. 24 November 2011, Southey Pt.

It is interesting to note that both Dusty and I reference beauty—one of the same facets highlighted by government tourism brochures—in our definitions of Salt Spring. While I was and am aware of the irony in this and my role in reproducing Salt Spring within a dominant discourse, Dusty was not in her reflections of her photographs. For her, as for several other photography participants, the natural beauty of the island was so great that it almost stood outside any possible conflict over definition. The beauty of the island is a given and therefore not something that all but one of my participants questioned. As West notes, “many scholars have shown that nature is now increasingly produced as a commodity and in the image of commodities” (West 2012:31). This is definitely the case for Salt Spring, where the beauty, the inherent “untouched” nature of the place, is something to be consumed by visitors and locals alike. West argues that neoliberalization needs nature to be a commodity so it, too, can be consumed and in that way contribute to the success of the neoliberal model (West 2012). While my participants’ experiences seem to support West’s assertion, as every single one of
them cited the island’s natural beauty as one of the primary drivers for settling on the island, only one, Julia, recognized this commodification and power of the commodification. By transforming Salt Spring’s physical beauty into a commodity that can be sold in the form of physical land and houses but also as a less tangible, but no less compelling experience and lifestyle, Salt Spring itself is contained within a neoliberal economic model despite efforts to remain outside of that model. Julia noted that the beauty of the island keeps people there. She also observed that it serves as a panacea when government services are not available as they would be in a larger urban area or when paying higher costs for groceries and other commodities.

As Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga note, “popular and official memories co-define each other, often in shifting relations, but the state controls public spaces critical to the reproduction of a dominant memory while marginalizing the counter-histories of peasants, women, working classes, and others” (2003:22). Spatial tactics, or defining space and place in a particular way, create illusion in order to further ideological goals (22). Those ideological goals are most often not those of local residents but those of the state and larger economic and political forces. Defining, or producing, localities is the work of local residents who, despite their individual experiences, still find certain shared memories within neighbourhoods or favourite restaurants or yearly local activities. Often though, this local production is at odds with the projects of the nation-state (Appadurai 2003). Those residents who challenge these fixed definitions, challenge the state’s need for a regulated public life.

One of the ways that residents challenge these definitions is through the mobilization of community. However, the state also uses the same term to promote its own interests, thus creating a further contested space. On the surface, community is a term that has become ubiquitous in how we in the Global North talk and think about contemporary life. Urbanization has resulted in a loss of community, people say. In order to reconnect with where we live and who we live with, we need to rediscover a sense of community. However, no one truly questions the actual definition of community. As Creed argues, this “is precisely why scholars need to pay attention to it [community]. Such common notions reveal the taken-for-granted understandings of the world that are so internalized or routinized as to escape comment and specification” (2006a:4). The concept of community includes at least three different meanings: a group of people, a quality of relationship (usually with a positive
association), and a place/location. The usage of the term often conflates these multiple meanings, diminishing each individual meaning (Creed 2006). People who use the term in one sense may unthinkingly and unavoidably invoke the other meanings associated with the term (5). Regardless of which meaning one might wish to connote, all references to community generally imply some degree of “harmony, homogeneity, autonomy, immediacy, locality, morality, solidarity and identity, as well as the idea of shared knowledge, interests, and meanings” and history or shared experiences (5). However, as anyone who ever volunteered for a community group has experienced, community is not always harmonious and homogenous. Community is fractious and varied, multiple and changeable, contested and created. And it is a powerful term.

Efroymson (2010) argues that the success of the modern nation-state owes much to the concept of community as the State traffics in the emotional elements of the term to establish popular consent. In addition, many of the defining factors of community—race, class, ethnicity, urbanity, suburbanity—are articulated through consumption practices, which of course makes it incredibly useful for a modern neoliberal capitalist state. In order to understand how “community” is utilized, we need to interrogate who is employing the term and why. How communities are defined and which communities are actually recognized as such, are arguments about inclusion and exclusion and thus competitions, not simply about structural inequalities but also about power and the resources that come with power (2006). It is important to recognize how the term can be used and mobilized. Community can be seen as what Uwe Poerksen (1996) describes as a plastic word. Plastic words are malleable, they are flexible and in contemporary usage they have a wide range of interpretations. Many plastic words convey a positive, rosy picture in the mind (just like community), even when we cannot easily define them absolutely. Without a clear definition, we are left with an abstract understanding of what we mean when we invoke the word community and this abstractness elides the specificity and diversity of reality. As Poerksen notes,

Abstract language serves to cover up reality. It prevents the imagination from reflecting on what actually happens to people. It ignores what they experience and what they feel, their life histories. The language of overview leads to disregard to what is most important. The seal of science or of administration, stamped on the everyday by the expert, hides suffering beneath an inhuman objectivity (1996:85).
Thus, community is meant to describe an inclusive, cohesive whole and is bandied about by planners, politicians, and locals alike. However, when we accept the term at face value we ignore the diversity it must encompass. A community like Salt Spring is made up of a variety of people from multiple socioeconomic and political backgrounds. Community might imply homogeneity but in reality it most certainly is not homogenous in almost every case. However, it is because community can be such an imprecise, and at the same time positive, word that many people feel comfortable with it. As Poerksen notes, “the highly abstract character of plastic words is their most effective property; the abstractness levels the language field and the field of the affected objects” (1995:63). It is this abstractness that can make plastic words so insidious and dangerous. Plastic words, in their lack of distinctness, provide a mask behind which very real actions can be hidden, often actions that disenfranchise groups of people or worse—think of the word “terrorist” and all that it has come to imply and how it is mobilized to sanction very real violence against a hazy, undefined group of people. I do not mean to imply that community carries with it such a level of violence but it can be used to keep people out and is not simply the positive, inclusive term that its surface assumes.

For my research participants, the sense of feeling like they are part of a strongly linked and connected community is an essential part of their identity and a reason for staying on the island. However, they most certainly apply a wide swath to the definition of community, generally including all residents, even if there is then a not-so-subtle ranking of locality amongst residents. Nevertheless, by mobilizing their ideas of community and creating links to their fellow community members, Salt Springers are challenging what Durkheim (1949) and Weber (1978) saw as the eradication of community via contemporary statecraft. Both Durkheim and Weber saw the commercialization of social relations as undermining traditional community ties. However, when community ties are re-localized and when consumers and producers are personally linked, rather than virtually linked, I would argue that community actually becomes a counter-hegemonic discourse. It is important, however, to underscore the importance of personal, local connections versus the virtual ones contemporary marketers attempt to create between consumers and producers. These personal connections are real and tangible and challenge the virtual, fetishized relationships between things like food commodities where no real relationship between producer and consumer actually exists. Of course, buying kale or eggs from local Salt Spring producers indicates particular status,
knowledge and political beliefs that differentiate buyers from those on the island who shop solely from the grocery store. However, the links between production and consumption are personally experienced rather than hidden. West notes that for all commodity choice today, “narratives that are seemingly about political ecology (the structural links between global processes and local social and ecological change) marketers convince well-meaning individuals that their everyday consumption choices can be ‘political’” (West 2012:18). However, for Salt Spring consumers who consciously choose local products because they are local and they come from someone they know, those consumption choices are in reality a political act. Unlike the fictional consumers and producers created by commodity marketing experts, the relationships between Salt Spring consumers and producers are tangible. By stepping outside the mainstream market and placing themselves firmly in a market that values locality over and above any other attribute, my research participants are in fact embedding their economic choices within social relations.

Resilience and Vulnerability

Global climate instability, economic insecurity, increasing drains on planetary resources, human-made and natural disasters—how human beings will continue to exist comfortably and successfully for the long term on what seems to be a smaller and smaller planet is a topic of interest for not only academic researchers but also for everyday citizens and media. “Sustainable” and “eco-friendly” products proliferate. News features abound about “how to live green” or, in the face of the BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, “how to break your addiction to petroleum products.” Local, national and global government entities trot out plans for sustainable development. Indeed, sustainable has become such a catchword that defining what kinds of systems are truly sustainable or what sustainable even means, is increasingly contentious and less meaningful all the time. Definitions of sustain include: “to give support or relief to; to supply with sustenance; to nourish; to keep up or prolong; to keep from ruin; and, to endure without failing or yielding” (Thatcher 1980). Today, we talk about sustainable development and sustainable agriculture but it is not always clear exactly what those terms mean nor how they provide a way of defining how we might build sustainable systems for the future. Sustainable also implies a sense of stability, of continuity, of enduring without fail. However, in a rapidly changing world, on both a human- and a planetary-scale, sustainable systems or systems able to remain the same under pressure, are perhaps no longer the best way
to approach our world. A concept more appropriate to the unique challenges we face in the early 21st century may be the concept of resilience.

World-renowned ecologist C.S. Holling (1973) developed the concept of resilience in reference to ecological systems and for a long time the concept remained solely the provenance of ecologists and those studying ecological systems. Resilience in its simplest ecological terms is “the capacity of an ecosystem to tolerate disturbance without collapsing into a qualitatively different state that is controlled by a different set of processes. A resilient ecosystem can withstand shocks and rebuild itself when necessary” (Resilience Alliance 2010). However, social scientists have adapted the concept, calling it either social-ecological or social resilience, to include not only ecosystems resiliency but also the capacities of human beings to anticipate and plan for the future. The concept of social-ecological resilience differs from that of psychological resilience, defined as “the ability to bounce back from negative events by using positive emotions to cope” (Tugade, Frederickson and Barrett 2002:1162). My research did not explore psychological resilience, but instead the concepts of social-ecological resilience and the related concept of vulnerability in terms of social-ecological systems.

Adger defines social resilience simply as “the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental change” (2000:347). The key to resilience, both ecological and social-ecological, is not maintaining stasis under stressors but, rather, the ability to rebuild and recreate in order to withstand those stressors. The concept is not just about the ability to maintain the status quo, but about the ability of systems to adapt, change and transform themselves if necessary into new, more desirable, more successful configurations (Haxeltine and Seyfang 2009; Folke 2006). There is the capacity for renewal and re-organization in resilient systems. Indeed, in resilient social-ecological systems, “disturbance has the potential to create opportunity for doing new things, for innovation and for development” (Folke 2006:253).

Social-ecological resilience is affected by multiple factors, including social capital; diversity (both at a human scale and ecological level) and, modularity, or a high capacity of regional self-sufficiency, strong international and regional networks and highly localized social and business interactions (Bristow 2010; Haxeltine and Seyfang 2009). Rob Hopkins (2008), the founder of the Transition Towns movement, which actively mobilizes the resilience concept in its philosophy, also adds to this list of factors what he calls, “tightness of
feedbacks” or, the ability to respond quickly and regionally to stressors and changes to ecological and social systems. However, most researchers usually include those characteristics within modularity. Resilience can also be lost through decreasing biodiversity, pollution and inflexible institutions and subsidies, which encourage unsustainable use of resources such as water, soil and energy (Resilience Alliance 2010).

Resilience is directly related to vulnerability, an area that has a strong research base in human geography, particularly around food security and famine. Social vulnerability encompasses changes or disruptions to livelihoods and loss of security, whether from natural or man-made events. For more vulnerable groups, these changes or stresses are often pervasive, based in structural inequality from underlying socioeconomic structures. The issue of vulnerability is an important one in relationship to resilience as those populations that are more vulnerable will, naturally, be less resilient. However, it is not a simple relationship of vulnerability as antonym to resilience. As Gallopín (2006) observes, the concept of vulnerability has been used by various research traditions—from both social science and environmental science perspectives in particular—but there is no real consensus on the meaning of the term. “Obviously a resilient system is less vulnerable than a non-resilient one, but this relationship does not necessarily imply symmetry” (299). Adger (2000) defines social vulnerability as “the exposure of groups of people or individuals to stress as a result of the impacts of environmental change…social vulnerability in general encompasses disruption to livelihoods and loss of security. Resilience increases the capacity to cope with stress and is hence a loose antonym for vulnerability” (348, emphasis added). I acknowledge that the two terms are not direct antonyms but, rather than split semantic hairs, I do use them as loosely contrasting terms here.

Vulnerability measures or evaluates the susceptibility of people, both groups and individuals, to harm from environmental or social change (Adger and Brown 2009). Levels of vulnerability depend on the capacity to respond to external stresses, from environmental, economic or social sources or, a combination of the three. Thus, vulnerability in a social sense is not simply about humans’ capacity to adapt to environmental change but also those disturbances due to social and economic reasons. Vulnerability is interrelated to wider political economic issues and is socially differentiated. Natural and human causes of vulnerability impact different groups in society differently. Thus, Salt Spring residents who
have full-time permanent jobs and are more financially secure than others are able to more easily roll with economic changes such as, increases in ferry prices and resulting increases in prices for goods on the island and can choose to purchase food locally even when it is more expensive than what is brought from outside and sold in the grocery stores. Those with the most socioeconomic advantages are, in short, more resilient and less vulnerable. In contrast, many of the poorest residents on the island struggle to meet their basic needs, having to decide between wood for heating or groceries because of their lack of socioeconomic resources and thus a higher level of vulnerability. Understanding the political economy of vulnerability and resilience requires us to ask whose resilience counts and why. Unfortunately, cultural context and local knowledge, along with socioeconomic factors, are often overlooked in many policy interventions.

Social capital, or the networks and relationships among individuals and groups that facilitate economic and social security, is a key aspect of resilience (Adger 2000). Adaptations to any kind of change, be it natural or human-driven, have socially differentiated impacts and social capital plays an important role in levels of social resilience. Research has clearly shown that the poor and marginalized throughout human history have been most at risk from things like climate-related hazards (Adger 2003a). In addition, poor and more vulnerable groups are often excluded from the planning and decision making process and the spaces they occupy become invisible and ignored, making social capital even more important for these groups. Adger (2003b) breaks social capital into two types, bonding social capital—ties within a defined socioeconomic group—and networking or bridging social capital—made up of economic and other ties external to social groups. A synergy between the two types promotes increased resilience. Different combinations of bonding and networking social capital, allow communities to “confront poverty and vulnerability, resolve disputes and take advantage of new opportunities” (393). Social capital of both types will take over when external government intervention fails. When the state fails to intervene, then communities must provide alternative social security and solutions themselves. Many Salt Springers see building local independence – in food, energy, and transportation – as a protection against this type of failure of the state. As Arwen told me,

Oh, I know tons of people who have moved here because they feel safer here, you know? In case everything goes to hell in a hand-basket. If it all falls apart. Because we’ve got each other, everyone is growing their own
food, even just a little pot of tomatoes. And now we’ve got the community gardens. So, for … even, you know, the people who don’t have a regular place, they can grow their own food (11 June 2012).

In the absence of organized support from the state—at a local, provincial and federal level—local Salt Spring residents work to address the needs of the community through various volunteer organizations. Salt Spring has a Transition Towns organization, through which several other local groups and initiatives are loosely organized. These include volunteer groups that raise money for walking and biking trails on the island to cut down on vehicle travel. Volunteer groups have also set up car stops around the island where people can catch rides (an organized form of Salt Spring’s ubiquitous hitch hiking). In response to changes in animal processing laws that took effect in British Columbia in 2007, a volunteer committee on the island formed a non-profit society to raise money to build an abattoir so local farmers could butcher their meat animals on the island, rather than having to take them off-island on long and costly trips. The abattoir opened for business in September 2012 and has proven to be a successful enterprise, growing in the types and numbers of meat animals processed at the facility. Duncan and his wife Emma were very active volunteers supporting the abattoir. As he described it,

It says something about the quality of the community that there’s … I’m sure it happens in lots of other places but it’s hard to imagine a bigger community that’s more connected, I mean, maybe there isn’t the need for this kind of thing, but for a small group of people to just say … just, you know what? We need an abattoir. And we’re gonna have one and we’re gonna raise the money and find the land and overcome the objections, get the thing built, get it up and running, make it for the benefit of the community and it’s always, always been for the community. (Duncan, 21 September 2012)

Unfortunately, while these efforts may seem on the surface to be an inspiring example of community action and local cohesiveness, I would argue that it is also, more insidiously, an example of neoliberal governance at work. The state has failed to deliver on its part of the bargain, providing protection and services in return for people voting it into power but there is no huge outcry, simply an acceptance that life must go on and a “we’ll just have to do it ourselves” attitude. This is a good attitude, to be sure, but one that reinforces the lack of responsibility of the neoliberal state and the responsibilization of society.
Like social capital, diversity or, lack of diversity, both on a human and ecological scale, is a central component of resilience. Communities that are dependent on a single or very small number of economic resources (such as the timber industry or mining), are more vulnerable to disruptions to their economic system. In contrast, communities that allow for multiple social and economic niches are more resilient than those dependent on a single resource. Thus, diversity is important not only for ecological resilience but also for social resilience. Using research amongst agricultural communities in Papua New Guinea, Adger (2000) shows that those groups who have become dependent on monoculture cash crops, many of which are ecologically inappropriate, are more vulnerable to food insecurity. These cash crops are often part of economic development plans to increase resilience in these communities. The plans, though, ignore the local context and the need for diversity in both cash and subsistence crops to build more resilience in the face of various disruptions, whether they are drought or flooding or collapse in world market prices for a particular cash crop. This is an important point because more resilient communities have more stable economic growth and equal distribution of income. As Adger observes, “the economic productivity of the workforce is jeopardized by the consequences of large-scale inequality” (2003a:355). It is not simply about economic and social resilience though, as ecological resilience must not be ignored. It is important to remember that resilience is culture- and place-specific and this limits large-scale modeling of adaptation (Adger 2003b). National and global policy interventions may not be sensitive to local specificities and therefore the ability to respond to change will be affected. “It is clear that the size of the group undertaking collective action, the boundaries of the resource at risk, homogeneity of the decision-making group, the distribution of benefits of management and other factors are all important in determining the ultimate success of collective management” (45). With the rise of global neoliberal economic policies, the role of reciprocity, trust and exchange between communities and governments has broken down (2003b).

It is my contention that many Salt Spring residents, in particular my research participants and the larger circle of their local food community, are actively attempting to counter the breakdown of reciprocity, trust, and exchange between community members and the market. Based on my research on Salt Spring and previous research (see Steager 2009), I argue that this breakdown in the connections between individuals and their community can be
directly linked to the breakdown of our connection to the food we eat, where it comes from and the meaning we accord to that food. In order to examine how this disconnection, and resulting efforts to reconnect play out on Salt Spring, we need to take a step back and explore the story of food and its cultural importance to human beings and the disconnect that has occurred over the past century.
Chapter 6 Our Changing Relationship with Food: The Story of Corn

Take a moment to ponder where food stands in relationship to our lives today. Think of the news stories and documentaries popularized in the media. Celebrity chefs like Jamie Oliver and food giants like Hellman’s Mayonnaise (owned by Unilever, the world’s third largest consumer goods company) champion a shift to fresh, more “natural,” less processed food. Jamie Oliver and other chefs and cooking shows openly urge us to re-connect with our food. Global food corporations like Hellman’s and McDonalds more subtly imply that we can reconnect with friends, family, our very humanness, by connecting more with our food, of course provided by them. Amongst this media frenzy reminding us that we have become disconnected from our very human links to food, research suggests that the current generation of children in North America will be the first in 200 years to have shorter life expectancies than their parents (Olshanksy et al 2005; Belluck 2005). Globally, there are over 1 billion overweight adults, at least 300 million of them are clinically obese (WHO 2013). Being overweight poses significant risks for serious diet-related illnesses and diseases, including Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and stroke and certain forms of cancer. At the same time, just over one billion people, more than at any time since 1970, do not get enough food to eat in order to maintain a basic standard of health (FAO 2009). A brief survey of my local supermarket has milk at $3.59 per 2-litre bottle and a 2-litre bottle of Coke® for $1.50. Generic cola can be had for $0.79 for 2 litres. Scientists work to build a rice plant that will grow in what was once fresh water but is now brackish from rising sea levels. Global agricultural production results in approximately 10 per cent to 12 per cent of total human-made greenhouse gases and is expected only to increase if changes to current agricultural systems and trends are not made (Smith et al 2007). A hothouse tomato grown 25 kilometres from where I live, might travel approximately 825 kilometres round trip before I can buy it at the supermarket four kilometers from my house. Yet another report sounds on the radio about yet another bout of listeriosis contamination in lunchmeat. Romaine lettuce is contaminated with *E. coli* from manure runoff. Breakfast cereal is recalled because it is contaminated with plastic.

The call to eat local has moved from the fringes and farmers markets to the mainstream and our local supermarkets. However, if we only buy local food, other media stories tell us,
farmers in developing countries will suffer, so we must keep buying food from all over the world. Plainly, the food that we eat, how and where we purchase it and where it comes from is not so simple anymore. The desire to feel connected to that most essential of shared human needs—food—is a driving force for many residents behind their choice to live on Salt Spring. Salt Springers connect with each other more often over potlucks than at restaurants. They share homegrown vegetables and homemade preserves with friends. A ubiquitous site across the island is the plethora of farm stands offering eggs, produce, and in the spring plant seedlings so you can grow your own food. Food, and our connection with it, is important business on Salt Spring. It is one of the things that makes Salt Spring the place that it is. As such, it is important to examine how most of us have become disconnected from our food through the structures of our contemporary food system because the majority of Salt Spring residents are very aware of this disconnection and live on Salt Spring in part to remedy their previously fractured relationship with food.

**The Ubiquity of Corn**

Consider what these things might have in common: aspirin, soap, frozen fish sticks, hot dogs, cough drops, toothpaste, shoe polish, insecticide, explosives, embalming fluid, shotgun shells, dynamite, cigarettes, almost every paper product but newsprint, peanut butter, oil-well drills, whisky and rubber tires (Fussell 1992). Stumped? Each item and many more, all share corn, in some form, as a common ingredient. Corn, except for personal gardens, is not grown on any significant scale on Salt Spring, nor did corn itself come up much in conversation with any of my research participants. However, to return to Lévi-Strauss (1963), you could say that corn is ‘good to think with’ when it comes to the contemporary food system and, because of that, I use it here as a vehicle to examine that food system and give context to the dissatisfaction my research participants often expressed with the dominant food system in Canada and, indeed, globally.

Corn sales in the United States, the world’s largest corn producer, amount to around $17 billion annually, or about nine per cent of all U.S. agricultural output (Ackerman 2006). Corn is traded on stock exchanges around the world, is central to global trade negotiations as well as U.S. and Canadian domestic farm policy, feeds the majority of the animals we eat as meat and feeds people around the world. Corn as human food, however, amounts to less than
one per cent of the corn market in the United States, or the equivalent of approximately three pounds of corn per person per day (Fussell 1992).

Indeed, one could argue that corn is more important in today’s world for its economic value rather than its food or nutritional value. And this is a fundamental change to how corn, and food overall, is valued by global power structures and, indeed, by many consumers. Corn has received significant attention in the popular media in recent years (see in particular Michael Pollan’s best-selling *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006) and the successful documentary film *King Corn* (2007). Much of this attention focuses on the ubiquity of corn, its nutritional qualities (or lack thereof), the effects of industrial agriculture on the environment and the power of multinational corporations in the global corn trade. However, one aspect of corn that much of these recent reports ignore, is the great cultural value corn has held for centuries.

Corn is ubiquitous in so much of what we eat, often invisible and yet never unimportant. One of the world’s most important economic commodities, corn is also one of the most sacred foods in human history. In this chapter, I explore the origins of corn and how it came to be an important crop around the world. I delve into corn’s links with world trade, beef cattle and genetic engineering in order not only to give context to our food system today but also to make a much larger point. The story of how we got from sacredness to economic transaction is essentially the story of food itself, but through corn it is a clearer, easier story to tell because corn is, perhaps, one of the most perfect foils for telling the story of our contemporary food system. It is important to understand our food system in order to make informed choices and to advocate for appropriate government policy but it is also equally important to rebuild the connections we once had with our food and to find, perhaps, a little bit of the sacred in the gift of life that food provides. The latter is exactly what the Salt Springers with whom I worked are attempting to do and, through the connections with food, build larger connections with community, the land and their fellow human beings.

**Sacred Corn and the Gift of Life**

Myths and stories about corn abound. One of the most telling is the Mayan origin myth that describes how the People of Corn came to be.

Once upon a time two gods, Plumed Serpent and Heart of Sky, decided to create life. The gods talked and planned and made
elaborate plans across the sky. Out of the fog and clouds great mountains rose up from the seas and trees sprouted from the earth across those mountains. The gods then created living creatures that would make their homes in the forests and seas—great jungle cats and chattering monkeys, graceful dolphins and majestic sea turtles and brightly plumed birds. Plumed Serpent and Heart of Sky were disappointed, however, because no matter how much they exhorted the animals to recognize the gods as their mother and father and honor them, try as they might, the animals could only chirp and growl and cackle.

When Plumed Serpent and Heart of Sky saw that the animals could not speak their names, could not thank them for giving them life upon this beautiful new earth and would not be able to celebrate the gift of life in story and song, they were very unhappy. Plumed Serpent and Heart of Sky decided to create a new life made with their own hands. First, from wood, they fashioned people who could speak and work but they still did not celebrate and love the gods because they had no blood running through their wooden bodies. And when fire came, the people were prone to burning up. Next, the gods fashioned people from mud, but again the people did not celebrate the gods and they tended to melt away when the rains came.

Frustrated and angry, Plumed Serpent and Heart of Sky rained down floods and raised stormy seas across the earth. The land flooded and the crops began to die. And then one morning, weak and thin from hunger, Fox, Coyote, Crow and Parrot came over the crest of the highest mountain at the farthest reaches of the earth and found a field filled with strong and healthy corn plants. And as they feasted on the life-giving corn, they made such a racket that Plumed Serpent and Heart of Sky heard them and looked down. The gods knew at once that this magical plant was the answer to their frustrations. They
gathered up the corn and carefully ground it, mixing their blood and the rain to make dough. From this dough Plumed Serpent and Heart of Sky formed the first true people, people who could raise their voices in song and could thank their creators for life and the perpetual life-giving gift of corn.10

For the ancient Quiché Mayan of the Guatemalan highlands, corn was much more than a staple food crop, as their creation story shows. It was the sacred source of life. While the stories vary, for many indigenous people across the Americas, corn figures prominently in creation myths, as well as stories that teach proper social behavior, gender relations and religious worship.

Corn figures prominently in daily life and many important rituals throughout the indigenous cultures of the Americas. The Aztecs placed garlands of popped corn on the heads of virgins during religious ceremonies and also tossed popcorn on waterways as an offering to the god who protected fisherman and water workers. Taxes and tributes to Aztec leaders were paid in corn, as well as beans, seeds, grains and greens. They worshiped gods and goddesses of green corn and of ripe corn. Corn was so important that during an especially severe famine, Aztec families sold their children for corn—400 cobs for a girl and 500 for a boy. For the Inca, corn served as the major unit of currency in their barter system (Fussell 1992). Even today in contemporary Nahuatl, a language directly descendant of the ancient Aztec language, corn masa dough is called toneuhcayotl, or “our flesh” (Lind and Barham 2004:53).

There is not a single indigenous group in the southwestern United States for whom corn does not play a central role. For the Hopi, corn has been central to everyday and religious life for all of human memory. According to Hopi legend, all human beings came up out of a lower world. As they emerged, Spider Grandmother, the Hopi creation goddess, named them into different groups, including indigenous North American groups like the Hopi, Navajo, Apache, Sioux and Zuni, as well as the more generic white man. Each of these groups would disperse across the earth, but before doing that, each had to choose from a selection of coloured corn, each colour associated with a way of life. The Hopi were last to choose, left with a short ear of blue kernels, associated with a long life full of work and hardship. Through symbolic sacred blue corn, Hopi spirituality explains not only long individual lives but also, more importantly, the longevity of the Hopi people (Courlander 1970).
For the Zuni, corn was a gift from the spirits that was only received after giving up the lives of a boy child and a girl child to the spirits themselves (McNamee 2002). Indeed, corn is so important that in the Zuni language the months of the year and minute divisions of the seasons are referred to in terms descriptive of corn and corn plant growth stages, including months designated Yellow, Blue, Red, White, Variegated and Black after the multiple colours of corn the Zuni grow (Cushing 1979). Corn was central to Zuni life; even the measurement of time was based on corn. Corn was revered and considered the generator and sustainer of life. Complex rituals surrounding the planting, harvesting, and welcoming of corn each harvest season marked Zuni life, distinguishing gender roles and family relationships, indeed, all social relationships. Corn remains vitally important to contemporary Zuni, Hopi, and other southwestern indigenous groups, although the rhythm of corn planting, harvesting, storing, and celebrating, has diminished over time.

To the west of the Pueblo tribes, the Mojave explain the difficulty of growing corn and tobacco with a legend in which corn and tobacco are actual spirit beings. Corn and Tobacco argue over which one of them is more important to humans, culminating in both Corn and Tobacco going off in a huff away from the homeland of the Mojave (McNamee 2002). Thus, corn and tobacco are not simply foodstuffs but, more importantly, embody the deities themselves who subject humans to celestial whims and arguments.

Farther north on the American continent, corn legends are also central to human origin stories. The Creek, Iroquois and Lakota Sioux all tell a similar story of the first mother or grandmother who provided people with all the corn they needed. However, those she was nourishing did not know how she got the corn. In each variation of the story, the people spy upon her and discover that she variously rubs her thighs, calves or feet together and sloughs off corn, literally bringing corn from her body (Grantham 2002; Bell 1990; Deloria and Rice 1994; Jenness 1956). Often, those who discover her secret react in disgust and shun her, resulting in the corn mother leaving her children to fend for themselves but leaving the all-important gift of corn seeds to grow themselves. In other versions, because her secret has been discovered, she must give up her life but again leaves her children with her body, the source of corn, which they are told to drag across the earth several times to cause corn plants to grow (Red Earth 1998).
Even as far away as western Africa, where corn is not indigenous, the Mande have a complex creation myth that includes the arrival of corn in the Mande world. It is also integrated into their cosmology and names for corn are connected to clan names. Jeffreys (1971) uses these connections to argue for the arrival of corn, perhaps even an indigenous African strain, to the African continent well before Portuguese explorers brought it from the Americas. While the majority of research would not support Jeffreys’ claim, the origins of corn in Africa are not necessarily as important as the fact that it has become such an important staple and integral food that it has been woven into creation myths, cosmology and everyday life.

**From Wild Grass to Global Food Staple**

It is generally accepted in the scientific community that some of the first plants deliberately manipulated by human beings were various types of grasses, probably selected at first for plants that produced especially desirable characteristics like more and larger seeds (see, for example, Zeder 2009; Tanno and Willcox 2006; Damania et al 1998; deWet 1981; Childe 1936). Eventually, with horticulture and then agriculture, the selection process became even more advanced, and today scientists manipulate genetic codes to produce particular traits. Out of these prehistoric grass strains come our contemporary staple grains of barley, wheat, rice, oats and, of course, corn. Corn likely underwent the major evolutionary changes that would make it recognizable as corn today around 2,300 BCE (MacNeish and Eubanks 2000; Fussell 1992). By 1,000 CE, the Huhugam O’odham, or Hohokam, the ancestors of contemporary Tehano O’odham, were growing corn and irrigating it with one of the largest canal systems in North America; thus, corn was firmly entrenched as the staple grain in Mesoamerica (Fussel 1992). By the time Columbus landed in 1492, corn was an essential food source, integrated into the cultural structures, behaviors and worldviews of many indigenous groups. Indeed, its domestication and improvement can be strongly correlated to the development of the great cultural complexity and socially stratified societies of pre-colonial Mesoamerica (Lind and Barham 2004).

European explorers were quick to bring back the riches of the Americas, including corn. However, just as they ignored the cultural richness and sophistication of the indigenous civilizations, they also failed to closely observe how the indigenous people processed and prepared their corn. Corn, just as it requires humans to plant its seeds in order to grow (it does
not self-propagate), also requires manipulation in order to release its nutritional qualities. Unless it is treated in an alkalinization process called nixtamalization (from the Nahuatl nextli, ashes and tamalli, corn dough), the rich essential amino acids and niacin (vitamin B3) contained in corn cannot be metabolized (Flores Chavez et al N.D.; Wacher 2003). Throughout Mesoamerica and North America, indigenous people who relied on corn as a staple food developed the nixtamalization processes to release corn’s nutrients. While it is impossible to know exactly how nixtamalization was discovered, it does make grinding corn easier and there is a noticeable difference in the ease of digestion in nixtamalized corn versus non-nixtamalized corn (Davidson and Jaine 2006:537). In Mesoamerica, nixtamalization was accomplished by soaking corn kernels in limewater (the mineral calcium hydroxide, found in naturally occurring limestone, mixed with water). In North America people used wood ash in place of lime (Wacher 2003). For the Hopi, the use of ash serves two roles: it accomplishes nixtamalization and preserves the sacred deep-blue colour of the corn (Fussel 1992).

When the Europeans ignored nixtamalization, they were not able to garner corn’s full nutritional value and therefore, as corn became a staple crop in Europe and Africa and dominated the diet of many poor people, those same people developed pellagra\textsuperscript{11}, a serious disease caused by niacin deficiency. For many years, until researchers discovered the benefits of nixtamalization, Europeans blamed corn for the disease, marking it as food not really fit for human consumption (except for those who were very poor and had no other choice or for those rich enough to have a varied diet that did not rely on corn for the majority of their nutritional needs) and only suitable really as animal feed. Today, most of the corn we eat does not go through nixtamalization (except that used in masa harina for tortillas and in hominy and grits) but the enrichment of breads, flours and cereals with niacin, thiamine, and iron prevents severe dietary deficiencies in most of the North American population (Rajakumar 2000).

**A Rose by Any Other Name: Distinguishing Between Corn and Maize**

So far, I have used the term corn throughout this chapter, partially to make the point I am about to make, but primarily for simplicity’s sake. For a North American audience, corn is corn, both for human and animal food; we generally do not use the term maize. The word maize originates from the indigenous Arawak/Taino word, maiz. The Arawak, indigenous to the West Indies, were the first indigenous inhabitants Columbus encountered and it is highly
likely that, along with the Arawak, he also encountered maize for the first time. In contemporary usage, the term maize is used more often outside English-speaking North America; in the United Kingdom maize is the common term; the French use the word *mais*; it is *maíz* in Spanish. In English-speaking North America, however, we call it corn. Why we do so is not a simple matter.

The word “corn” is an Old English term for a small worn-down particle. It came to mean cereal grain in general and wheat in particular for English speakers (Fussell 1992). Using the less-specific term corn thus strips maize of its sacred, cultural meanings and instead relegates it to yet another grain; in this case, a food stuff that was considered fit for animal and poor human consumption but not for those who had a choice. As corn became a staple agricultural crop in Europe and colonized North America, it was grown primarily for animal feed, as well as a food source for the ever-growing numbers of slaves. It was sent to African regions where it would become a vitally important food. By the late seventeenth century, corn cultivation had risen dramatically against native crops like millet and sorghum. By the late twentieth century, corn had become the most important food crop on the African continent. In fact, today corn accounts for over 50 per cent of calories in local diets in southern Africa. Malawians say “*chimango ndi moyo*” or “maize is our life,” eliminating corn’s New World origins and making it completely African (McCann 2001:246-47; 251).

By the second half of the sixteenth century, poor Italians had adopted corn and made it their own, incorporating ground cornmeal into native cuisine, turning it into polenta (cooked grain mush that had been made previously with millet) and using it to make pasta. However, corn was almost totally absent from the cuisine of upper-class Italians (Capatti and Montanari 2003:49-51). It also became a staple for many poor Americans, particularly in the South (Warman 2003:162) where corn grits and corn bread were common at many meals. Corn was also the staple of a slave’s diet in the United States, combined with a pound of fatty (or all fat) pork, which provided niacin and, therefore, ironically kept slaves from developing pellagra from a diet primarily of corn (160). Corn, as a highly productive and, thus, relatively cheap food crop, was a natural staple grain for the poor.

Along the way, corn lost its newness, as well as its original meaning. This is an important change, this shift from the sacred, life-giving properties of food to its solely economic properties. It is a different shift, though, than simply absorbing new foodstuffs from
other regions around the world and making them native or traditional. When a food that was once exotic is integrated into a coherent food system, it loses its exoticism and becomes a normal part of the native cuisine (Mintz 2008).

In New York City, Chinese food on Christmas Day is quintessentially Jewish, and yet Chinese food could not be more different than what is normally associated with traditional Jewish foods like bagels and lox or matzo balls and chicken soup. Arriving with the wave of immigrants in the 1880s-1920s, Eastern European Jewish immigrants to New York linked notions of cosmopolitanism, urbanism and sophistication with eating in Chinese restaurants. Chinese food was considered safe non-Kosher food because of the way it was prepared. Additionally, Chinese restaurateurs held a lower social position even than immigrant Jews in New York society and, thus, the Chinese restaurant felt like a safe and comfortable place to eat unusual food away from home. Eating Chinese food at Christmas, surrounded, as it was and is, by Christian Anglo-Saxon rituals and hoopla, became a way not only of expressing difference and resistance to the dominant norms but also a way of creating new traditions. Thus, socially constructed meanings around Chinese food, a non-traditional food, become the raw materials for new cultural constructs. By the time the children of these immigrants came to adulthood, eating Chinese had been fully incorporated into New York Jewish custom and group identity (Tuchman and Levine 1993:388; 391-93; 396). Ironically, some contemporary non-Jewish Americans and Canadians have adopted the “Chinese food at Christmas tradition” as a way to protest a holiday that they consider consumerist and without real ritual meaning.

Like Chinese food, corn tortillas, salsa, sushi, pizza and bagels were once exotic foods in North America, but they are regularly consumed as normal and American. Salsa is often referenced in popular media, perhaps apocryphally, as surpassing ketchup as North American’s favourite condiment. Corn, once relegated to food for animals and the poor, has become so ubiquitous in our food that it is nearly impossible to avoid. This is partly due to its naturalization but also largely due to the vagaries of modern industrial agriculture, science and the vast swathes of land that make up the United States and Canada. Corn’s history is rooted in the Americas and so it is perhaps fitting that its future is also rooted in the same soil.

Corn was a sacred crop and staple food for much of the population in Meso and North America. As colonial power spread so, too, did corn. As settlers spread across the North American continent, they took corn with them. Indeed, it is likely that without the gift of corn
they had received from their indigenous neighbors, colonial settlers would not have survived (Warman 2003). Wheat, the preferred, more “civilized” grain of the Europeans, hadn’t had the thousands of years to adapt to the varying climates of North America as corn had and it did not do well. Indeed, in a good year, wheat produced about 50 kernels for every one planted, in comparison to corn, which yielded 150-300 kernels per one planted in North American soil (Pollan 2006). And this was the corn of the seventeenth century, not today’s hybrid and genetically engineered corn specifically bred to produce in high volumes. It was no wonder that settlers who relied solely on the wheat they brought with them from Europe quickly turned to corn as a staple crop.

**From War to Peace, From Family Farms to Industrial Agriculture**

Settlers arriving across the American Midwest discovered some of the richest grasslands in the world, on some of the best alluvial loam in the world, four feet deep in places (Pollan 2006). In their minds, inculcated with the idea that civilization meant the improvement of land through agriculture, this was a gift from the Christian God Himself. The great plains of North America were quickly blanketed with corn, wheat and hay fields, blowing bright green in the summer breezes. As the buffalo were hunted to near extinction, European cows replaced them, grazing on the nutrient-rich grasslands where soil and weather were not conducive to farming. In those places that were good for farming, cows grazed in fields alongside sheep, next to fields of corn, beans, squash, fruit trees and other kinds of food. Early American farms were mixed farms, in some ways a perfect cycle of nature reproduced for human needs (Berry 2009; Pollan 2006; Horowitz 2006).

Cows grazing on grasslands spread grass seeds and ground them into the earth with their hooves and then fertilized the soil with their manure. Chickens roamed the fields and ate many of the insects, worms and grubs that might eat the plants. Farmers collected manure from their cows, sheep and chickens and spread it on their fields, adding essential nutrients back into the soil. Beans and corn were rotated in fields to keep the soil rich in nitrogen. Corn may grow in almost any conditions, but it is nightmare on the soil, sucking up huge amounts of nitrogen and other nutrients. Soil became corn sick when not replenished by planting beans, a natural nitrogen fixer, so farmers rotated crops to actively enrich their soil. Bone meal from the animals also helped to feed the soil. Corn fed the people and the chickens and pigs on the
farm, although it didn’t feed the cows or the sheep. The way American farmers farmed would soon change dramatically, however.

During World War II the agricultural and military-related industries of the United States ramped up exponentially, turning out huge factories for chemical weapons and increasing agricultural production to fill the gap left by a war-ravaged Europe and cut-off Asian trade supplies. While corn had yet to hit its sweet spot during this production boom, its day was coming. During the war, however, soy became king and today plays neck-and-neck with corn in the global industrial agriculture business, with almost 87 million metric tons produced in 2006-2007 (DuBois 2008). Soy had long been a cover crop (adding that necessary nitrogen to farmers’ fields) and used for animal feed, but World War II changed all that. A perfect storm of oil shortages, an infestation of cotton boll weevil and a hungry military force led to the canny realization that the U.S. could benefit from a strong, increased soy industry, both growing and processing the beans. Soy oil was already a vital manufacturing oil, used in everything from paints, soaps and varnishes to lubricating industrial machinery and the protein meal by-product left over went to feed pigs and chickens. With World War II, however, production more than doubled to fill the gap from the loss of Asian suppliers and soy became an important meat replacement for the troops overseas. By 1950, 90 per cent of the soy crop was being harvested for the beans and was no longer relegated as a simple cover crop (DuBois 2008:210-216). However, with the end of World War II, all of that extra soy needed a place to go, along with the factories that had been producing materials for chemical weapons and those toxic mixtures themselves. And this is where corn (and the rest of industrial agriculture, really) comes in, especially in relation to those chemical weapons materials and factories.

Factories and materials specifically for chemical weapons would seem to have no place in peace time, leaving companies and the U.S. government, with expensive factories and materials and nowhere to sell them. After the war, there was an enormous surplus of ammonium nitrate, the principal ingredient in explosives. Ammonium nitrate is also an excellent source of nitrogen for plants. And so the chemical fertilizer industry was born, as was the pesticide industry, using formulas and technology developed during the war to produce poison gases (Foster and Magdoff 2000; Pollan 2006).

Corn, specifically, hybrid corn and the companies that process corn into the thousands of different ingredients that go into today’s food, would prove to be the primary beneficiary of
this surplus of ammonium nitrate fertilizer. Developed in the 1930s, by breeding for particular traits, the hybrid corn of the post-war period was bred to stand on tall, thick stocks and grow very close together, making it possible to grow much larger numbers of plants in a smaller area of land (Pollan 2006).

With nitrogen fertilizers, there was now no reason to rely on cover crops like soy and alfalfa to replace the nitrogen in the soil. Those cover crops, before the advent of chemical fertilizers, had been fed to beef and dairy cows. Once farmers didn’t need to grow those cover crops to supply nitrogen for crops like corn, they could more easily specialize as either crop or livestock operations (Foster and Magdoff 2000); thus, the enormous mono-crop swathes of corn across the U.S. Midwest were born. Cows and hogs moved off the farm to larger animal-only operations where scale dictated profit—the larger you were, the more money you made. Those animals also needed to eat and, with a surplus of corn, what better way to feed them. However, there was a small problem.

**Corn Surpluses and America’s Love Affair with Beef: A Marriage Made in Heaven?**

Cows, like sheep, are ruminant herbivores, genetically built to eat grasses, metabolizing them into proteins. They are not, however, built to eat grains. In fact, grains like corn ferment in a cow’s digestive track, filling it with gas, sometimes so much that this gas presses up against the cow’s lungs and suffocates it (Pollan 2006). Cows also get extreme acidosis from eating corn, resulting not only in a very sick cow but also in a very unhealthy cow (that ultimately is destined for human consumption), with serious infections ranging from pneumonia, ulcers, feedlot polio and abscessed livers. This extreme acid environment of a corn-fed cow’s stomach also creates a perfect environment for the production of acid-loving bacteria, in particular *E. coli* O157:H7, that is, for humans, a particularly lethal strain of *E. coli* bacteria (Pollan 2006:77-79). This bacteria gets released with cow manure, which because cows are now “finished” in large-scale Confined Animal Factory Operations (CAFOs) with thousands (or tens of thousands as the case may be) of cows, their manure becomes not a valuable fertilizer but instead an environmental hazard (Berry 2009; Altieri 2000). Indeed, U.S. cattle feedlots produce 300 million tons of manure each year. The runoff from these feedlots, other CAFOs (hogs in particular) and excess chemical fertilizer the soil cannot absorb has created a dead zone the size of New Jersey (22,608 square kilometers) in the Gulf of Mexico (Patel
Nitrogen-loving algae feed off the nitrogen-rich stew of excess chemical fertilizers and animal effluent, choking out all other sea life around them.

Given the way cows react to corn, one has to wonder, then, why the majority of cattle in the United States and Canada (over 100 million of them) are fed corn at all. Indeed, it is corn that made the inexpensive All-American hamburger and steak on the barbecue possible. Early cowboys and ranchers moved cattle across the wide-open spaces of the west, providing beef to an appreciative public, but it was a public that could only really afford to eat beef occasionally; maybe three times a week if you were very lucky, nothing like the three times a day that some Americans now manage. It hasn’t been a dramatic rise in overall incomes that has made this change in beef consumption possible; rather, it was corn that made the large-scale, industrial production of cheap beef that exists today (Pollan 2006:64-67).

Cows are not made to digest corn but, it turns out, if you feed them just enough, for just the right period of time, they grow quickly, putting on layers of fat and marbling their muscle, making it more tender and juicy (or fatty) than a grass-fed cow. You can also feed many more cows in a smaller area on corn, resulting in meat that is quicker to market, cheaper to produce, takes up less expensive land and is eagerly scooped up by a public that has developed a taste for corn-fed, fat-marbled beef. Indeed, corn-fed or grain-fed is sold to consumers as a desirable trait in their beef, most of them entirely unaware of just how sick the cow they are eating might have been. Thankfully for contemporary beef producers, there are antibiotics to mix in with the corn to keep the cows from getting too sick. Those antibiotics also have a really great additional benefit—they make the cows grow even bigger even faster (Horowitz 2006; Pollan 2006). Thus, while antibiotics are an additional cost for producers, their use makes sense if we are talking solely about economic gain, as much and as quickly as possible. Despite these benefits, we still might question why corn really makes sense as feed for so many cows given the health repercussions on the cows (and potentially the people consuming them) and the possible fallout from unhappy consumers once they discover the exact origins of their steak or burger. To answer this question we need to return to corn and move into the world economy of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Corn and the Global Economy
Corn is a greedy plant. The more corn you plant, the more nutrients those plants suck from the soil. Thus, the more fertilizer companies could sell. This seems like a win-win situation with
higher corn yields for the farmers and higher profits for the chemical fertilizer companies. There was just one problem, one that corn shared with soy: production would quickly outstrip demand and prices would plummet. To protect farmers and the economy, the U.S. government stepped in, setting in place policies that still reverberate today and, in many ways laid the foundation for the neo-liberal capitalist policies of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which still control the global agricultural market and food system today.

During the Depression, American farmers were producing much more food than consumers could afford to buy. The government weighed in again, not to get farmers to grow more food for a hungry nation, but instead to rescue farmers from the disastrously low prices of food because of a glut on the market. Under the New Deal, the government established a set price for commodities like corn and soy based on the cost of production. When the market price dropped below that set point, farmers were offered a government loan with their harvested crop as collateral. By taking the loan, farmers agreed to store their surplus corn (or whatever commodity crop they might have) and not dump even more product on the market. Once prices came back up, the farmer sold his corn and paid back the government. If corn prices stayed low, the farmer could also opt to keep the money the government had loaned him and use his corn as repayment. The government then kept the corn in a government run granary to sell when the price of corn rose too high because of shortages. This system helped keep the price of corn relatively stable even in the face of massive increases in yield in the twentieth century (Pollan 2006:47-50).

Already under fire since the 1950s, with the Nixon administration in the 1970s the system changed. Neoliberal economists thought that farming should be treated the same as any other part of the economic sector. Removing price supports, they argued, would foster market competition for food in the same way that it did for all other economic sectors. There were also the growing corporations that believed farm consolidation (and therefore fewer farmers) would lead to larger profits. Both pushed to dismantle the system. With the Nixon administration, the system that had been working fairly well heaved its last breaths. The farm bill of 1973 encouraged farmers to produce and sell as much as possible instead of holding back surplus corn from the market or keeping fields fallow when prices were low. If the price of corn fell, the government would now make up the difference (Pollan 2006:50-53).
And the price of corn did fall and continues to fall today, as more and more corn hits the market. It is a vicious cycle for farmers. By producing so much corn, they drive the prices down but, in order to survive, they have to sell even more corn, further driving down the price. This great glut of corn (and soy and other commodity crops such as canola and wheat) does not really benefit farmers. So who does benefit? Certainly it can’t be the U.S. government, which pays out billions of dollars each year in farm subsidies. It doesn’t benefit small family farms. Small farmers continue to go out of business. Indeed, the US Department of Agriculture reports that, since 1945, the number of farms has dropped by two-thirds while the actual number of acres farmed has remained the same (Mittal and Kawai 2001). The great glut of commodity crops like corn and soy, thus, benefits those who farm and process large amounts of land and food, the agribusinesses.

To really make a living, you have to go big. In fact, just over one per cent of the farms in the United States account for 42 per cent of the country’s total agricultural production value (USDA 2005). Even farm subsidies benefit the larger producers, with just ten per cent of farms in the United States receiving 61 per cent of all subsidy payments in the year 2000 (Morgan, Marsden and Murdoch 2006). Competing when you are small becomes increasingly difficult under the current system. In addition to national farm policies, international policies set systems in place that make producing food, rather than commodities, a losing proposition. For those with smaller farms, the only way to truly make a living anymore is to specialize and cater to a niche market, often a premium niche market. For my research participants who farm, that means selling vegetable seedlings in the spring to feed the booming market for home gardens, then growing special heirloom produce varieties to sell to high-end restaurants and at the local farmers market. In addition, where a more reliable source of income can be found, they create value-added products—artisanal foods like blackberry-apple vinegar, garlic scape pesto or braids of hardneck garlic that are both decorative and good for cooking—that do not have a short shelf-life like fresh produce and for which customers are willing to pay a premium price tag.

It is important at this juncture to really make the distinction between the concepts of food and commodities. Although corn is a food and a commodity, the food aspect of corn, that is its nutritional, symbolic and taste qualities are, more often than not, lost to its economic commodity qualities. It is corn’s economic qualities that take precedence on the world stage.
and that matter most when it comes to policies of international organizations like the WTO, WB and IMF and international trade treaties like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This is a very important point because when corn (and any other food) loses its food value becoming, instead, just an economic entity, it can have significant consequences on the health, wellbeing and cultural sovereignty of people around the world, particularly less powerful, marginalized peoples.

It is also useful at this juncture to examine how the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organization (WTO) work, both at a macro and micro level. The World Bank’s stated goal is to eradicate global poverty. By breaking down national trade barriers, the WB asserts that so-called Third World countries can be brought out of poverty through developing their national economies, freeing up trade and educating governments to operate within the tradition of a Western, neoliberal capitalist economic model where the market is the ultimate driving factor. The WB philosophy asserts that countries literally follow neo-Darwinian evolutionary paths, moving from poverty to self-sustainability (The World Bank 2008). While this is eerily reminiscent of early human evolutionary ideas that had people moving from savages to the ultimate civilized stage of the Western colonial world (a theory that has been decisively repudiated by scientists), the World Bank does not seem aware of this similarity. The IMF, in turn, was established to provide global financial stability by helping developing countries to build economic policies of free trade through technical assistance and financial integration with the global market (Schanbacher 2010).

The World Trade Organization, established in 1995, is the successor to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trades (GATT) established in the wake of World War II. The WTO is charged with establishing global trade policies, usually working towards liberalizing global trade barriers, although it does, albeit rarely, uphold trade barriers to support individual nation sovereignty. Governments negotiate trade agreements, settle trade disputes and establish a global system of trade rules through the WTO (WTO 2010). All three organizations are heavily influenced by the economic and trade policies of the richest member nations, in particular the United States. However, there are certain trade fights, in particular surrounding Genetically Modified (GM) foods, which the U.S. has not been able to dominate in recent years, as the European Union and smaller member-nations assert differing opinions.
The United States and the European Union have fundamentally different regulatory approaches to GM foods. The US follows the principle of substantial equivalence, meaning GM foods are not considered inherently different from non-GM foods but are essentially *equivalent*. In the EU, biotechnology products are considered inherently *different* from conventional products, the direct opposite of the US approach. The EU approach also incorporates consideration of non-scientific factors such as societal, economic, ethical and environmental factors into the equation. The dispute between the US and EU over GM products reflects regulatory models that ultimately reflect larger political and cultural values related to food (Morgan, Marsden and Murdoch 2006:8).

While the World Bank, IMF and WTO cover areas much larger than food, it is perhaps food where they have the largest impact on people’s everyday lives. Food production and distribution play an integral role in the goals of these organizations to eradicate poverty, liberalize trade and establish a cohesive global economic system. Food becomes a project of economic and developmental globalization designed, in theory, to help poor and so-called developing countries (Schanbacher 2010). In order to do this, a policy of agricultural growth targeted at international export trade, not at internal food production, is central. Mexico and corn provide an especially good example of this process in action.

After the food and oil crises in 1973-1974, where world food and oil prices rose exponentially and fear about sufficient supply for both was pronounced, countries in the Third World were forced to borrow heavily from wealthier nations, leading to the massive debt crisis of the 1980s. In response to the inability of many of these nations to repay their debts, the IMF and WB continued to emphasize economic solutions to deeper issues of poverty, growing reliance on foreign products, and massive debt faced in Third World Countries (Schanbacher 2010). Mexico was one of the countries that faced a crumbling economy and a massive debt to the World Bank. When it defaulted on its loans in 1982, the country was forced to initiate World Bank-directed structural adjustment programs. While Mexico’s government could choose how to implement these adjustment programs, the World Bank and IMF requested an increased liberalization of Mexico’s trade policies to allow more imported food across its borders, an increase in exports to foreign countries, the privatization of public agencies, including the previously state-owned *masa harina* (corn dough for making tortillas) factories.
and, the dismantling of subsidies for Mexican farmers and consumers, amongst them the *ejido* system (Lind and Barham 2004).

The *ejido* system was a state-supported series of policies that offered price supports and marketing assistance to farmers. It also subsidized the price of tortillas for urban wage earners and low-income families. It was part of a larger social welfare program that distributed basic foodstuffs, in particular the tortilla, to the poor (Lind and Barham 2004). Instead of subsidized or free tortillas, poor Mexicans now received cash payments so that they could buy food. However, with the liberalization of trade, cheap foreign foods (in particular those from the United States) have flooded the Mexican market and are often cheaper than foods produced in Mexico. The corn tortilla, the staple of Mexican diets for thousands of years and a link to the sacred, is out of reach to some of the poorest Mexicans. For policy makers who advocate these changes in the name of “choice,” the reality is that poor consumers have very little choice. Indeed, under the economic liberalization policies that began in 1982, the Mexican government further liberalized tortilla prices, resulting, in a 127 per cent increase, between 1997-1999, in the price of tortillas and, between 2000-2002, a further 22 per cent (Zahniser and Coyle 2004).

Providing money instead of a food like tortillas, which is deeply inscribed with cultural meaning, assumes that food is food and anything can be substituted for anything else. Just imagine, for example, that the All-American Thanksgiving turkey was replaced with a bowl of Japanese sweet red beans and rice. Both meals are full of protein, both hold celebratory symbolic meaning in their respective countries and yet, clearly, one does not equal the other. When corn plays such an integral role in the cultural and social foundations of Mexico, for the tortilla to be equated in value to a loaf of white bread imported from the United States displays a fundamental flaw in today’s global food system and the erasure of the essential cultural value of food. We should seriously consider the implications of a worldview that places the market as central, where all elements of social life are subject to commensurability, commodification and ultimately given a dollar value or price (Lind and Barham 2004). Food has always held sacred meaning for human beings, none more easily understood than corn. When something is sacred, we assume that it is safe from commodification. When we commodify the sacred, we violate our very understandings of the human experience.
What does it mean, then, when the market as worldview rules our actions? Instead of a specific cultural worldview grounded in, for example, the sacredness of food, consumer action drives everything. How, when, where and what can be sold and purchased drives the way people see the world. As consumers, we are told that it gives us more choice, more availability and the chance to assert our individual right to choose. Without a full understanding of the context underlying available choices, though, we are not truly free to choose.

**Going Beyond Natural Selection: Genetic Engineering and Food**

Now we arrive at the last or at least the most recent stage in the story of corn, as corn, in whatever form it might take, is surely not going to disappear from our plates. Corn has in many ways conquered the world. It blankets much of the North American continent, both in the field and on supermarket shelves. Technology has allowed us to break the corn kernel down into thousands of different components, making almost all processed food possible, feeding the animals we eat and even powering our cars. It has been so successful, it is a wonder that anyone would work to improve upon it. But they have. Hybrid corn has given way to transgenic or GM corn. In North America, where labeling laws do not require that companies disclose GM content, we are hard pressed to find a food with corn or a corn-related ingredient that is not made with GM corn. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA 2010), at least 70 per cent of the entire U.S. corn crop is GM.

Transgenic crops are the future, the way we will feed humanity. At least that is what transgenic proponents tell us. Even the Gates Foundation, one of the richest philanthropic organizations in the world, believes that transgenic foods hold a powerful answer to the world’s hunger problems. The foundation has donated over $115 million in the last twelve years towards biotechnological crop research (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 2009). Given the level of support from an influential humanitarian organization, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the promises heard in the media about transgenic foods, it is surprising then that consumers, even in the United States, have not readily accepted GM foods (Lang and Priest 2007). Biotech corporations have promoted the social promise of GM technology, such as easing or even ending world hunger and, yet, consumers are not clamoring for GM foods (2007). Indeed, even in so-called developing countries like India, Mexico and Peru, where GM technology is supposed to provide the most dramatic benefits, there are vociferous protests against GM crops (Asian Tribune 2010; GM Watch 2010a; 2010b). If
genetic engineering can truly save the world from hunger, one has to wonder why there are so many people around the world fighting to prevent GM plants from being grown and reaching the food supply.

**Genetic Engineering: Promises and Consequences**

In the mid-1970s scientists discovered that the bacterium *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* was able to insert its own DNA into a host plant’s genome. It was this discovery that provided the foundation for the creation of transgenic plants. In a gross simplification, it is the ability of the *Agrobacterium* to hijack the host plant’s genome that allows scientists today to insert particular genetic traits into plants. Imagine *Agrobacterium* as a rocket. Riding on this rocket (actually spliced into *Agrobacterium*’s genome) is a gene that provides resistance to a particular type of herbicide. Riding on the back of the herbicide resistance gene is also an antibiotics resistance gene and a gene that will switch on the herbicide resistance (the desired trait) in the host plant, a corn plant for example. *Agrobacterium* and its passengers fly, crashing into the corn plant’s DNA. Then comes another tricky part. An antibiotic is introduced into the corn, killing off *Agrobacterium* but not its passengers, because the herbicide resistance gene came along with an antibiotic (Lotter 2009a:38-39). So *Agrobacterium* dies off, and the herbicide resistance gene switches on, thanks to the handy "on" gene it brought with it.\(^{14}\) And, bingo, you have a corn plant that you can blast with herbicide (for example, Monsanto’s RoundUp) and it won’t die. All the weeds around it will, but that corn plant will keep on growing and, theoretically, growing even better because it won’t be competing with weeds for nutrients.

Transgenic corn with resistance to herbicide, or one that carries a natural insecticide in its genes (known as Bt corn, after the toxic *Bacillus Thuringiensis* gene it carries), or now with both traits together, has been grown by farmers for almost 10 years. In theory it makes farming easier. Biotechnology promised decreases in pesticide use, increased yields and increased profits for farmers. However, there is very little peer-reviewed evidence that these promises have actually come to fruition.\(^{15}\) Indeed, some studies show that transgenic crops are equally or even less productive than standard non-GM crops (Lotter 2009a). While there may be strong future potential in transgenic engineering, the fact remains that they are just that—potentially beneficial (Lang and Priest 2007). And, while the future benefits have yet to
appear, there still remain very serious existing concerns about genetically modified plants and animals.

**Attempting to Outsmart Nature: The Risks of Genetic Engineering**

When the transgene packet (the herbicide resistance gene and its compatriots riding in on *Agrobacterium*) is placed in the host plant’s chromosomes (or when the plant is bombarded with metal pieces containing the new genetic material), *where* the transgene packet ends up is highly imprecise and completely random (Lotter 2009a). Scientists first thought that these transgene packets would always end up in the same place but, it turns out, they cannot predict or control where it goes. It is virtually impossible to replicate the genetic pattern from host plant to host plant. Each time the new genetic material is introduced, it ends up in a different place in the host plant’s DNA.

This unpredictability proves to be very important when considering the ramifications of genetic engineering for our food supply or genetic engineering in general. More and more studies are proving the unpredictability of DNA and how it behaves under genetically engineered conditions. This is a potential problem because we cannot say for sure what the long-term effects of transgenics on plants might be. Early on, scientists cautioned that transgenic corn could result in herbicide, insect or viral resistance in weeds or could kill beneficial pollinator insects like the Monarch butterfly (for just some examples, see Nabhan 2002; Saxena et al 2002; Snow 2002; Ervin et al 2000; Jesse and Obryeki 2000; and Losey, Rayor and Carter 1999). Despite strong and mounting evidence that confirms the negative effects on Monarch butterflies and the growth of herbicide resistant superweeds, Monsanto still persists in asserting the opposite in their marketing materials (Monsanto 2010b). Monsanto’s scientists and those working for other biotechnology companies neglected to consider evolution, which they seemed to hold as the impetus for doing this at all.

In May 2010, the *New York Times* reported the rise of superweeds resistant to regular herbicides, plaguing farmers across the United States. The first resistant weed species to pose a serious threat was found in a Delaware soybean field in 2000. There are now 10 resistant species in at least 22 states infesting millions of acres, predominantly those planted with soybeans, cotton and corn (Neuman and Pollack 2010), which also happen to be the predominant GM crops. It is not just weeds adapting to transgenic crops, but also transgenic DNA cross-pollinating with other non-transgenic plants and transgenic crops spreading to the
wild. This, too, was not supposed to happen as scientists assumed that transgenic DNA could not be passed to other plants and seemed also to assume that plants recognize human borders and will remain only where they are planted. They assumed wrongly.

In August 2010 Nature reported that transgenic canola is now growing freely and unmonitored in the wild in North Dakota (Gilbert 2010). Researchers found two varieties of transgenic canola, one modified to be resistant to Monsanto's Roundup herbicide (glyphosate) and one resistant to Bayer Crop Science's Liberty herbicide (gluphosinate). They also found that the two plants had bred together to produce plants that were resistant to both herbicides, a new trait that does not exist anywhere else. Previous discoveries of GM canola that have been found growing outside of deliberately cultivated areas are often near the likely fields of origin or along roadsides where trucks carrying GM seeds travel. This same truck bed-spread of seeds is likely how wild canola plants carrying the genes of GM canola came to be growing near a Japanese national highway (Kyodo News International 2010). However, with this new discovery in North Dakota, plants were found growing along roadsides and near gas stations, grocery stores and other areas far from agricultural production areas.

Gene flow, or the exchange of genes between plants, has been happening naturally for centuries. It is, in fact, how corn became corn and how those super-productive hybrids were created. If gene flow happens naturally, we might wonder why it is such an issue with transgenic crops. We do not necessarily know what will happen when genes from one corn plant cross with another in the wild. Gene flow from transgenic crops is a serious concern because we do not know what the ramifications might be. As noted in the prestigious science journal, Nature, genetic engineering is of concern because it introduces new types of fitness-related traits, like herbicide resistance, into ecosystems with thousands of different types of plants, each with its own specific potential to cross-breed and pass along those new traits (Snow 2002). A Bt gene for insect resistance has been found in wild sunflowers and was responsible for an unexpectedly large increase in sunflower seed production (Snow 2002). While an explosion of wild sunflowers from an excess of seeds might not necessarily a problem, if the same result were to be observed in a noxious weed that chokes out desirable native plants or even food crops, then the gene flow from transgenic plant to wild plant would be a serious problem.
With our reverence for science and the constant push of the market as the driving force behind much of what happens in the world today, we have not taken the time as a global society to stop and truly evaluate the consequences of genetic engineering. The rate at which new GM crops are commercialized has vastly outstripped the rate at which long-term, multi-sited studies to determine the possible effects of genetic engineering have been conducted (Snow 2002:542). Companies also do not want to fund long-term studies and hold back their patents until definitive proof of safety has been gathered. However, it is vitally important that they do conduct these studies. The ability of scientists to understand and predict the ecological and agronomic consequences of gene flow is still very rudimentary (542) and much more needs to be done before we can be assured that we are not jeopardizing our future food supply with these new technologies.

Part of the difficulty is that natural science tends to be myopic (Thompson and Scoones 2009; Knudsen and Scandizzo 2006). It focuses on an individual problem, such as insect infestation, and works to solve that. A Bt corn is developed and planted in a test field and observations are made about how much pollen is dispersed in the wind, for example. A small, acceptable amount is observed and thus the new Bt corn strain is deemed safe. However, what is often not considered is that the risks involved in widespread dispersal of wind-pollinated transgenic Bt crops increases exponentially when larger regions are planted. So one field might be safe, but multiply that one field by the thousands, across multiple areas of the world and the risk is not simply proportional to the increase but exponentially higher. And the gene flow from transgenic crops is irreversible. Once those superweeds evolve, that’s it. They do not disappear with the next frost. They reseed themselves and come back even stronger. Concerned scientists suggest that the gene flow from GM plants could result in a catastrophic change in the ecological balance of the planet (Knudsen and Sandizzo 2006).

These concerns do not account for the cultural impacts of gene flow, let alone the changes to farming that occur when technological advances like GM crops are introduced. Large corporations, not small family farms, are the true beneficiaries of GM technology (Berry 2009; Morgan, Marsden and Murdoch 2006). In addition to the scale of farming required to truly make a profit with GM crops, the technology patents that come along with GM seeds also benefit corporations, not farmers. Under international patent law, biotechnology companies have a uniquely privileged position and hold great influence over
agricultural policy (Lang and Priest 2007). Indeed, legal battles rage between corporations and independent farmers over patent infringement when GM plants are found growing in non-licensed fields. When corporations patent and thus own life in the form of seeds, the longstanding practices of farmers worldwide are jeopardized. Saving and exchanging seeds has been an essential part of growing food since humans first started controlling plant populations for their own sustenance. By inserting binding legal agreements that specifically forbid seed saving and replanting, farming moves even further away from a source of food to simply another economic process.

For thousands of years, people have planted corn. Their daily lives have revolved around the plant and its ability to nourish both body and spirit. There are thousands of types of corn, carefully cultivated to produce different qualities. The Hopi have protected their blue corn by planting it far away from yellow varieties. Indigenous people in Mexico also separate their corn to keep the white corn away from a multi-coloured variety. Consider what happens to these distinct varieties when they become contaminated with GM traits. We cannot adequately predict what will happen; however, we can predict that those varieties so carefully cultivated over thousands of years, varieties that contribute to the rich biodiversity of the planet, will be lost forever. Also consider what happens to farmers, who rely on the seed corn they carefully save from each harvest to replant for the next year, when that seed saving is illegal.

Corn has gone from a sacred gift from the gods, to a food considered fit only for animals and the poor, to a commodity that powers global economic engines and makes much of the food we find on our supermarket shelves possible. The phenomenon of relegating less-desirable food to poorer, less fortunate people by those in power has unfortunately not gone the way of history. As Gewertz and Errington (2010; 2008) so deftly explain in their work on “cheap meat,” extremely fatty lamb or mutton flaps—sheep bellies—not considered edible by mostly white consumers in New Zealand, Australia, Europe and North America are sold to a ready and willing market of economically and socially marginalized Pacific Islanders, following in the path laid so deftly by corn. Today, only the elite can truly afford to eat expensive cuts of grass-fed beef from cattle that have not been fed large doses of corn (and antibiotics) to fatten them up. Organic fruits and vegetables, without harmful pesticide residues and the questionable impacts of transgenics, are difficult if impossible to find in
poorer areas of cities and, even if they can be found, are often out of reach financially for the most marginal sectors of our global population. In North America, our poorest populations are the unhealthiest, with higher rates of diet-related illnesses than those better off. Our food choices matter, not just for environmental or animal welfare reasons, but for social justice reasons as well.

Food used to be sacred, a gift from the gods to give life to human beings. Today food has become a commodity, relegated to the same status in international trading circles as iron or plastic baby dolls. Food is valued today primarily for its economic potential, not its life-giving and spirit-sustaining potential. Movements towards more local food, the desire to know just exactly what is in our food, the increasing popularity of community gardens—all of these trends point to a desire to reconnect with our food in a more than superficial way. When the market is at the very centre of our worldview, consumption is the only thing that matters; not what we consume or why, but simply that we consume. Refusing that worldview and instead reclaiming the sacredness of food connects us to what it really means to be human and is perhaps a step towards remaking a more human food system for us all. This refusal to accept the majority worldview of consumerism lies at the core of definition of place for Salt Spring. Even its most affluent residents, sometimes the ones the most disconnected from the larger population of the island, will agree when asked that Salt Spring is special because it is out of the ordinary and because people there are working to change the system from the inside.
Chapter 7 Creating Place through Praxis

Many activists, and those on Salt Spring are no exception, find themselves asking a potent, if sometimes plaintive, question: “How do you change the world?” The popular quote at the beginning of this document, attributed to Margaret Mead, is widely used as inspiration to continue the fight, whatever the specific fight might be. However, after recent confrontations with deeply entrenched neoliberal policies that honour the market above all and tend to ignore the effects of those policies on all but the most privileged in society, it seems that believing we can change the world is as difficult as believing, like Alice on her adventure in Wonderland, in impossible things. Faced with increasingly urgent global environmental concerns, like climate change and peak oil, as well as postcolonial concerns such as Indigenous rights and sovereignty that have yet to be resolved, contemporary social activists are searching for ways to effectively communicate their messages and effect global social, political, and economic change. Many Salt Springers, and definitely all of my research participants, are at the centre of this search for the best way to effect change. Some approach it only from a very personal perspective, focusing on changing the world through small, direct personal actions like growing their own food or biking everywhere rather than driving. Others use those personal actions but are also on the front lines of activism, organizing protest marches and very vocally contesting the neoliberal social, environmental, and economic policies that are generally the norm in the Western world.

Recent campaigns in Canada and the United States promoting alternative approaches to the globalized food system, urge us to “Eat Local” or “Vote with Your Fork.” For example, in 2009, Slow Food USA sponsored a series of “Eat-Ins” across the 50 states, gathering people together over Labor Day weekend to share a meal in a public space and advocate for healthier, more locally sourced school lunches across the United States (Slow Food 2011). The Food Action Society of the North Okanagan (FASNO) in British Columbia sponsored a “100-Mile Diet Challenge” in 2009 that challenged participants to eat only foods produced within 100 miles for 100 days. FASNO worked with local retailers to highlight foods sourced from producers within 100 miles of the town of Vernon, British Columbia, and had a local politician sign up and discuss the challenges and benefits of trying to eat locally. These are just two examples, among thousands across North America, of work toward building an
alternative food system. Advocates of an alternative to the global food system, or food activists as I will call them throughout this chapter, promote increased local food production, agriculture with a smaller environmental impact, eating seasonally, growing your own (even if just a small balcony pot of tomatoes), and more. They do this for a variety of reasons—from concerns about the environment and better nutrition to building more robust local economies and community relations. While the underlying concept may be to change the food system via global collective action, many of these activist messages get structured within an individualistic, consumer-based paradigm. Buying a bunch of organic broccoli, for example, certainly supports a more environmentally conscious agricultural system, but without an awareness of such things as who produced the broccoli and in what context, buying it can become a simple consumer choice. This act might leave you feeling better about yourself by having done your part to help the environment, but does not truly engage you in the sociopolitical, as well as environmental, implications that this act of resistance against more conventionally grown broccoli might mean.

There is a tendency in some social science literature, particularly in anthropology, to skip over the importance of place, or terra firma, as we have come to understand the contemporary world as one of transnational flows and migrations where physical place and the cultures that grow up around the unique characteristics of each place, takes a background role to human networks and flows of information and physical human bodies through place. However, place, actually physical terra firma, is an essential factor in examining challenges to dominant systems as well as determining social-ecological resilience. By exploring food activism through a feminist lens, which highlights the role of the embodied and emotional, the expressive and spiritual—all characteristics “traditionally” associated with women—this chapter works to expose the global, market-based focus of neoliberal principles and create a space for alternative views of activism that are not solely centred on the economic market. I begin with an exploration of neoliberalism, choice, and resistance. I follow with an examination of the general approach to most discussions surrounding globalization and of why a male-focused interpretation cannot adequately analyze global forces and how people interact with them, whether in congruence or conflict. This is followed by a definition of a feminist lens and why a feminist ethnographic approach is important to challenging dominant discourses. Finally, I examine some alternative ways of knowing and acting in the world and
how the daily activities of food activists, in conjunction with vocal discussions and information dissemination from activist academics, have the potential to make meaningful change to our food systems and, indeed, to the world in a broader sense.

**Neoliberalism, Choice and Resistance**

Neoliberal capitalist systems focus on the market as the ultimate driver of the majority of economic and social structures, with the global economy and trade liberalization governed by international organizations like the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Local diversity is supplanted by standardization of goods and services, which are commercialized and commodified (Williams-Forson 2008). Within a neoliberal capitalist framework, individual “choice” within the market is paramount. Under a neoliberal philosophy the role of the state is to encourage independence, of both people and corporations, so that markets can naturally flourish. Within this maximized independence, markets will thrive because competition is encouraged and “good” companies will rise naturally to the top because consumers can exercise their choice to support those companies, leading to the benefit of consumers and producers (Castree 2007; Harvey 2007; West 2012). Proponents of this approach highlight the freedom that comes from individual action and the right to choose how one operates within society; freedom essentially becomes how one chooses to operate as a global, market-based consumer. Thus, empowerment under neoliberal capitalism is achieved through individual choice, where choice is participating within the market.

Those of us in the Western world and, increasingly, those who make up the growing middle classes of the so-called developing world, are bombarded with seductive images of seemingly endless food choices, all promising us participation in the vast diversity of flavours the world has to offer. One can choose Wonder® bread over an artisanal loaf or an exotic curry over a more mundane macaroni and cheese but choice always exists within market terms. The choices consumers are asked to make within a neoliberal market are complex and challenging, choices that include, according to Guthman, “regulatory decisions about ecological and public health risk, working conditions, and remuneration, and even what sort of producers of what commodities should be favored in the world market” (Guthman 2007:472). And, in fact, the reality of the production costs behind these choices remains hidden. For example, Indigenous lands have been appropriated for soy production; the environment has
been degraded as a result of increasing chemical pesticide and fertilizer use; more genetically modified crops are being planted and introduced into the food supply without adequate testing; and, the health and dignity of workers, who have a hand somewhere along the way in bringing these foods to our tables, is ignored (Barndt 1999c:64-65).

Resistance also becomes another consumer choice that an individual can make, particularly when the hidden relationships behind production practices are revealed. However, resistance is generally framed as small, individual acts of resistance or micro-resistances, that might include buying organic broccoli and Fair Trade bananas and chocolate or getting take-out instead of performing the traditional female role of cooking. James Mittelman argues that these myriad micro-resistances “send forth ripples of doubt and questions concerning the viability and sustainability of neoliberal globalization” (2004:76). While I agree that micro-resistances can chip away at the accepted viability of neoliberal globalization, I would argue that each of these micro-resistances can also easily fall firmly within the dominant neoliberal consumer construct when they are framed as individual consumer choice and, therefore, participation in the market. We are told that by consuming particular products we are in turn supporting farmers, food producers and workers around the world, which, in fact, we may be. However, these are things some of us want to hear because consuming in this way fulfills in us a moral obligation to do the right thing (Wurgraft 2002). On the other hand, just how we do the right thing has changed—rather than direct political action, we can choose to shop at Whole Foods or join a Facebook group that champions a healthy food system and feel good about our actions.

West, drawing on Guthman’s work on ethical consumption notes that, “the current paradigm for consuming correctly or, ethically, has seen a conflation between civil protest or political action and consumer choice; that people read a label and assume that it enacts their politics” (West 2012:50). For my research participants, just using an organic or fair trade label to guide their consumption is not enough. As Tanya noted, “I think it's very hard for someone not to serve organic [on Salt Spring]. Because that's totally politically incorrect. It’s like the basic thing you have to have before anything else” (Tanya, 17 July 2012). Most Salt Spring residents are very aware of the politics of choice and the conflation of consumer choice with political protest. This does not mean that they do not buy organic—they do when they can—but that there is a higher-level choice, one that for them does indicate civil protest and
political action. This higher-level choice is one predicated on locality and on the choice to live on Salt Spring in the first place in an attempt to remove themselves as much as possible from the larger system that has conflated choice with political action for so many consumers. My research participants and, I would say, the majority of Salt Springers, place personal relationships well above labeling. Thus, even if a bag of spinach at the grocery store is labeled certified organic, the hierarchy for ideal food on Salt Spring would place it below grown at home and locally grown and just above non-organic mass-produced spinach. On Salt Spring, locality trumps everything and sits high above other value markers. Even for coffee, one of the world’s largest commodities—definitely not something that can be grown on Salt Spring—locality is a more important value marker than organic or fair trade certification. Salt Spring is home to a number of local coffee companies, the largest of them Salt Spring Coffee, which, in fact, no longer roasts on Salt Spring. Ometepe Coffee imports beans from Nicaragua and Guatemala, roasts them on Vancouver Island and then volunteers package the beans on Salt Spring. This company is run by a group of volunteers and all profits go back to community development projects in Nicaragua (Ometepe Coffee 2014). Mount Maxwell Coffee Roasters is the most local of them all, a small artisan roaster run by John and Lara Gossett out of a yurt on their property on Mt. Maxwell. Each Salt Spring coffee producer offers organic and fair-trade certified coffee but it is their local-ness that gives them a higher value than other organic and fair-trade coffees. Local customers trust these companies not because of their certifications, which implies that they are, in West’s words “willingly opening themselves to external auditing” (West 2012:53) but because they are local and people know them. Their children go to school with John and Lara’s kids; they’ve shared many cups of coffee and conversation with Salt Spring Coffee’s Mickey McLeod at the local café; their friend volunteers for Ometepe at the Saturday market. It is a given, really, that all these coffees are certified organic and fair trade—the businesses wouldn’t survive on Salt Spring otherwise—but it is the personal relationships and local connections that make them valuable for islanders.

Those Salt Spring residents who value locality over and above almost anything else are, in fact, re-embedding economic transactions within social relationships, the opposite of what Karl Polanyi calls disembedding. In the disembedding process, economic activity becomes removed from social relations and the things being purchased lose any sense of origin and their means of production is erased (West 2012:55). When disembedding occurs the
links between “economic choice, political action, social relationships and identity production” removes the web of social connections from the market and makes it just a series of economic transactions (West 2012:55).

A key facet of neoliberalism is the framing of these choices and social, political and economic issues as human rights (Naples 2002a). Nancy Naples asserts that this framing of economic and social policies and practices in terms of human rights “reveals the colonialist, ethnocentric, and racist assumptions underlying neoliberal policy” (2002a:273). Human rights are framed in terms of consumer choice, rather than fundamental humanistic values and the Western values of freedom, individualism and, ultimately, consumerism trump all. By constructing human rights issues as grounded in Western capitalist values and assuming that those values are superior to others, alternative cultural values are erased, further colonizing people around the world via discourse and rhetoric, rather than through direct force, as in past colonial efforts. Indeed, the entire contemporary discourse surrounding human rights that has emerged in the last 25 years has moved beyond the original framing of civil liberties and political rights to what is simply just and right (Grewal 2005). Of course, the definitions of what is just and right differ considerably around the world and, therefore, when the dominant definition is one based on the rights of the individual as a private, autonomous, free consumer, the entire concept of human rights becomes problematic and diminished.21

We are led to believe that the more we consume, the more freedom we have (West 2012). In a globalized corporate world flexibility and choice are ultimately about maximizing profits and minimizing obstacles for the corporations, not for the individual (Barndt 1999b). As Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake so succinctly put it, “in this brave new world of niche marketing, everyone is valued as a potential customer and no one is valued intrinsically” (2004:20). Micro-resistances, therefore, can reduce activism to lifestyle choices rather than political commitments, making an actual challenge to neoliberal capitalist models ineffective because those models rely on the “commodification of resistance [as] a hegemonic strategy” (Garrison 2004:27). Community action, with values like justice, fairness and equality as a foundation, is replaced with the freedom of consumer choice (Reiter 1999:85). However, consumer choice is not simply false consciousness or consumers as unwitting victims of neoliberal commodity culture. As Inderpal Grewal (2005) reminds us, choice is essential to any participatory democracy as well as to consumer culture. Indeed, feminist discourse also
relies on the concepts of choice and freedom for all human beings, regardless of gender, race or class. The right to consume, as well as to participate in the democratic process, has been an important part of the struggle for full citizenship of many marginalized groups in the United States. The American Consciousness, as Grewal terms it, is one in which consumption is linked to democracy and choice (27-30). The discourse of neoliberal globalization is supported by the linking of democracy and choice.

**Globalization Discourse(s)**

While feminism advocates for a diversity of choices and freedoms and filters the analyses of those choices through a distinctly gendered lens, the discourse surrounding neoliberal globalization, both its effects and processes, is predominantly about men (Adam 2002; Nagar et al. 2002; Naples 2002a; Freeman 2001). “Whether the emphasis is on economic and political processes, social relations, the role of technology or environmental impacts, gender is rarely the focus of attention” (Adam 2002:4). Much of the literature on globalization has focused on globalizing forces in terms of corporations, global financial trade patterns and global governance, in particular through institutions such as the WTO, the WB and the IMF (Nagar et al. 2002). This is despite the fact that the impacts of globalizing forces vary significantly based on gender.

When economic, market-based relations by multilateral global institutions and governments are the focus of globalization, it masks very direct human relations based on mutual dependence and cultural diversity (Schanbacher 2010:ix). While globalization always implies some sense of global flows of information, goods and people, exactly how that happens, the impacts of such flows, and how those flows are adopted, adapted and resisted may be defined in many different ways. As the motto of the World Social Forum reminds us, Another World is Possible, complete with alternatives to neoliberal capitalist globalization and multinational capitalism. These alternatives have human beings and human relationships at their core, rather than macro-level, abstract economic theories.

Those involved in alternative social movements across the globe advocate a new approach based on equality, solidarity and diversity: a more human approach to global economics than we have seen under the neoliberal model (Allard, Davidson and Matthaei 2008; Matthaei and Brandt 2008; Hart, Laville and Cattani 2010). Many food activists are part of these alternative movements and build community relationships and global networks with
other food activists that can support “participation, solidarity, diversity, human rights, and social justice” (Williams-Forson 2008:4). Food activists build networks with each other and share information about their efforts via personal and group blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites, as well as during international conferences held by organizations like La Via Campesina and Slow Food International. By bringing people together for a common cause, no matter how far away geographically or socioeconomically they may be, these domains work to link people who might not normally interact in the everyday world. Global Internet-based networks level the playing field, so to speak, and help participants to focus on their common goals of increased access to healthy food and sovereignty over choice—what to farm, what to grow, how to grow it, how to distribute it, what to buy—while valuing and encouraging the diversity of voices that share similar goals. Through international and local forums, food activists advocate for a global food system, played out at the local level, which supports community participation, gender equity, environmental responsibility and social justice (Food First 2010; La Via Campesina 2010; Slow Food 2010).

Jane,\textsuperscript{22} for instance, volunteers many hours toward building a more robust local food system in her community. I met Jane about two years before my fieldwork on Salt Spring began, through my own volunteer work with a local food security group in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia. While not residents of Salt Spring Island, Jane’s and her husband’s experiences and feelings surrounding local food production mirror much of what food producers on Salt Spring had to say. Their experiences are indicative of those shared by the larger community of small-scale food producers across BC, including my participants on Salt Spring Island. Jane has a graduate degree in agronomy and, with her husband, runs a small mixed farm, growing an assortment of vegetables and raising chickens. At one time they raised both meat birds and laying hens but, when the provincial government instituted changes to animal slaughter regulations, they could no longer slaughter their chickens themselves and the nearest provincially approved slaughter facility was over 100 miles away, making it economically impossible to raise meat birds any longer. Jane works as an agricultural consultant as well as on the farm. Tall, slim, her \textit{café au lait} coloured cheeks scattered with freckles, Jane looks much younger than her 54 years, which she attributes to “good genes” from her “native” great-grandmother, although Jane identifies herself as “a real Canadian mix” when asked how she would describe her family’s ethnic background. With four grown
children all at university, Jane does not plan to slow down any time soon on the farm or in her consulting business. She has been instrumental in fund-raising and getting government approval for a mobile abattoir to replace the many small-scale slaughter facilities that had to shut down due to government regulations. When asked how they went about the process, Jane told me that they didn’t reinvent the wheel. We got in touch with other people who’d done it before us and learned from them. That saved us so many headaches. This is something the community, producers, really, really need. And no one outside was stepping in to do anything. So we had to do it ourselves. I do think a local food system is the best way to go, the most sustainable; really, it might be our only choice in the future so we must build it up now. But does that mean that we only do things locally, we don’t learn and work with people far away? No way. That would be silly. We’re stronger if there are more of us.

Along with other local food system advocates, Jane well understands the importance of maintaining and building a larger, extra-local community of fellow advocates. By sharing knowledge about alternative ways of approaching the food system, Jane and others work to challenge simple definitions of globalization. Indeed, Jane introduced me via email to two people on Salt Spring who became important research participants. Jane and her friends on Salt Spring maintain connections to each other and thus build a larger, philosophically aligned, rather than geographically local, food community praxis.

Indeed, the dominant discourse surrounding globalization can be seen as socially constructed imaginary, part of “the rhetoric to legitimize certain political strategies” (Kelly 1999:380). Seeing globalization as socially constructed, rather than taking it for granted as an inevitable process, opens space for alternative interpretations (Nagar et al. 2002:262-263). These interpretations recognize what Julie Matthaei and Barbara Brandt so eloquently call “the invisible heart” or the feminine caring work that takes place out of the formal economic sector but is crucial to economic and social life (2008:173). When we view globalization as inevitable or outside human agency, we accept it as a static, bounded force generally framed according to large abstract scales at the supranational, nation-state and corporate levels. This global-national focus reinforces the idea that globalizing forces exist in and of themselves, rather than as socially constructed, relational ideas that are in fact open to reframing and reinterpretation (Kelly 1999; Nagar et al. 2002). When we focus on the human scale of globalization, on the hybridities and heterogeneity of people’s adoptions and resistances to
globalizing forces, we can see more fully the different patterns of meaning that people create daily in their worlds, rather than assuming that globalization is simply a homogenizing force that is erasing cultural differences throughout the world (see, for example, Watson 1997; Srinivas 2007; Williams-Forson 2008; Gewertz and Errington 2010; West 2012; Errington, Gewertz and Fujikura 2013).

Examining how globalizing forces have affected women brings the heterogeneity of experiences into stark relief. The impacts of globalization are not simple. A review of the research shows a complex and often contradictory story (Stark 2000; Adam 2002; Nagar et al. 2002; Heywood and Drake 2004). Some studies have shown that, in general, women have benefited from global economic restructuring (Mehra and Gammage 1999; Tzannatos 1999). Rekha Mehra and Sarah Gammage (1999:538) argue that the global trend that sees labour moving from agricultural to nonagricultural reflects a broad improvement in women’s employment because nonagricultural work generally offers higher wages and more stable and secure employment. The economic shift to wage work often leads to feelings of empowerment and actual independence, as women no longer have to rely on other household members, particularly men, for income (Nagar et al. 2002). However, the majority of the part-time, flexible, disposable labour in both agricultural and nonagricultural work is provided by women, making their improved employment prospects less than stable and the first to go when jobs are cut (see chapters 1-9 in Barndt 1999c for a variety of research on this phenomenon). Other research shows that women and children have suffered disproportionately under global economic policies (Harrison 1991; Martinez-Salazar 1999; Adam 2002; Desai 2002; Nagar et al. 2002). The shift to using women’s labour across the globe is based on the enduring marginal social role of women, due in large part to the still-significant wage gap between women and men (Barndt 1999c; Adam 2002). Many women in the Global North have increased access to education and better jobs and, as a result, a much greater degree of independence than ever before. However, this increased access is generally limited to white middle- to upper-middle class women. There remains a large number of poor women, including many women of color, who have limited access to education or jobs that pay more than minimum wage (Mullings 1997; Mullings and Wali 2001). Yet, women of all socioeconomic and racial groups are still overwhelmingly the ones who perform most unpaid household work. In effect, this increases the amount of time they spend working, while
decreasing the amount they earn. It is important to recognize this unpaid work, however, because it drives the global economy and continues to be devalued (Villagomez 1999; Waring 1988). Although there are numerous difficulties in making an accurate monetary estimate, the latest figures from the United Nations Platform for Action Committee estimate the monetary value of unpaid work, the majority of which is done by women, in the global economy at USD$11 trillion annually (Efroymson 2010).

It is important that analyses of globalizing trends and people’s responses to them be conscious of the complexities inherent in those processes. A feminist understanding, implicitly a critique of more prevalent and static understandings of globalization, is one that does not simply add women’s stories into the larger picture but instead “challenges the very constitution of that macropicture such that producers, consumers and bystanders of globalization are not generic bodies or invisible practitioners of labor and desire but are situated within social and economic processes and cultural meanings that are central to globalization itself” (Freeman 2001:1010). Women’s voices and experiences cannot be lumped into a single gendered box, just as men’s experiences cannot. A contemporary feminist ethnographic approach recognizes and highlights the importance of these diversities of knowledge and perspectives to consider not only the larger picture but also the diversity that exists within individual human experiences.

**Using a Feminist Lens**

Food is a particularly useful medium not only for building community relations and establishing common ground, but also for analyzing larger global social, political and economic matters. As a woman, a feminist ethnographer and food activist, I understand intimately the visceral experiences that can be found in food and the power that comes from feminist collectivity. Ten years ago I simply wanted to cook better tasting food and I loved getting up early on Saturday mornings to visit the farmers market. As I spoke to farmers each week, though, I began to understand how passionate they were and what a struggle it was for them to do what they did and make any kind of living at it. I wanted to understand how our food system became, in my mind, so broken, and what I might do to help fix it. My research grew directly out of this desire, not simply to learn but to take an active role in changing the system. Issues surrounding our food systems “highlight the irrationalities and inequities of the
economic system and problems in the relation of capitalism to the natural world” (Wells 2002:149-150).

Food and food activism is also a particularly useful site for feminist analysis not only because most of the world’s food producers are women (FAO 1998) or because women are essential to a sustainable agricultural system (United Nations 1997; Krug 2003) but also because global governance around the food system is profoundly patriarchal in nature (McMahon 2009). The key decision makers surrounding the global food system tend to be male profit makers from the Global North whose approach is grounded in a neoliberal capitalist framework that puts corporate profit and unlimited free trade before the sovereign rights of less-influential countries in the Global South, not to mention before the rights of small-scale farmers and consumers around the world.

Perhaps because food is considered women’s work in many cultures, the majority of food activists are women. From increasing corporate control of agriculture and global economic policies to the price of groceries, women feel the effects of global forces on the food system every day (Barndt 1999a, 1999b, 1999c; Wells 2002). Whether they lose work hours at the local tomato processing plant due to vertical integration of food corporations (Barndt 2002) or they work full time but cannot afford adequate healthy food for their families (Field 1999; Villagomez 1999; Ehrenreich 2002) or they are concerned about the poisoning of soil and waterways from industrial agriculture practices (Martinez-Salazar 1999), women have myriad reasons for being on the frontlines of food activism.

This concentration of women food activists highlights an integrated sort of knowledge that is both rational and visceral or, as Deborah Barndt puts it, “What we know about the food system and its impacts on us, we know in our guts” (1999a:21). However, it is important not to fall prey to the risk of eliding very real differences among women activists. As noted in my discussion on the diversity of experiences of globalization, women have a multiplicity of experiences, some shared, some not, experiences that are not simply about a common framework of backgrounds and beliefs based on shared gender but also, and perhaps more importantly, about situated experience. It is important for feminist ethnographers to go beyond simple description and analysis of women’s experiences and instead dig deeper to describe the rich diversity of human experience and how global forces and local as well as individual contexts inscribe those experiences. Global processes are mediated through specific local
contexts, including local cultural beliefs, political and social structures, ideologies and gender relations (Wells 2002). All of these shape the diverse look and feel of globalization and a feminist analysis must be conscious of this diversity at all times. Many contemporary feminist theorists argue that all knowledge is situated because it is gained by specific individuals located in specific places at specific times (Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991; Collins 2000; Mohanty 2003; Grewal 2005). A feminist analysis of knowledges and perspectives is not simply about understanding gender differences. It is equally, if not more important to examine other significant factors such as ethnicity, class and socioeconomic status. As Psyche Williams-Forson (2008) notes, examining the intersections of gender, race, class and power are critical to understanding hegemony and power and the historical constructs of particular positions in society today. Further, according to Martha McMahon (2009:4), “feminist analysis uses gender as a theoretically and politically enabling tool. It encourages us to theorize gender as a process rather than a property of individual identities” and to make the workings of class, race and privilege more visible.

A feminist approach also implies an agenda and a commitment not only to describe the world we live in, but also to help change it (Acker et al. 1991; Couillard 1995; Mohanty 2003). Academic and scientific modes of knowledge production generally operate within ways of knowing that privilege male authority and are based predominantly on values typically associated with the Western world, such as autonomy, distance and separation from place and generalizability (Eschle 2001; Casas-Cortés et al. 2008). As academics, we must balance the privilege of teaching within the academy with an “an ethics of political responsibility to distant, and not-so-distant others” (Cumbers and Routledge 2004:826) and make our research more relevant to those less privileged (Appadurai 2000). Feminist approaches understand knowledge to be situated, embodied and located within multiple and complex relationships of power and resistance. This perspective integrates rational and visceral ways of knowing, combines thought and feeling and honours diverse accounts that might also be in conflict with one another (Barndt 1999a; Nagar et al. 2002; Casas-Cortés et al. 2008). Indeed, it is within these conflicting accounts that the real wealth of experiences and understandings of the world can be found, helping to expose notions of boundedness and similarity as fundamentally false when it comes to human experience.
By situating analyses of globalizing forces “in women’s community-based efforts and in local feminist praxis … [we can] deepen our understanding of the limits and possibilities of counter-hegemonic alternatives to oppressive forms of globalization” (Naples 2002a:10). This is where a feminist *activist* ethnographic approach can be especially useful. Documenting activities like local food activism, while working alongside and with activists, allows us, as researchers, not only to observe but also to experience viscerally the actual daily work of activism. For me, it might be through the simple, if tiring and dirty, act of weeding plots and digging in compost in a community garden with fellow gardeners during an annual clean-up day. Or it might be helping a friend gather the eggs from her backyard chickens and then sitting down over omelets to discuss why she believes caring for her four hens Hazel, Harriet, Hermione and Hannah is contributing to a positive future for our planet. In each of these activities and others on Salt Spring and wherever I am living, I take part in conversations with groups of people who are experiencing their world outside the mainstream (despite the increase in popularity in community gardens and backyard chickens), and I share in the physical experiences they also experience. As such, my research becomes not simply about gathering information but about building that kind of embodied knowing that makes me more than a researcher but also an activist myself. The knowledge built in the kinds of experiences my research participants and I share is embedded and embodied in lived experience and offers different kinds of answers and different ways of knowing than so-called objective, neutral and distanced knowledge (Casas-Cortés et al. 2008:42-43).

**Alternative Ways of Knowing in a Neoliberal Context**

Understanding how we know and construct our worlds can have real-world, everyday life implications, especially when it comes to social activism and world-changing work. According to Michel Foucault (1972, 1980), much of what we know as reality is constructed and maintained through discursive formations or, in a very simplified explanation, historically produced combinations of ideas and types of statements that make particular discourses possible (Casas-Cortés et al. 2008). For example, the neoliberal discourse that tells us that freedom of choice is a human right and that we can exercise our inalienable right of freedom through consumerism, is a discursive formation. Neoliberal discourse is also made possible, or made *real*, by the relative power of particular regimes of truth. Very often these regimes of truth are based in scientific or expert discourses, so a global food system that relies on large-
scale agribusiness, rather than locally sustainable, self-sufficient food production, is justified through economic studies and statements from authority figures like academic researchers. The discourse of the inherent rightness of global agribusiness in turn produces truth-effects, which in turn define and shape how we see and experience the world. Truth-effects hold weight and power because they tell us what it is possible to say and do, as well as what we might consider impossible (Foucault 1980:131-133). If, as Michel Foucault says, “it’s not a matter of a battle ‘on behalf’ of the truth, but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays,” then the question becomes exactly how activists might challenge hegemonic regimes of truth, or dominant paradigms and “common sense” that tell us how the world is “supposed” to work (1980:132).

For example, Emma-Louise and her husband, Duncan, left successful corporate careers and life in two major global cities, first London and then Vancouver, to “step outside the system,” as they described their choice to me, and moved to a small cottage situated on five acres on Salt Spring. Food growing plays an essential role for Emma-Louise and Duncan in their efforts to live, in her words, a “smaller, more contained” life on the island. Emma-Louise and Duncan are in their early forties and now work from their home on Salt Spring having transformed close to one-third or more of their five acres to garden areas for food growing. This comes, Emma-Louise says, from a desire to be self-sufficient, save money and feel more in touch with the land. They directly question the way the world is supposed to work when I ask them why they grow their own food. Emma-Louise tells me, her voice full of passion:

Well, who says that we’re supposed to buy it all from a supermarket? What did people do before markets? They grew their own food. There’s something very empowering about realizing that you can sustain yourself ... Well, not completely, of course, because we still want sugar and tea. And chocolate! But really, by making this choice we’re taking a leap but I think it’s a leap we need to make. The system’s broken and the only way to change it anymore is through changing yourself. It’s not just us. We have lots of friends here now who do the same. And we all support each other. We could do more, but it’s a process. We’re learning.

Emma-Louise and Duncan not only grow a lot of food but they also socialize and share work with others on Salt Spring doing the same thing, trading knowledge, skills, extra produce and time to help build a more robust local food system where they live. Food activists like Jane
and Emma-Louise challenge regimes of truth not only through words but also actions, and this is key. By producing new forms of knowledges, food activists challenge expert, mainstream discourses by proving that there are alternatives (Casas-Cortés et al. 2008). For example, in relatively small-scale projects focused on intensive, multi-crop food growing under organic methods, food activists where I live in British Columbia are showing local residents that families can grow a large percentage of their produce in a relatively small plot of land with a relatively small input of capital. Projects like ours gain legitimacy on a larger scale because the same kinds of projects are being repeated in many other areas in North America by groups just like ours—small community groups that challenge the dominant notion that we must be dependent on supermarkets for our food and that satisfaction comes through the wide choice at the superstore and not through collective community food growing. The local organizations that I volunteer with also sponsor community workshops on food preservation—from canning to building a solar dehydrator—and cooking, as well as gardening. We have also, along with numerous other groups across North America, challenged our municipality’s laws prohibiting backyard chickens, leading to a change in local policy that now allows people to keep up to six hens in their backyards.

In the spring, Seedy Saturday events pop up across the North American continent, bringing together small-scale home gardeners and larger-scale (but still small-scale in relationship to agribusiness) farmers to exchange seeds, share foods made from local produce and build and reinforce community relationships through a shared commitment to an alternative food system. Others glean leftover produce from fields or reclaim unspoiled foods from dumpsters and share the bounty with friends and community members. As Jane Dixon notes, gleaning in particular “is characterized by a commitment to the informal economy, free food, and an anarchic organizational format which is devoted to challenging the dominant materialist and capitalist ethos” (2010:8). However, events like Seedy Saturday, in which trading rather than selling is a key component, challenge dominant models where money is the key exchange value. Gleaning, trading seeds, and sharing knowledge about how to grow, cook, and preserve food all rely on relationships and goodwill versus money for exchange. Like the more dominant capitalist system, they also increasingly rely on very contemporary communication tools, like Facebook and community-driven websites, to connect people to the goods and services. In these cases, however, activists and others within the informal economy
use global communication tools to come together to actively engage in practices that challenge the dominant economic system.

Seedy Saturday on Salt Spring Island is an important community event, bringing people together after the long winter to see friends they perhaps haven’t seen in a while after cozying up at home during the long rainy season. There is an excitement and energy in the air around the upcoming growing season and what might be possible this year. In addition to locals exchanging seeds, Seedy Saturday on Salt Spring also brings organic seed companies from off-island to sell organic seeds, many of them unusual heirloom varieties. Dan Jason, a local celebrity and alternative food system hero who started Salt Spring Seeds over twenty years ago, also participates. It brings hoards of locals, the aisles between tables filled with seed packets are cramped with people, many crowding around the free seed exchange table run in organized chaos by volunteers, including Emma-Louise and Duncan. Seedy Saturday is not just about the seeds for Salt Springers, although the excitement of what will go in the garden this year is palpable. It is also an important social event, bringing friends and families together at one of the main event locations on the island, the Farmer’s Institute. I run into Joyce, a long time Salt Spring resident who attended high school on the Island. Joyce is a successful local business owner, married to a born-and-raised local with whom she has a son who was also born on the island. She tells me that, “we need events like this to keep us tied together as a community. Otherwise we’re all just out there, all anonymous and losing our links to each other and just get lost in the whole big system. Events like this reinforce and remind us what community is all about.” Seedy Saturday serves as the weft that helps to weave various threads of Salt Springers together, helping people find common ground and shared interests through exchanging seeds, attending workshops on beekeeping or more efficient composting and simply sharing a cup of locally roasted coffee and a sweet from Brigitte’s local French patisserie, Rendezvous.

In addition to physical events like Seedy Saturday, the Salt Spring Island Exchange, a vibrant Internet bulletin board, serves as an extremely active virtual place for Salt Spring residents to barter, sell and trade. Someone might offer organic apple juice in exchange for someone’s labour splitting wood or free chicken manure for their garden for whoever wants to come and haul it away. Jars of quince chutney line my shelves, made in the fall with bags of quince I picked for free after responding to a posting on the Exchange. In return for the free
quince, I brought several jars of chutney to the woman whose trees provided the fruit. The Exchange is another marker of local inclusion and identity outside of mainstream systems; a way of communicating with each other and linking island residents into the wider island community in ways that are not generally modeled on neoliberal capitalist ways of doing things. In addition to quince, I have picked up two free armchairs in great condition, given away a dog bed my puppy outgrew, bought a used dresser, offered rides to the ferry to people who posted the need for one, bought bushels of canning tomatoes and joined a knitting group, all advertised for free on the Exchange.

Even in large urban areas like Chicago, nonprofit organizations like Growing Power in Illinois lead regular education workshops about growing, cooking and preserving food and the benefits—both financial and emotional and/or spiritual—that come from working and connecting collectively through food. Indeed, Growing Power gained legitimacy and cultural capital when Will Allen, its founder and CEO, was named a MacArthur Foundation Fellow and awarded the prestigious foundation “genius grant” of $500,000 (MacArthur Foundation 2012). Through this type of legitimization, the messages that Growing Power carries about alternative agriculture, community and self-sufficiency challenge dominant regimes of truth and begin to remake them. At the same time, smaller community efforts like fighting for the right to have backyard chickens or organizing seed exchanges each spring also challenge the discourse that food provision belongs in the hands of corporations and governments by spreading alternative ways of knowing and being, including alternative social and economic models. In so doing, each of these efforts intervenes in important operations of power and begins, even if in a very small way, to change the world.

While the majority of these examples focus on moving people to become more involved in food production, rather than simply consumption, for food activists it is not simply a matter of production-oriented activities versus consumption-oriented activities. Instead, what matters most to the people with whom I interact is the building of relationships and community through these actions. Nothing is done in isolation. Rather than a trip alone to the supermarket to buy the week’s groceries, a trip to the farmers market or a volunteer day at the community garden with a basket of produce in return builds human relationships that are not valued within the larger neoliberal capitalist model. If we define collective action as being in pursuit of a common, shared goal, then food activists clearly work collectively versus
individually toward an alternative food system. Canning workshops, backyard chickens (and the sharing of lessons learned by more experienced chicken owners), communal garden plots and seed sharing are all tools activists use to challenge hegemonic structures that tell us that we are all individuals first, rather than a complex interweaving of interdependent human relationships. Food is no longer framed first in terms of monetary value but, instead, in more emotional, visceral experiences that come through human interaction and interdependence.

Feminist activist ethnographers directly contribute to the construction of alternative ways of knowing by not only writing and teaching about them but also by engaging in activism themselves. While many of these new knowledge practices happen on a local level, global communications systems allow social activists to share their ways of knowing through multiple transnational channels. In this way, a global network of resistance is built, allowing small efforts to become large ones that can pressure larger state and global institutions to bring about change (Mendez 2002:130). One of the central tenets of neoliberalism is TINA: ‘There Is No Alternative.’ What activists do to challenge neoliberal systems of power is to spur people’s imaginations about the alternatives that do exist. Their efforts challenge a market-based paradigm and replace it with one grounded in community, sharing, learning and food production for ourselves and others, not for the market. Identity becomes not simply about what one chooses to purchase, but what one produces and what one consumes and with whom.

We must guard against simply thinking in terms of these behaviours as individual choice. Things like buying local food or growing your own vegetables can easily be co-opted to continue the cycle of the current system. “Local is now measured in terms of miles . . . Because such units can be externally measured, mapped, managed, and/or reproduced, they can also be correlated with dollars spent . . . w/CO2 emissions released, sold, or exchanged. The outside remains outside” (Delind 2006:129). That visceral, intimate, internal connection to knowing the world becomes lost and activism is once again framed externally, outside human relationships and collective action. Laura Delind writes that, “our challenge, as academics and practitioners, as people engaged in relocating the food system, will be to find ways to stretch our experiences and sensibilities to a point where ‘the local’ as food, as farmland, as the culture and ecology of real places starts to ‘be’ us and define wherever we are” (2006:142-143). In other words, we need to embody our activism, both personal and academic, and create a new way of being in the world in words and actions, remaking the
world in the process. Feminist activist ethnographers are an important part of this process because many of us are activists and academics, supporting activism through our academic work while also directly pushing activist agendas through our own personal activities. At the risk of calling on an overused turn of phrase: the personal is political and professional.

Feminist activist ethnography can highlight grassroots challenges to powerful elites, like transnational agribusiness and, by doing so, contribute to attempts to change how people view and experience the world and what people think is possible. Through practices of approaching the world in a very different way, not only through activism itself but also through academic research as activism, the potential to remake the world exists. As Anne Runyan and Mary Wenning note, feminist research is “increasingly necessary not only as a source for, but also as a form of, feminist activism for organizing and policy change” (2004:180—181). We must acknowledge and embrace our personal connection to those with whom we research because we have a stake in the future just as much as they. Trying to understand another culture without acknowledging that, as researchers, we do not have some kind of stake in the people and place where we research is impossible (Walter 1995:279). By its very nature ethnographic research means that we become part of the fabric of a place and of its present while we are there and of its future even after we leave.

By contributing to the discourse on social justice activism, feminist ethnographers can offer descriptions of the world and include (often silenced) voices in new ways that counter the status quo. Not only do these alternative perceptions and descriptions that we write and speak about make power relations visible, in the process, they also open up space for significant change in the world. By describing and living through praxis, an alternative way of being in the world, I and my fellow activists, both within and without academe, are in some small way remaking the world we live in on a daily basis. Feminist activist ethnographers like me know that in action there is the potential for change. When I write about local food activists and their efforts to build a different kind of approach to food in their community, I not only help to give voice to their efforts, I also document actual ways of being that challenge hegemonic structures. By exposing the costs of production, both social and economic, that surround our food system (and, indeed, many other global systems) feminist activist ethnographers help to make social justice issues more visible and therefore open additional space for furthering social justice.
Harry West (2007:46) reminds us that, “people do not merely make meaning; in the process of making meaning, they also make the worlds they imbue with it.” By embodying different ways of being in the world and by creating an alternative discourse, feminist activist ethnographers and the people we work alongside actually conceive a new world. It may be a small world, but in our words and actions we construct reality, actively challenging hegemonic discourses about the world and how it must be constructed. Like the Queen that Alice meets in Wonderland, we must exercise our imagination and believe in impossible things in order to make them reality and change the world, a little bit at a time.
Chapter 8 Island Magic: The Power of Place

Clifford Geertz wrote that the test of a good ethnography is whether or not the reader believes that the ethnographer was truly there. What he actually said and, because he wrote about words and the power of them it is important to include his original words, was that, the ability of anthropologists to get us to take what they say seriously has less to do with either a factual look or an air of conceptual elegance than it has with their capacity to convince us that what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life, of having, one way or another, truly ‘been there.’ And that, persuading us that this offstage miracle has occurred, is where the writing comes in (Geertz 1988:3-4).

An ethnography should feel real somehow, it should transport the reader to that place and time, much like a good novel. With that goal in mind, let’s leave behind the theory and theorists and move instead into the story, my story, an island’s story, a story from a moment in time that has passed and cannot be recaptured except in the imagination. I hope that with these words I can bring you there with me, to give you a sense of the time and place that I found myself in for almost fourteen months on Salt Spring Island. Of course what you see in your mind’s eye, the scents you imagine, the greens of the trees and the blues of the ocean will be different than what my own body actually experienced, but it would be the same if you had been walking next to me when I was actually there. You would have had your own experience of Salt Spring, and your own interpretations, and we might have disagreed. Instead with this reader-writer experience we are sharing here, you have to trust me and my interpretations and that they will guide your imagination and impression of my Salt Spring story in absence of actually being there.

I started my research experience on Salt Spring before I had found a place to live on the island. I was staying in a room in a friend’s house in Victoria, about half an hour south on the highway from the Swartz Bay ferry terminal, where the ferry to Salt Spring departs. My friend was in the midst of renovating her house, so there were great gaps in the floors where the hardwood needed to be filled in, there was a long cutout in the kitchen ceiling waiting for insulation and then drywall. It was filled with light, though, and a free place to stay because of my friend’s kindness and a good location to make the drive each day to the ferry and across to Salt Spring. It was high summer, which in coastal British Columbia means generally sunny,
clear days with bright blue skies, calm ocean and warm but almost never hot days. I had been back and forth four times to Salt Spring, making my way to the ferry, waiting in the lineup with the other cars for about an hour before loading, then driving on, the ferry workers guiding the drivers artfully to get the cars packed in like sardines on the small ship. It takes approximately thirty-five minutes to cross from Swartz Bay to Fulford Harbour, at the far south of Salt Spring. Each time crossing I felt a sense of anticipation, my stomach turning over with nervousness as I geared up to introduce myself to strangers and try to engage them in conversation about their island and hopefully about the food grown there. Each time, as we pulled into the harbour and the ferry slowly docked, I’d start to feel a calm come over me. By the time I had driven up the steep narrow road out of tiny Fulford Village and was coming around the curve at the end of the bay, my nervousness was gone and I felt a sense of peace and calm come over me. It’s a magical island, at least for some. That’s what people say anyway. The Saturday that I head over once again is no different. Although this time I get to the ferry over an hour ahead of departure. I’ve been warned about how busy it can get in the summer and I don’t want to miss a spot and have to wait for over two hours for the next one.

It is my first day at the Saturday Market. The Saturday Market on Salt Spring is famous, or at least it is what people who have heard of Salt Spring tend to know about and people do come from around the world to see the market. It has been operating for over twenty years, and since the early 1990s dedicated solely to products made or grown on Salt Spring. I take the 9am ferry because my friend and people I’ve talked to on the island during the week warned me that if I came later it would be impossible to find a parking spot in Ganges, or town as locals call it. We dock on time, at about 9:35 and I make the 20-minute drive with the other caravan of cars from the ferry to town. When I arrive it is definitely busy—many more cars and people than I’ve seen during the week and a palpable energy in the air. I turn off the main Fulford-Ganges Road and park up a small hill in a little parking lot above ArtSpring, the performing arts centre. The woman I spoke with at the natural foods store in town on Tuesday recommended it as a place not everyone from off island knows about so I might have a better chance of finding parking there. I do, but it’s the very last spot. Another woman is pulling in behind me, driving a funny looking van, small and thin with a somewhat high roof, with the steering wheel on the wrong side. She wedges her van into a space I would never consider, kind of half on the hill, the van tilting at what I consider to be an alarming angle.
I’m eager to get to the market so I leave off watching her parking acrobatics and start to head down the hill, trying to take in all the sights and sounds — traffic on the road, the dry, tan grass, a string of beat up pickup trucks all parked behind each other on the road, a faint breeze with the smell of the sea, the sun hot on my head. Footsteps, moving quickly and anxiously, sound behind me as I move further down the hill. They are not running, but almost. I can tell the owner of those footsteps wants to rush ahead of me, but I am walking even faster than usual. I am a fast walker, just ask my mother, and today I am anxious because it is my first market. The person walks even faster, perhaps because she senses she has not gained much ground on me. I move to one side of the road — there are no sidewalks — to make room for this person who so clearly wants to pass me. A blur of movement to my left and a woman rushes past me on the dried out grass. She is thin, bobbed gray hair covered in a small thickly woven straw hat. She carries a colourful round woven basket, the kind that you see at stores that sell things made by women’s collectives in Africa. As she crosses the street a woman getting out of her car calls hello, the anxious woman’s answer catches in the wind. I follow the anxious woman as she seems to know where she is going.

The market is just ahead, white tents sprouting up in a solid column along the sidewalk and down through a narrow parking lot. As I get closer and begin to look around I don’t see any food — what I’m really here to see—just pottery, jewelry, soaps, clothing all tempting in their bright colours and textures and smells. But I am intent on my prey—farmers and food producers. I look ahead and there is the anxious woman, rushing through this section of the market to the stalls around the corner. I see snatches of green; here are the farmers, the local produce I’ve come to see. I walk along the block-long row of vendors, assessing tomatoes and lettuces, lots and lots of garlic, summer squash big and small, carrots with their tops still on, bright displays of flower bouquets in old milk cartons, rounds of white goat cheese with people already lined up to taste samples, baskets piled high with crusty loaves of bread and pastries. There is Michael Ableman of Foxglove Farm, a well-known organic farmer in the local food movement. He attracts young acolytes hoping to learn his secrets and I imagine just bask in his glow. It’s the farming equivalent of semi-celebrity. A pretty young woman is handing out samples of Sungold cherry tomatoes at his stand and they are delicious. Sweet like candy, bursting slightly inside my mouth. A line is forming at Foxglove, people anxious to get hold of the beautiful displays of Sungolds and orange and red beets, kale and collard.
greens. A mother chases after her giggling toddler and loses her place in line as someone else swoops in.

I buy some perfect baby zucchini and Red Russian garlic from a busy stall, but not one with a line. One of the girls behind the stand compliments another customer on her haircut, “Thank you, Claire,” she responds. She is clearly a regular customer, a local. I want to linger and listen in, the researcher wanting to gather all the information I can all at once. My politeness wins out and I move on. I stop at a stall run by a young couple, the man handsome and dressed like an urban hipster, but with telltale dirt under his fingernails and ground into the furrows of his fingers. Not just an urban hipster trying to look like a farmer, but a farmer (who perhaps was fairly recently an urban hipster) who cleans up for market. His partner is less stylish, but bubbly and friendly, rushing to help all her customers. I pick out three tomatoes, a good-sized German Striped, a soft red striped with orange, and two others that I can’t identify. I add a bag of little green filet beans, and move along to a stand that has blueberries and buy a basket. The aisle is getting more crowded and difficult to move through. I take my stash of produce and move over to the park around which the market springs up each Saturday from April to October.

I settle down on the grass, munching alternately on blueberries and crispy green beans. Kids run past in erratic curving patterns, screaming in delight as they play some kind of game. A guy in tie-died t-shirt and pants is making balloon animals. It’s easy to think, sitting here in the sun surrounded by all these happy people in such a beautiful place, that I’ve somehow arrived in Eden and fieldwork will be like a kind of extended vacation. Salt Spring seems idyllic at this moment, a perfect place filled with beautiful local food, local residents who enjoy it, their children running and playing with abandon, the exchange of money for goods not only a commercial transaction but a moment between friends. I know intuitively that like all places there must be issues and conflicts and problems, but at this moment I understand why so many people fall in love with it and decide they must move here. I will encounter people who have changed everything in their lives to move to this island in an attempt to create the kind of life one imagines while sitting in the sunshine on a warm summer day, surrounded by laughter, the calls of seagulls and the scent of the sea and freshly baked bread. I’ve fallen into the island’s siren song and cannot wait to take a look at my potential new homes—the rest of my day will be looking at rentals across the island. While I could construct
an entire ethnography of travelling on the ferries, that is not what I have set out to do, so moving to Salt Spring needs to be in the cards.\textsuperscript{26}
Chapter 9 Virtually Constructing Place: The Salt Spring Exchange

In order to find a place to live on the island, I started with an online search for Salt Spring rental properties and stumbled upon the Salt Spring Exchange. I mentioned the Exchange briefly in Chapter 1 but it deserves a further description because it plays a very important role on Salt Spring. It serves as a mostly-free, online bulletin board where people post just about anything you can think of. It is run by local residents and used to be entirely free but when people really started using it, the volume of posts became almost too much to handle and the list owners introduced small fees for particular items for sale as well as spots for online ads on the page. To read through the Exchange on any given day, is to look through a virtual window onto life on Salt Spring. People advertise the usual things for sale—furniture, bicycles, vehicles—but also various clothing items, paintings, lambs, chickens, goats, plants, you name it. There is also a huge trade in things offered for free. I once saw a broken mirror offered, the poster saying that they thought perhaps a local artist or someone who did mosaics might be interested and she was offering it for free before taking it to the dump. I took advantage of different offers for free fruit—most of them come and pick what you need but others were simply drive by and pick up a bag at the driveway, first come first serve. People offer to trade homemade wine or apple juice for use of a vehicle for a day or their labour in exchange for a place to park their camper van for the summer. Job openings on the island are listed, including random one-offs for things like chopping wood or cleaning out gutters, although more often people post looking for work, generally odd jobs that involve manual labour of some kind. The Exchange also serves as a community forum for notifying people of various events, lost pets (including a loose donkey), and ride shares off island.

As I review my initial field notes, I realize that I had started to understand the importance of the Exchange early on, although I didn’t fully know how important a central point of information exchange and the construction of island identity the Exchange actually is.

*I took walk today to catch the sun as it’s all too elusive down here under the trees. Some people were up picking the grapes in response to a post K put on the Exchange. They pick the grapes, then give some of the resulting wine to K and J in trade for the grapes. There are lots of ads on the Exchange for things like this. Someone has apples, looking for instruction on canning and will give some of the applesauce they make together in exchange. There seem to be tons of ads for ducks. Why ducks in particular? I would have expected more*
chickens. There are also people looking to do any kind of work it seems, for money or food. Lots of odd jobs. There was a post for free quince today. I’m going to call tomorrow morning and see if there is any left. 27 Sunday, 9 October 2011. Souhey Point Road (home)

What I began to realize the more I read the Exchange is that it also serves as a venue for constructing Salt Spring and as a method of maintaining Salt Spring values and rules. People post commentaries on the cost of ferries and the latest cuts from BC Ferries and when the next community meeting and protest against those cuts will be. There are also more intimate, shaming posts where someone calls out another person for driving recklessly in the pouring rain or for stealing from a local honour farm stand. These posts often inspire readers to post further comments (there is a commenting function on the site where people who are logged in can respond to the original poster). Commenters might agree with the original poster and add further shame upon the unknown perpetrator or they might offer thoughts on who the perpetrator might be or they disagree and put forth an argument about why the original commenter was wrong, either to post in the first place or about their analysis of the situation. Arguing about just about anything and everything is something Salt Springers love to do. One of the first things people told me when I arrived on the island was that residents love a good argument. Valdy, a well-known folk singer and longtime island resident has famously said, Salt Spring is an argument surrounded by water. To live on Salt Spring for any length of time, is to learn this intimately, where arguments and lively debate occur on street corners, in the coffee shops, within the pages of the local Driftwood newspaper and online on the Exchange.

During my stay on Salt Spring, I was lucky enough to experience a local Islands Trust and CRD election. As a researcher it was as if an enormous gift had just fallen into my lap as a local election on a small island quickly exposes many of the hidden issues and conflicts that might in other times take a bit more time to dig out. The Exchange served as a focal point for communication about the election and people’s viewpoints. While there were more than three candidates for the available Trust seats, the contest between three candidates in particular, highlighted the differences of opinion on the island. Seemingly overnight, signage promoting the ideas of two candidates, running as a team, popped up on roadsides all over the island. With slogans like, “Preserve Our Community, Protect Our Future” and “Protect Fishbearing Streams Not Fishless Ditches.” When I commented on the signs popping up all over, I was told by several people that there “had always been an unspoken rule” not to put campaign
signs up in order to maintain the beauty of the island and not “visually pollute our home like they do in Victoria.” Several people posted on the Exchange in response to the campaign signs, including the opposing candidate with the most extreme differences in campaign platform from those who put up the physical signs.

In keeping with the desire of islanders to pursue a ‘deep green’ economy, the Larry Woods Campaign has decided that instead of cluttering our roadways with actual signs, they’ll post ‘virtual’ signs on the island information highway. These signs have been locally manufactured out of recycled electrons and will automatically electro-degrade on November 19th. Moreover, unlike traditional road signs, viewing them is entirely voluntary. From a post on 17 November 2011 at 1:04 pm

I love the ‘pollution’ of election signage. Nothing beats a vibrant display of democracy on our island better than a plethora of competing possibilities. Bring it on. From a post on 17 November 2011 at 5:49 pm

By publicly shaming the candidates who put roadside signage across the island, posters on the Exchange were asserting a very particular definition of place for Salt Spring—one that is different from places where campaign signage abounds—a place where natural beauty should not be visually polluted and should be kept “green.”

The Exchange is also home to much more contentious and often vitriolic, commentary about Salt Spring. These strings of conversation can provide deep and valuable insight into how people place themselves within Salt Spring, how they define it as well as how they think the definition of place should be changed. The following conversation string is excerpted from a series of responses to a post about the harassment of a whale pod off the coast of the island by Vancouver- and Victoria-based whale watching outfitters. It very quickly devolved from discussion about the responsibilities of whale watching outfitters, into a more serious one about Salt Spring itself and who gets to define the island. I have edited spelling mistakes and typos for ease of reading and for length in some instances. Where names appear in brackets, they are pseudonyms in order to protect the commenters’ identities (although they were public posts). Where a name or title appears without brackets it belongs to the original poster.

Mr Salt on October 17, 2011 @ 8:37 pm
My problem with the Salt Spring I’m-a-retiree-and-I-worked-hard-for-it-so-screw everyone-else residents is that you live by this “Conserver” edict, but you actually live in a completely un-natural and corrupt little island. You and the other grey-hairs, in your need to “keep it natural” have entirely destroyed the lower economic ecosystem of the island, so no one can come except
middle-class retirees, who honestly don’t give a damn about the rest of the world. The local campground was shut so the local retiree campground owners could profit, the so-called country market is fixed with the same artist-wannabes and no-one else can get in and I tried to ask that they add many more spots to make it open to the poorest but, the local yocals, who are actually city-folk, not country folk, prevent it. The real estate market is also controlled by a very few who own 75% of the village … The concept of “farming” is also a joke here as, when you see the Tuesday market, you see yuppie farmers charging more than Safeway for tomatoes, but the retiree ME ME ME self-help group love it and can afford it … The Service Class of Salt Spring, who live on little and work for the Land owners and then you have the invisible people who live in campgrounds and trailer parks and unmarked spots all over the island who have NO CHANCE of upward mobility … poverty is right on your doorstep and YOU have allowed it to stay as is and for the poor of Salt Spring to have no hope … and you’re doing your Yoga and Buddhism and eating organic…

[Sarah] on October 17, 2011 @ 9:05 pm
Wow dude, that’s kind of harsh to generalize all Salt Spring Island residents as “retired grey hair yoga organic eating do-nothings.” I, for one, am a mother of two, business owner and hold down 4 casual jobs to keep my bills paid and kids fed. I’m not rich but I try to do as much as I can to make my world environmentally better and healthier for myself, my family and my community. Uh, it’s not Salt Spring Island’s fault the world is in the mess it is in and we, like many others, are concerned about global and local issues. We must start working together at solving problems in our own backyards and not laying blame and name-calling as you have done. That is so unproductive and immature. Your post seems a little bitter and angry. And just so you know, there are rich, ignorant, mean-willed people all over the world … not just on Salt Spring Island … so next time you post, say something positive and helpful to inspire others to do more with their lives and money and maybe offer solutions, maybe you could tell us what you’ve done with your life and wealth that is so worthy and helpful towards our global issues, instead of just ranting.

Here Sarah not only calls Mr. Salt to task for his negative attitude but she also challenges the image he is creating of Salt Spring as a haven for rich, grey-haired hippies. Mr. Salt’s portrayal of Salt Spring is one that many locals share but, at the same time, they feel leaves out a large portion of the population. The group left out of his portrayal is those who are not independently wealthy or living comfortably in retirement but, like Sarah and apparently Mr. Salt himself, is working several jobs to keep afloat. Juggling multiple jobs is a common state of affairs on Salt Spring, one that was underscored throughout my research. All my research participants commented on the struggles people face to stay on the island. Struggling is a “Salt Spring thing” and is an important component of the local definition of the island. When you
struggle, you join a community of other islanders in the same situation. As Jessica told me, “I’ve been doing the Salt Spring thing. In January I had five jobs. I had three new jobs in one month… you start to realize that it’s all about moving here for the lifestyle, and then you end up struggling” (Jessica 21 September 2012). Tanya also underscored this struggle, saying, “It’s that balance, that precarious balance of things on Salt Spring where you have a job but you're not guaranteed a certain amount of hours, ever … So many people juggle like 4 or 5 different jobs … So … it's a stressful thing for people. (Tanya, July 17, 2012)

The conversation on the Exchange continued, with Mr. Salt weighing in again, angry that the special nature of the island was being corrupted by a small group of people.

*Mr Salt on October 17, 2011 @ 9:22 pm*
And actually Ms. Replier, Salt isn’t like the rest of the world…some parts yes … but Salt Spring is SPECIAL. And yes, I am bitter and angry to see the shit of the world, while many, like you, want to feel-good backyard, do it the Salt Spring way …and get NOTHING done….)

*Mr Salt on October 17, 2011 @ 9:37 pm*
Basically, this large group, who own most of the Gulf Islands, have completely hijacked what is a place that ALL should have a right to come to and start a life, but the place has been culturally engineered by people who don’t want the low people to prosper there…it is a falsely engineered BOUTIQUE CULTURE … you see NO lower economic ecosystem … Salt Spring is actually my parallel to the larger problems of the world

*[Sarah] on October 17, 2011 @ 9:50 pm*
Mr. Salt, please don’t say “many like you want to feel-good backyard, do it the Salt Spring way…and get NOTHING done” because you don’t know me … and you don’t know what I do or what I am capable of doing with regard to helping the global problem. … I struggle financially and I work my ass off to enjoy my backyard, my organic garden and rural lifestyle. I raise my kids in an environment I’m proud of and my life is what I choose to make it. My life is not dictated by others, rich or poor. I work with what I have (or don’t have) and make the best of it and I’m thankful for what I have. Please remember that Salt Spring Island is full of many young, thoughtful, hopeful, smart, environmentally conscious people who care about the Earth and the economy.

In his additional comments, Mr. Salt challenges the validity of an outside, constructed definition of Salt Spring. Both he and Sarah create a definition of Salt Spring that is more than simply a physical place but something larger, a place with a special sense of
purpose that is endangered by outside global forces. One understands from Sarah’s reply that Salt Spring is special because of the struggles people endure in order to reside on the island and raise their children, grow organic foods and live without outsiders dictating how they should live. It is not only locals who contribute to the construction of place via the Salt Spring Exchange but also visitors, as evidenced by another person who weighed in on the conversation.

_KY gal on October 18, 2011 @ 7:00 am_

My husband and I visited B.C. this year and we were lucky enough to spend several days on Salt Spring. Every person we met treated us kindly, shared amazing stories about the island and made us feel welcome. We were both blown away by the sense of community we felt while visiting. (For example, we took the last ferry from Victoria one night and we missed the last bus going back to Ganges. A husband and wife offered to drive us and another girl who had also missed the bus, back to where we were staying. Kindnesses like that would never take place where I live, unfortunately.) The green initiatives that we witnessed on Salt Spring Island made a huge impact on us. I am inspired by the dedication of the residents to preserving their island, growing and buying local, recycling, composting and even something as small as not littering. [Sarah], you mentioned above that it’s important to make changes to yourself so that you can be good role models and inspire others, you have! Thank you for setting such a good example for me and my husband. When we got back home to Kentucky, USA, we made some major changes to our lifestyle. Mr Salt, however trivial you may think this, the wonderful people of Salt Spring HAVE made an impact in other places than their own backyards. They made an impact in a small town in Kentucky. I think that should be applauded, not criticized.

Not only does KY Gal reinforce the notion of Salt Spring as a place with a strong, welcoming community but she also gives examples of how this worked for her and her husband and that they were inspired to act to change their own backyard as a result. For a number of my participants, influencing visitors to change the way they do things once they return home is something they hope to accomplish. As Emma-Louise said to me,

_I don’t want to be one of those Salt Springers who says, all blithely, oh peace, or, we’re so grateful, but I do feel very lucky to be living here, and I feel privileged …When people come and we show them a different way of being, and then hopefully, you know, when people come and especially when we have repeat visitors, hopefully they’ll learn something and they’ll take a little bit of that to the city (Emma, 13 June 2012)_
In this way, Emma-Louise and others are hoping that their actions, their *praxis* if you will, can be carried off the island and begin to change other places as well. For Emma-Louise, Duncan and other Salt Springers their *habitus* or, as Errington, Gewertz, and Fujikura so neatly define Pierre Bourdieu’s complex theory, their “daily expectations and activities” (2013:7) has shifted so that a dedication to eating local food and/or growing their own, as well as financial struggle for many, has become normal and the adverse is the unusual and abnormal.

*Joy* on October 18, 2011 @ 7:51 am
We used to watch the whales moving up the channel all the time when I was a child in this house and, over the 32 years we have been here, the whales have been sighted less and less over the years, so here is my chance to see something I loved to watch and don’t get to very often anymore … And Mr. Salt – way to stay on topic here. You do realize the topic was whale harassment and nothing more? … I grew up on SSI and moved away for 15 years, returning to live here again quite recently. When I was away I lived in many different places and cities, worked at many different blue-collar jobs, and felt the unique experience that was living in each of those places. I come back to this island knowing that it has changed since I was young, not all for the better but it is still a wonderful place to live. The core groups of caring people that try to keep this island beautiful and comfortable and clean are very dedicated. The influence of city behaviour has become more evident (not surprising considering how many folks have moved here over the years from the cities) but I think most people coming here to live would like to learn how to get that city out of their system and become the Islander they know they can be. Why else would they have come here if not to find a better, more personal, way to live? I am in the process of getting the city out of my system and habits, and it takes some time but, if I can do it, anyone can do it. So, Mr. Salt, a little optimism would make your world a much better place and most likely effect more change for the good than that bad habit you have of hating pretty much everything around you. Just sayin’.

This conversation on the Exchange, as well as others I followed while on Salt Spring, help to illustrate how Salt Spring is constructed as a place. Mr. Salt and Sarah both recognize Salt Spring as special and different from other places, although they express the idea differently. Mr. Salt specifically calls out Salt Spring’s specialness, despite his apparent frustration with the “grey-hairs” of the island. Sarah is less direct, but the importance of Salt Spring as a good place to raise her children is clear when she notes that she works several jobs in order to live on the island and give her children the kind of upbringing she believes is of value. The definition of Salt Spring as a community made up of environmentally friendly and concerned residents is underscored throughout the conversation. Indeed, the very topic of the original
post calling out behaviour of whale watching outfitters and their endangerment of the local whale population, highlights this definition of place. Commenters, including those who don’t even live on the island, repeatedly highlight Salt Spring as a place focused on environmental awareness and community-mindedness. The Exchange serves as an important forum for the construction of place and the maintenance of the kinds of ideas and images that define Salt Spring as different from the outside, particularly urban environments. Joy notes, “the core groups of caring people who try to keep this island beautiful and comfortable and clean are very dedicated … I think most people coming here to live would like to learn how to get that city out of their system and become the Islander they know they can be.” She indicates that there is a specific identity and type of islander that residents strive to be, an idea that most of my research participants also commented on repeatedly in conversations and that I heard throughout my time on the island. To be a Salt Springer is to be a particular kind of person or to construct your identity in a particular way.

As the excerpts above indicate, the construct of Salt Spring as a place of positivity and supportive community, while also acknowledging that there are problems on the island, is often underscored on posts on the Exchange. However, because Salt Spring is a small community, things can get personal very quickly. As one of my research participants told me,

All these things, different opinions, people talking about them, people writing all kinds of letters to the newspapers. And now it’s the community Salt Spring list. It’s really rabid, someone’s putting obscene messages on someone’s … where they’re selling their eggs or whatever, you know? I mean in some ways it's funny but it also can be very hurtful if you’re personally embroiled.

(Tanya, 17 July 2102).

Nevertheless, many posts highlight the power of Salt Spring to overcome those negative issues and come together as a community to support each other. The following post was from the owner of B-Side Clothing in downtown Ganges. Unfortunately, the store has since gone out of business but not without significant support and effort by members of the community to raise money for the store’s owners to keep the business going.

From a post November 23, 2011 11:58 am
Stolen Jacket Update
I just thought I would update the post from a few weeks ago about the jacket that was stolen off our outside sale rack and then returned to our door before we opened in the morning, [and then] was removed once again. The jacket has been returned and purchased by one lucky customer! I just have got to say,
what an incredible community we live in! It's not that we are sheltered from negative things happening but the community seems to always right wrong action. There seems to be a force that demands integrity and righteousness.

Once again, I must express my pride and gratitude for being a part of this incredible populace! Thank-you for all your support and caring. And...a big thank-you to the Salt Spring Exchange for making communication to our community so accessible! You help make our little island special and unique!

Notes of thanks like this one are fairly common on the Exchange and help to virtually reinforce the sense of a connected community and of a place where people stick up for each other and for shared community values. The ability to openly share opinions might cause friction on the island but it also maintains a sense of interconnectedness and underscores the shared value of equality amongst islanders. Indeed, the Rants and Roses section on both the Exchange and in the local paper, where people can send virtual roses to people they wish to thank as well as post rants about (generally) whatever they wish, for free, whenever they want, further cements this practice. Posts on the Exchange can be run-of-the-mill impersonal advertisements for things for sale but often they take on a personal tone, contributing to the feel that Salt Spring is a connected community where people want to know their neighbors.
Chapter 10 The Island Calls to You

Everybody’s like … Salt Spring’s heaven, well it’s not heaven, really, except in small bits. But when it is heaven, it is, totally…We used to live in Ganges and we overlooked a bit of the harbour and we would see people, walking back and forth to the Harbour House, walking back and forth to the Market and you could always tell, you’d be looking out the window and there’d be a couple, standing by the side of the road, looking at the harbour, and you could just tell what they’re saying, ‘I would love to move here. Look at that view. We could move here. Yes, we could.’ Ohhh, my god, they’re gonna be calling the realtor in five minutes, right? You could just tell. And that’s what this does, right? Sucks you in, oh, it’s beautiful here, it’s beautiful. (Julia, 17 August 2012)

My search for a home on Salt Spring yielded four offers from landlords, each a place I thought I might be able to live in for a year or so. The number of choices I had turned out to be important because how you find a place to live on Salt Spring is an important part of each person’s Salt Spring story. I did not realize it at the time, but it is not always easy to find a place to live on the island. When people inevitably asked me where I was living, then closely followed with a question about how I found my place, they almost always expressed surprise that I had had so many choices. Often I was told “You’re meant to be here then” or “The island must really want you here” or something along the line that it was meant to be and some kind of forces were in effect to bring me to Salt Spring. Sentiments like this, with the associated woo-woo or spiritual (whichever side you fall on) subtext, abound on Salt Spring. Often the island is anthropomorphized, always as feminine by anyone I spoke with and as having power over who is able to stay and who is forced to leave the island. People struggle to live on the island by working multiple jobs, trading labour or goods for food, and becoming very creative with finances to make ends meet. So when things are easy, like my finding not one nice place to live but several to choose from, many Salt Springers see it as the island making the way smoother for some reason unknowable to regular humans. “There’s something about being here, and I’ve heard it from a lot of people, a lot of people have said that, it just feels like home” (Emma, 13 June 2012). Falling in love with the island’s siren song almost the minute you step off the ferry is a common trope in the story people tell about Salt Spring. Every person I met who had moved to the island within the past ten years told me that they had fallen in love with the island and just had to move there.
On the other side of the coin, though, is when the island no longer wants you. It is difficult to make a life on Salt Spring for many people—there is not a lot of employment, especially permanent, well-paid work; rent and real estate is relatively expensive, although less than in and around Victoria and significantly lower than Vancouver. Many people describe making a life on Salt Spring as an almost herculean effort. And it is for some, especially people who are not retired with some kind of income. While it is bigger than the other Gulf Islands, it is still a small island that you need to take a ferry, an increasingly expensive ferry, to get to. Finding a stable place to rent, with responsible landlords, is not always an easy feat. I know of one family that has moved three times in the past four years because they have not been able to get a long-term lease, and they are good tenants with solid income, no pets, non-smokers, gardeners, all the attributes of desirable tenants. However, because Salt Spring has a large number of non-resident home owners, either because they own homes elsewhere and only come to Salt Spring occasionally, or because they had to move off island to find work or for family reasons, often rental properties are not long-term rental properties but can slip through your fingers as soon as the lease is up. One of my participants lived on Salt Spring for over 20 years, in the same place for over ten. She chose to leave the island, though, when suddenly her landlord decided he wanted to use her apartment as a vacation rental and she was unable to find affordable accommodation. She told me, “the island must have decided that my time is up. It thinks I need to move on, and it’s probably right.”

It may sound horribly woo-woo and out there to someone who has not been to Salt Spring or has but has remained immune to the island’s call, but there is some kind of indefinable magic the island holds. Whether this comes from the cultural remains of the communes that formed in the 1960s and 1970s or if it is something more deeply ingrained and intangible in the island’s energy itself could be energetically debated—which it is on the island—forever. What is important is not the truth or facts surrounding the magic that forms a key foundation when defining Salt Spring but rather, it is that Salt Springers, both newcomers and those descended from several generations of islanders, believe that there is a kind of unique magic to the place from which no one, believer or not, can escape.
Chapter 11 Does Where You Are Define Who You Are? Placing People on Salt Spring

In order to find a place to live, I posted my own ad on the Exchange, introducing myself and letting potential landlords know why I was moving to the island and what kind of tenant I would be. I received numerous responses to my ad, everything from what turned out to be a shed with a sleeping loft in a communal group of houses to a brand new cottage perched atop Mt. Belcher and built according to Vedic architecture principles. Where you live on Salt Spring also makes up a large part of how people get classified on the island because each area of the island has particular attributes and personality traits assigned to it by Salt Springers. I didn’t know this when I first came to the island, so my choice of abode was a more practical one based on cost, location (meaning no almost-vertical dirt driveway at the top of a mountain) and other considerations, like the actual presence of a stove in the kitchen. The place I finally chose to rent was on the far north of the island, at Southeys Point. I thought it ironic at first that it was called Southeys Point when it was at the far north but was quickly corrected by a long-time island resident that it was in fact named after a James Southery, an officer in the British Royal Navy and secretary to the captain of the H.M.S. Ganges for which the town of Ganges is named. The name is pronounced not “sow-thy” but “suh-thy” and “only people not from Salt Spring say ‘sow-thy’.” I took the message and made sure that I pronounced it correctly from then on.

During my time on Salt Spring I came to know intimately how what outsiders might see as a relatively small island becomes, in fact, a distinct set of geographic locations, each with a general personality assigned to it by islanders. Vesuvius, which I thought of as part of the north end of the island because it sits up on the northwest side of the island, is not in fact part of the north end. It is its own distinct area, known for being the sunniest part of the island, with warm water for swimming and a long stretch of beach great for gathering driftwood washed up from winter storms. Then there is the central part of the island, home to the island’s only four-way stop, the Fritz movie theatre, Portlock Park with soccer fields and the one running track on the island. If you turn left at the intersection coming in from Vesuvius, you head into the north end of the island, home to St. Mary’s Lake, Fernwood and one of the most important distinctions among geography, personality and place that exists on the island. Turn
right and you head into town. Ganges isn’t exactly at the centre of the island geographically but it is the centre of commercial activity, with the island’s two grocery stores, natural food store, coffee shops, restaurants, art galleries, ArtSpring and Mahon Hall and numerous little shops that entice visitors with their wares. The attribution of personality traits does not really happen for residents of areas other than the north and south end—Vesuvius, central and town are almost neutral. However, the distinction between north end and south end is an important pole of personality on the island. The north end is supposedly made up of more newcomers (despite the fact that there are some old island families with homes on the far north end), with money and gates across their drives. I was told time and time again that people on the north end were not as friendly, that they weren’t real Salt Springers. The north end has less open space and grazing areas than in the south, marking the south end’s history as the agricultural area of the island. Figure 2 at the end of this chapter provides an annotated map of some of the ways geography is used to classify people on Salt Spring.

In contrast to the north end of newcomers and gates to keep people out, the south end of the island, which begins at the top of Lees Hill, right around where Salt Spring Vineyards is located (see Figure 1 for a loosely marked up map that shows this separation), is considered by many to be the real Salt Spring. Here you’re more likely to find wildly creative gates and fences made of driftwood (the gates on the south end are presumably to keep out deer, not people as those on the north end are purported to do). The hippy, alternative vibe abounds in the south end—the collective households and farms I know about are all located in the south end. There seem to be more farm stands scattered along the winding, undulating roads although that may have more to do with the fact that the south end was the first part of the island cleared by settlers and is thus great farmland—the south end is home to the oldest working farm on the island, Ruckle Farm, now a provincial park with some of the most stunningly beautiful ocean vistas I have ever seen.

Certainly many of the houses in the south end look more hand crafted, with many driftwood fences, bits of houses added on to other sections, the look of mis-matched, rough wood planking for shelves, door and window frames, as if they’ve been put together with bits and bobs as finances and time dictated. Southenders pride themselves on their adaptability and resilience, as well as their ability to come together as a community. More than one person told
me that “southenders stick together” even more than the rest of the island. Salt Springers in general are supportive and connected to each other, as in many small communities, but Southenders seem to identify particularly strongly as a group distinct from the rest of the island. Gerald, a lifetime southend resident told me, while laughing, “that’s why we have our own phone prefix, so we can tell who’s who and to keep everyone else out.” I should be clear that I was not asking specifically about differences between one area of the island and another in these conversations but, as a rule, it came up almost every time I spoke with Southenders. There is great importance placed on being a Southender, not just a Salt Springer. As Natalia, a longtime south end resident told me,

> We Southenders, we don’t really like to venture out much. But for events at Beaver Point we go out. Weddings and funerals bring the community out. We don’t go to town [Ganges] if we don’t have to. Before Patterson’s closed, you’d go down to buy milk and butter and see four people and get in your socializing along with your butter. But we’re making the best of it. We’re adapting, like Salt Springers do. Now, we’re just calling neighbours to borrow what we need. My neighbour called me the other night to borrow a can of coconut milk. So we’re making it work.

There is an idea among Salt Springers, particularly those who live in the south end but also held by those who live on other parts of the island, that Southenders are an even more tightly knit community than the island as a whole. Some in the north end might dispute this, like the group of people I know who all live on one road and are good friends with each other; but certainly in the area of the north end where I lived, there was not a lot of neighbourly camaraderie; and definitely not enough to merit calling up a neighbor to borrow a cup of sugar or a can of coconut milk. Many of the houses on my road were only lived in for part of the year and my landlords, although they were a young couple new to farming, would never have considered asking the house next door, with owners who had been growing apples for over twenty years, for advice. In the southend, the advice would have been offered up without asking and every effort to make the new couple feel welcome and part of the community. Southenders like to know who their neighbours are, not necessarily just out of friendliness but also because it is good to know who lives close to you when you might need to rely on them for help. You also want to know who might know a bit about your personal business and make sure that they know how to keep it to themselves. As Natalia told me, Southenders really value their privacy and it is important to know who your neighbours are to be able to keep that sense
of privacy intact. Despite all the differences attributed to north and sound end, no matter where you live on the island, there is a distinction that trumps geography every time—newcomer versus genuine Salt Springer.

Illustration 1.2: Annotated Map of Salt Spring Island
Annotations indicating areas of the island are my own. Original map courtesy Kenneth M. Fersht ©2006.
Chapter 12 That’s Not Local: Invasive Species and Locality

I’m greeted by a man with a blaze of white hair, his tanned face creased with deep wrinkles. He asks me if I’m just over visiting for the festival. No, I say, I just moved here. Oh, a total newby, then, he replies and laughs. He introduces himself as Herb, and tells me that he thinks he’ll get invited to the ‘locals’ picnic this year since he’s lived here 50 years. You have to be here at least 50 years to be local, he says while smiling and laughing, so you have a ways to go. 1 October 2011 – Apple Festival

In addition to the importance placed on being environmentally friendly and living in a way that supports the community, one of the most important values on Salt Spring is locality. To be a true local is to be in some way superior to an outsider. People who are new to the island want to become locals and take pride in the things they do to express their localness. One of the two grocery stores in town, now Country Grocer, used to be called Ganges Village Market, shortened to GVM. Despite the name changing in 2008, locals still refer to the store as GVM, even those who moved to the island after the name changed. Using GVM to refer to the market is a marker of authentic local identity. It indicates a sense of belonging and knowing something outsiders do not, just as the pronunciation of Southery Point can identify locals versus outsiders. It is an important distinction in a place where there is a strong love-hate relationship with outsiders. Outsiders bring tourism dollars to the island but they also cause crowding and drive up the real estate prices. In mid-October the island returns to the locals because the tourists stop coming and seasonal residents move on to their other houses. While I was on the island, the Driftwood ran a short column from a local author celebrating the change of season, not from summer to fall, but from outside invasion to getting the island back, somewhat like celebrating getting your house back after rather unwanted house guests finally leave after an extended stay.

Locals, or those trying to pass as locals, know the rules for operating as a local. A well-worn BC Ferries Experience card, one that when pre-loaded with a set amount discounts your ferry fare by 30 per cent, marks you as a local. Locals also know the ferry schedules by heart and when to arrive to be sure to get a spot. For example, during busy summer months, locals know that, if you are past the line-up of cars at a certain bend in the road just above Fulford Village, you won’t make it on the ferry and you might as well go home. They know
the local lore and how to interact to showcase their locality. Even when you go to the Saturday Market, or whether you go at all, marks your level of locality. Some locals take pride in saying they “never” go to town during the summer months. Of course, this is a falsehood because they go to the bank and the grocery store like everyone else, but there is perceived value in saying that you eschew the “falsely engineered boutique culture,” as Mr. Salt described it, that arises during the summer months in order to attract tourists and their money. As Emma-Louise told me, “You go down to the Market on Saturday … you go early, ’cause the locals tend to go early or early in the year and you wander out in the Market, you see all your friends and you stop and chat to them. So what you do … you wander around the Market and chat to your friends and you catch up with people” (Emma, 13 June 2012). You might buy something at the market, particularly produce from the farmers, but more likely if you are an authentic local you are simply there to visit friends and say hello, get a feel for what’s happening in town and then get out before the tourists arrive.

What constitutes an authentic local is one of the most hotly debated and resented values on the island. It can drive how people are treated, even though most people would never really admit that out loud or at least not in most circles. When you live in a city one of the first questions people tend to ask when you meet is “what do you do for a living?” On Salt Spring the very first question, almost without fail, tends to be along the lines of “And where do you live on the island? How long have you been here?” When people asked me and I answered that I’d just moved or had been on the island about six months, the reply was always something like “Oh, so you’re not from here. You’re totally new.” Sometimes this was said with a tone of superiority and sometimes kindly, with a feeling that there was something I didn’t know just lurking beneath the surface. At rare times it was said in a simple matter of fact tone, but it was still said.

The issue of insider/outsider or native/newcomer infuses almost every interaction and discussion; indeed, the entire experience and concept of the island as a place. Everyone I spoke with and overheard in conversations, acknowledged that real Salt Springers have been born on the island, preferably as part of a family line that goes back several generations. Newcomers, even those who have been living on the island for over 20 years, express a sense of alienation at times and a difficulty in being fully accepted as a true local. Even non-local plants, or invasive species, play a role in the debate over local versus non-local. Himalayan
blackberries are an invasive species on the island that people are constantly fighting. They grow in great swaths, like giant waves pouring over old fences and hillsides, taking over in a single season, if they aren’t controlled mercilessly. But they’re also a form of income both as fresh fruit for anyone who wants to go out and pick the berries and for one of the island winery’s blackberry port. More than one participant compared herself to an invasive species like the blackberry. Emma-Louise described the feeling particularly well, saying,

One of the things I find hard is we have a lot of invasive species on Salt Spring. So, blackberries are one and we … we kind of just manage to keep them under control enough to have a nice crop of blackberries and we’re still reclaiming the land from broom and we have invasive thistles and others. But it’s interesting, ’cause it doesn’t just represent blackberries and harvesting but … there’s this thing on Salt Spring, at least my experience on Salt Spring, about how long you’ve been an islander. So people who come here, who don’t belong here, one of the questions people always ask is how long have you been here. And sometimes when you meet someone who’s recent, it can be just, oh, hi, nice to meet you, how long have you been here? And sometimes it can be, ‘how long have you been here’ in a very critical tone. And so there’s all these invasive species and I think sometimes the new people coming to the Island are seen as a kind of invasive species and need to be kept under control. There’s that parallel between the invasive species and these humans who come in and people think are like tourists and we’re not tourists, but we’re … we’re one, I mean, we’re one step above tourists. Tourists are the worst of the invasive species. ‘Cause at least they’re temporary, right, and at least they bring money. But the newbies, well, we are one step above them. So I find it a little … I feel judged a lot on Salt Spring. But then there are the juicy, juicy blackberries that are so amazing. (Emma, 13 June 2012)

The local on Salt Spring is often leveraged as a site of authenticity, purity, and connection and is somehow qualitatively better than anything that is not local. Conversely, as Emma-Louise’s comment shows as well as my experiences on the Island, the local can also be a site of inequality and contested power relationships—who has a right to define what the Island really is and how it should be seen, who belongs and who doesn’t, who feels welcome and who doesn’t and who has the right to make decisions about the Island’s future. However, as DuPuis and Goodman (2005) in their research on local food systems show, a more reflexive and inclusive form of localism can address these inequalities. An unreflexive localism can potentially lead to two major negative consequences: 1) “it can deny the politics of the local, with potentially problematic social justice consequences” and 2) “it can lead to proposed
solutions, based on alternative standards of purity and perfection that are vulnerable to corporate cooptation” (360). Often the concept of local is based on a fixed set of normative, pre-set standards that do not in actuality apply to everyone in a community. Those normative standards are different for every community. As the following quotes from Emma-Louise and Arwen show, on Salt Spring what seems exotic to outsiders is celebrated as normative, one more marker of differentiation from the outside.

I’ve found, even in the ‘alternative’ scene, if you don’t fit a particular model, then you don’t fit within that, and … it’s very hypocritical, ‘cause they have a lot of money. Help from family money … You see them, there’s a woman … she’s got all, all these crazy clothes and they have holes and she looks kinda … like a street person, a bit? Well, and yet, she drives a big, brand new, really beautiful, turbo diesel Volvo … And those kind of things, you know, when people, they have a Delica, but it’s brand new….There’re certain things about how you’re supposed to look, and how you’re supposed to do things. You know, a baby who’s diaper-less. I had never encountered that until I came to Salt Spring. Or the judgment around people who use diapers, not just because of environmental things, but also, you know, that somehow it’s developmentally better for the child. Well, how? Why is running around peeing on people better for child development? And they can’t give you an answer. So, there’s a lot of judgment for some place that’s supposed to be so open and loving and free and accepting. (Arwen, 11 June 2012)

There’s a level of bizarreness on Salt Spring that’s not really considered bizarre. We went hiking with our friend and they have a donkey. So the donkey comes hiking. Well, they were getting the donkey in training to be a packhorse or something. But it’s just, normal kind of, I mean, people do look, but I mean … The guy wandering downtown with a goat or the lamb that was in Foxglove [garden supply], on a lead. Well you do a double-take but, it’s very Salt Spring to do things that are just slightly offbeat. (Emma, 13 June 2012)

These descriptions of how one is supposed to be on Salt Spring, although they seem exotic to outsiders, actually create a generic definition of what it means to be a Salt Springer, one that leaves many people out of the equation. As Duncan told me,

[There’s] a different slice of Salt Spring as well. [We] tend to focus on, you know, the eco-warriors and the crusaders and there’s some really nice just working guys here. A lot of them still, their families have farms and stuff, that rural aspect, but they’re kind of guys who like AC/DC and beer and who go upset the conservancy by off-roading on Mount Tuam. But, it’s part of the mix that these guys exist and they’re not always that visible, unless you need [excavating work] but they’re a pretty big section of our community. And it’s
good, I think it’s a balance, it’s not all like living in yurts and wearing tie dye.
(Duncan, 21 September 2012)

Questioning, as Duncan does, what are considered norms can contribute to a more democratic politics, one that makes space for everyone rather than a few. The local inherently implies the inclusion of one group of people, locals, places and ways of life, to the exclusion of others, outsiders, who do not fit in that local space and who may not live the same way real locals do. As DuPuis and Goodman (2005) note, “the representation of the local and its constructs—quality, embeddedness, trust, care—privilege certain analytical categories and trajectories, whose effect is to naturalize and occlude the politics of the local” (361). When one group alone, without reflexivity, defines local, its definition will leave other portions of society and ways of life out of the mix. DuPuis and Goodman explain that a reflexive local politics (in their research a politics of food in particular but I think applies to an overall local politics) “would entail taking into account ways in which people’s notions of ‘right living,’ and especially ‘right eating,’ are wrapped up in these possessive investments in race, class, and gender” (362). This is not to discount the power and effectiveness of local politics that champion environmental stewardship and growth of a strong local economy as much of the volunteer efforts on Salt Spring do. However, it is important to pay attention to the ways in which our own racial and socioeconomic privileges influence how we define problems and solutions and how assumed norms can alienate and ignore the actual diversity of communities.
Chapter 13 Conclusion: The Future of Salt Spring

There’s something very unique about Salt Spring … This thing called flower frost requires a unique set of conditions, it’s where the air temperature is freezing, but the ground is not. So you have a twig, it’s always in pieces of wood and stuff, you have a twig or a piece of wood that’s kind of, it’s oozing water ‘cause it’s not frozen, but then the air temperature’s freezing, so you get this, it pushes it out, so you get this gorgeous, like Christmas, called Christmas beard. And it needs a really unique set of circumstances for that to actually, you know, be like that. And Salt Spring’s also a really weird, unique set of things, and contradictions. (Emma, 13 June 2012)

This ethnography is my attempt at creating a rich, nuanced description of Salt Spring Island, one that honours its complexities and messiness. Salt Spring is more than stunningly beautiful vistas, alternative social relationships, 21st century hippies or a playground for the wealthy. Residents attribute a humanness to the Island, as if it is a She, a living breathing entity. Perhaps it was the Island’s magic, but after my time there I agree with the personification, in a sense. Salt Spring Island is a complex, living, breathing, constantly changing place because of the unique interaction between terra firma and the people living and visiting there. I wrote at the beginning that I did not intend for this ethnography of Salt Spring Island to stand as a microcosm in a larger meta-discourse about global resilience; however, it is difficult to not make those connections. It is easier, perhaps, to use a small, contained space like Salt Spring to talk about ecological and social resilience because there is a tendency to think of it as operating within a vacuum. Certainly, some Salt Springers themselves tend to forget or want to forget that they are, in fact, completely reliant on the outside world for survival. Despite the seeming abundance of locally grown food, according to one member of the Salt Spring Agricultural Alliance, there is only enough to feed everyone on the island for one or two days. Without the outside world, Salt Spring’s future is tenuous and, yet, it is the separation from the outside world that has helped to create a unique place. No one is more aware of the tenuous nature of the Island than Salt Springers themselves; this tenuousness, too, is part of the definition of place essential to the Island.

When all goes well…well that’s lovely. But it’s a reminder. I think you’re a little closer to the edge here than – you’re a little closer to the edge of no help here than you are in other places. On the other hand, you know, back to the
myth, this is beautiful. You’ve got your fire in your fireplace, you light your candles, and you say, well this is so much fun! (Julia, 17 August 2012)

Salt Spring is definitely “closer to the edge,” as Julia says, than some other places. There are very real issues around water quality and quantity and the environmental sustainability of the Island as a whole, if the population increases or the draw on natural resources continues or grows. However, there is a portion of the population, like many of my research participants, who have chosen to live on Salt Spring, whether they moved 40 years ago during the first hippy back to the land movement or in the past 10 years under the threat of climate change, who came to the Island in an effort to survive should things in the world all go to hell. For an island venerated for its lush natural environment, the reality of surviving independently is in fact an unreality at the present time.

*I was thinking of the rhythm of days here and they almost always include a car. Driving to the gate, opening it, driving through, closing it, driving to town. Sure, people hitchhike and some very few ride bicycles but it’s largely a place completely reliant on cars. What does that say about the future of the island? Emma made a comment last night while showing me her garden, which is huge for two people. She mentioned they were thinking of getting bees because if things all went to hell she “likes something sweet.” The implication being that she’d have access to honey. So nothing said directly but it seems that part of their move to SSI and all their work on their land is about survival if the worst does happen, whatever the worst may be.* 21 October 2011

Southey Pt.

The fact is, though, that survival is tough. Growing your own food is not easy, especially enough to sustain a family throughout the year. While it may seem a noble goal, it is one that is built in many ways on nostalgia for an imagined past where people were closely knit and everyone worked together for the good of the community. Many people on Salt Spring reify an imagined past like this but are aware at the same time that it is imagined and is an impossibility. They know that they are reliant on the outside world to sustain them, regardless of how much they would like to operate independently. However, through practices like growing their own food, revering close community ties through local events like Seedy Saturday or smaller cooperative work parties, they are in fact creating a particular place that operates in a particular way. Those approaches to the world do not operate within a vacuum but instead, are shared with insiders and outsiders alike thus, not only change Salt Spring but
also the outside, when those practices and experiences are carried to other places. Salt Spring changed me, the researcher, in very distinct ways. I am more spiritual, more hopeful (yet more realistic) about the future on a local level and more appreciative of differences. Many people said to me, when learning where my field research took place, a version of “Lucky you! What a paradise!” However, as I have shown, Salt Spring is much more than a mythical, exotic paradise, even if that is how I chose to read it at times, both in a positive and negative light.

*Have successfully built my first fire. Didn’t smoke myself out, it’s warming up nicely in here. It’ll take me a while to get used to it, get faster, figure out the stove and how to use it most efficiently. Unfortunately I think it’s given me a bit of a headache. There is something satisfying about it, building a fire. City girl turning into country girl.* 24 October 2011, 9pm Southey Point Rd.

*Only fire #2 and I have decided I hate making fires. All set up nicely, kindling burning away and the stupid small foundation log won’t really burn. It’s oozing shiny pitch as it heats up. I figured, well, at least that will help it catch fire. But no. No dice. It barely burned. Things were going well at first, so I put on a bigger log. That log is now sitting outside of the stove partially burned. I had to start all over again and now aforementioned small log that should burn quickly and hotly so the large slow burning log can catch on fire is barely burning. Have been looking up whether this is really environmentally friendly or not. Jury is still out. More research to do. In the meantime I have black soot all over my hands, I smell like a camp fire and it’s still cold in the house. I’ve also run out of small pieces of kindling so I have to run into town to buy a hatchet. It could be a long winter. And now, finally, after over an hour, I think the fire may actually be taking off. Maybe.* 26 October 2011, 2pm Southey Point Rd.

Places, whether a remote Western Canadian island or a major metropolis like New York City, change us; and, just by being present we also change those places. Place—and how it is defined is inexorably linked to its human inhabitants. External social action, such as individuals working together to build a more local food system or, on a broader community level, land use policies that are put in place, directly results in ecological change. If the ecological system becomes more vulnerable to these changes or its resilience is threatened, this directly affects the resilience of the social systems that rely on the ecological system for survival. Thus, the social and ecological resilience of place are directly linked in a continuous circle of interaction and the two must be considered in context in order to build more resilient communities. Local-scale, locally appropriate responses to change are just as important as the external forces causing change. Agricultural and economic policies in one part of the world
have direct consequences in other parts of the world, challenging the resilience of local social-ecological systems, yet, many state-level responses to those challenges do not directly address unique local requirements. Analyzing resilience and vulnerability requires an understanding of these impacts and a realization that contemporary governance trends towards the elision of distinct localities combined with declining diversity and functions of species and landscapes increase vulnerability and decrease resilience. It is important to remember, though, that within localities there are distinct differences that need to be recognized. The local is not homogenous within itself but, instead, is made up of a diversity of communities and people, all of whom need to be considered in order to build a resilient and successful whole. As Tanya asked me,

What does that mean, to preserve and protect the Island? Is it just environmental? It should be social as well. If you’re not protecting the social viability of the island, if it’s only for wealthy people, then that’s not protecting the future of the island. (Tanya, 17 July 2012)

If we do not ask for whom we are building resilience as well as resilience to what, populations whose voices are not easily heard will, just as easily be left out of the equation. A truly resilient human social system would be one that considers all people in all their unique and specific cultural and geographic contexts. However, the concept of resilience is one that is fundamentally challenging to incorporate into existing models for social-ecological systems. Resilient systems are diverse and to have a truly resilient system, we must accept that change is not the exception but the norm. With change the norm, then uncertainty about what the future holds rears its ugly head and human beings are inherently uncomfortable with change and uncertainty.

A different perspective is called for on how we approach the future success of communities like Salt Spring Island—and really all our communities globally—in order to address the changing world. A perspective that focuses on resilience, rather than simply sustainability (or staying the same), would shift policies from those that work to control change in systems assumed to be stable, to policies that manage the capacity of social-ecological systems to adapt to and shape change. Instead of focusing on adapting to the current situation, there would be an increased emphasis on creating improved social-ecological systems (Folke 2006). In order to create a successful future, Salt Spring Island (and yes, I deliberately use Salt Spring as an individual entity here) will
have to learn to live within social-ecological systems rather than trying to control them (Walker et al. 2002) and will have to accept and embrace the rich and amazing diversity on the island.

I would like to return to that famous Brillat-Savarin quote I cited earlier, and that is so oft cited in various forms by food activists: “the destiny of nations depends upon the manner in which they feed themselves.” Perhaps because it has been cited so often it has lost a bit of its power, but when we dig deeper we see that it is indeed a very powerful notion. In Salt Spring’s case, we might replace nation with island, or for a larger global picture instead simply say that a community’s future depends on the manner in which it feeds itself. Our connection to our food is rooted in our very humanness. I don’t use the word rooted glibly, either. There is a reason why we talk about setting down roots. It is because our direct physical connection to the ground we walk upon is important to our sense of self and how we experience place. People, social science researchers in particular, discuss the erasure of borders, the concept of translocalities, and the lack of rootedness as a new kind of natural order. However, those kinds of assertions, particularly when we internalize them as givens and do not challenge them, lead to very real, often damaging, consequences.

My underlying argument throughout my research, and if we’re being honest my personal belief, is that global neoliberal economic and social policies have led to a disconnection between individuals and their larger social communities. This breakdown can be directly linked to the breakdown of our human connection with the food we eat, where it comes from, and the meanings we accord to that food. That breakdown also has significant negative consequences, including deleterious health impacts for the billions of people who consume processed foods as well as severe impacts on the Earth’s natural environment and, indeed, its ability to remain a habitable place for human life in the future. Many Salt Springers are actively countering that breakdown by refocusing on and reintegrating an intimate connection to their food and its means of production. By creating place in this image through their actions, they are working to rebuild reciprocity, trust, and exchange between themselves, fellow community members, and the market and thus reimagine the market in a different form than that created by larger, impersonal neoliberal forces.

These spatial tactics on Salt Spring can be seen in direct conflict with the neoliberal state’s ideological goals—what we can assume within a neoliberal construct to include first
and foremost unfettered economic growth and a distancing of the individual from a larger whole. Indeed, Salt Spring is a space where challenge, not conformity, is the norm. Reversing Appadurai’s (2003) assertion that in most cases spatial tactics create an illusion that supports state ideological goals, Salt Spring residents use spatial tactics that instead create a space that supports a particular set of ideological goals important to Salt Spring residents, not the larger neoliberal state.

Unfortunately for Salt Spring, sometimes it is a place at risk of believing too strongly in the myth. The fact is the island faces very real problems, ones that are much larger than the argument over whether the Islands Trust or a municipality is the right form of governance. People go hungry on the island, mental health issues and addictions are rampant, and it is not an easy place to survive despite all its claims to inclusivity, peace, love, and understanding. There is a very real crisis to be found in the water supply on the island, particularly if the population grows further. While many residents are doing their utmost to support the development of a sustainable local food system, the fact remains that there is not enough food being produced on the island to support the population; and many residents cannot actually afford the true costs of production that is reflected in local food prices but hidden in the lower costs of imported foods. The myth at times is in danger of overtaking fact, which is a precarious place to be on an island reliant on outside supplies for its basic survival.

I have tried to communicate the unique and magical characteristics—both positive and negative magic—of Salt Spring Island and the people who live there. There is something very special about the Island that draws people in and holds on, to some anyway. “Most of us know we could go somewhere else and it would be easier for us financially and in a lot of ways. But we choose to stay here” (Tanya, 17 July 2012). The reasons why people choose to stay are as diverse as the island inhabitants themselves. I feel here at the end that I have only scratched the surface. Researchers talk about embodiment, but it is impossible to convey the physical and spiritual sense of being there in words or in images. The feel of the breeze on my skin during a hot summer day; the salty, damp smell of the sea mixed with the sulfur stink of the pulp mill across the water; the almost suffocating wet darkness of winter when the rain feels as if it will never end; the physical joy and heart-bursting awe at the sight of an eagle just steps away on a branch, as the waves lap gently against the smooth rocky outcroppings of the
beach near my house; the fantastical sound of a pair of barred owls calling to each other through the forest; the skin-crawling disgust inspired by millions of tent caterpillars wriggling down a tree trunk in my back yard; the deep-in-my-bones sadness of driving onto the ferry and leaving the island, knowing I will only come back for visits; the similar but ineffable difference upon returning for a visit and knowing that the Island is no longer calling me and, while I will always visit, I will not live there again. These things and more I cannot share with you. The experiences, sights, sounds, smells and physical and emotional feelings that are fused with my bones and sinews now are what every ethnographer comes away with after research but is unable to communicate fully. We can only try, as I have here, to give you, the reader, a sense of the time and place we experienced and let it seep into your marrow in a small way, so that my story of Salt Spring becomes part of the larger story of all of us in the world.
PART TWO: An Ethnography in Pictures

The images that follow are in no way an attempt to literally reproduce the ethnography you have just read. They are a compilation of my own images, as well as those from my research participants but not all the images I compiled during my research are included (with over 700 images between my participants and I, it would be overwhelming to include them all). These images are meant to be a different sort of journey through space and time on Salt Spring. While you will bring your own interpretation to these images, they are of course a series of images I chose deliberately, a series that constructs Salt Spring according to my participants’ stories and my own. Thus they cannot help but be framed by my own experiences and my own interpretations of my participants’ reflections. The photos following tell a particular story of Salt Spring in my mind and, thus, could be seen in as a form of auto-ethnography. However, they do not include only my own photographs but also those of Salt Springers and I have framed them in a conscious way to reproduce as much as I could the ways in which my participants framed their own (and not my own) stories of Salt Spring. In no way do I consider them a realist recording of so-called objective data as Mead argued photos were (Mead 1975). While they are photographs of actual physical places, they are imbued with the intersubjective interpretations of my participants and myself.

Sarah Pink argues that researchers “should attend not only to the internal ‘meanings’ of an image, but also to how the image was produced and how it is made meaningful by its viewers” (2003:186). For my purposes what was most important to me in this exploration was to look at how my participants imbued the photos with meaning and, in turn, how those images are further imbued with meaning by the readers of this ethnography. Rose advocates a focus on “audiencing” or, how those who view images react to those images and thus produce a particular understanding of that image (2001:191-197). This goes farther than this experiment of mine, as I am unable to record how my audience interprets these images and which meanings they produce but it is in this spirit that I envisioned this section.

The images are grouped loosely into themes, as each of my participants grouped their reflections into themes. All of my participants included several photographs of the ferry. The ferry also became an important part of my understanding and experience of the island, both personally and through the stories Salt Springers told me about how the ferry informs their
lives and the definition of Salt Spring. Thus ferry photos play an important role in this
ethnography in pictures. As I discussed in Section 1, natural beauty is at the very foundation
of every definition of Salt Spring. The experience of stunning natural beauty is one that every
person who has stepped foot on the island shares. While it may be used within the dominant
neoliberal discourse as a way to sell Salt Spring and products from Salt Spring, it is also an
unarguable part of the island. The beauty cannot be taken away and thus it colours my every
experience of the island, how I chose the photographs I took myself and how the photographs
my participants chose to take and share with me.

These are not just pretty pictures, however, but a concerted effort on my part to build
a better ethnography of Salt Spring. To circle back to the beginning and what makes a good
ethnography, I return to Clifford Geertz and his now classic theory of thick description. By
incorporating my own photographs—one of the ways I experienced and interpreted the island
for myself—and those of my participants, I believe I have created a richer, thicker
description of Salt Spring than would exist without the photographs that follow. As we reach
the end of this textual journey, I ask that, as you view the images, you attempt to think about
how you read the story contained within them and how that story might differ from the one I
have told in writing.

As I discussed in Chapter 3, some of the photos that originally appeared in this visual
ethnography have been blocked due to confidentiality concerns on the part of the university.
All photos that are masked with a white box and captioned are done so at the direction of the
College of Graduate Studies at UBC in Kelowna. I did not choose which photos to cover
based on my own concerns about confidentiality, ethics and responsibility to my participants
and the community in which I lived and worked for 14 months and continue to visit on a
regular basis. As a researcher using photography as a data collection method, I hold concern
about ethics and permissions for photographs in the highest possible regard and would never
include photos that might cause someone discomfort nor that I didn’t receive permission to
use when necessary and possible. However, when working within an academic institution,
there are often larger discussions around ethical and legal concerns that trump the individual
researcher. Sometimes the institutional guidelines contravene a discipline’s ethical
requirements, but that is a topic entirely too large to discuss here.
As you read the next section, however, I ask that you keep these issues in the back of your mind. Ask yourself how what you read in these photos might be different from how another reader might read it and why those differences exist, as well as how the missing pictures might have contributed to the story and how the decisions of a university officer contribute to how the story is told and read. This is meant to be an experiential and experimental piece of ethnography, one that more obviously needs the participation of the reader to construct meaning. Ideally this would be an interactive piece, where the reader could comment and construct their own story along with mine, but we are limited by format constraints, so the dialogue between you and I will have to be imagined. All it takes is a bit of an adventurous spirit and a willingness to go, like Alice, down the rabbit hole and an openness to believing in impossible things.
Welcome to the Southern Gulf Islands!

These islands are famous for their tranquil, beautiful scenery, abundant wildlife and rural nature. By following these tips you can help us protect the special environment of our islands while you enjoy your stay.

- Cars, pedestrians, cyclists, horses and wildlife share our narrow roads. Please be courteous and use caution.
- Water may be in short supply in the summer - please use water sparingly.
- Because of the fire danger, there is no outdoor burning during our long dry summers.
- Overnight accommodation may be limited - pre-arranging your stay is recommended.
- Campsites are not available on all islands - if you plan to camp, please check in advance.
- You can help protect our farm animals and wildlife by keeping your dog leashed.
- Planning to buy? Please review local Land Use Bylaws as they differ for each island.

Thank you

Salt Spring, Galiano, Mayne, North Pender, Saturna and South Pender Local Trust Areas
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: My father walking away from me on the Fernwood dock, back turned away from me. Photo by Tabitha.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: two young girls sitting under a large magnolia in bloom. Photo by Avril.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: photograph from a distance of adult male in the doorway of Morningside restaurant, Fulford. Photo by Avril.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: photograph of Duncan, provided by Duncan, in front of Morningside restaurant, Fulford.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: man with dog in front seat of old pickup. Photo by Tabitha.
MORNINGSIDE ORGANIC BAKERY CAFÉ & BOOKSTORE

Nutrition Facts
Serving Size: Generous

Amount Per Serving:
- Factory Farmed Animals: 0
- Herbicides: 0
- Pesticides: 0
- Growth Hormones: 0
- Genetically Modified Food: 0

% Daily Value for well being: 100%

www.morningsideorganic.com
slow down

It's Salt Spring

Drivers don't have to take the first in line. You're not obliged to accept a ride, that's fine. You accept a ride at your own risk. But the ride is free, so consider it a gift.
VOTE MARK WYATT & GEORGE GRAMS
OCCUPY THE POLLS, NOT THE STREET
NOVEMBER 15,
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Emma at Seedy Saturday, provided by Emma.

Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Emma at Seedy Saturday, provided by Emma.

Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: attendees at Seedy Saturday, provided by Duncan.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Duncan singing karaoke with friends at his house, provided by Duncan
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: professional singer performing at the Tree House Restaurant. Photo provided by Emma.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: birthday dinner at Emma and Duncan’s, photo provided by Duncan.

Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Photo from a distance of attendees at Fall Fair, looking at giant pumpkins. Small child from behind in background. Photo by Tabitha.

Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Harry West announcing the Zucchini Races at Fall Fair. Provided by Tabitha.
Removed for privacy concerns per UBC: Zucchini Races at Fall Fair. Crowd watching races, with children in frame.
Photo by Tabitha.
Photo removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Distance photograph of attendees at Fall Fair. Children in frame from behind, no faces. Photo by Tabitha.

Photo removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Brigitte and Bruno of Rendezvous French Bakery serving at Seedy Saturday. Photo by Tabitha.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Elizabeth May speaking at a public event. Photo by Tabitha.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: children selling handmade crafts at winter outdoor market. Photo by Tabitha.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: man playing flute at bus stop. Photo by Avril.

Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: distance photo of three men standing on bridge near Barb’s Buns. Photo by Avril.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: photo of man in front of TJ Beans with a bundle on the end of a large stick. Old man in leather jacket reading a book, face looking down and not shown. Photos by Avril.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: photo of man in front of TJ Beans with a bundle on the end of a large stick. Photo by Avril.

Removed for privacy reasons per UBC:
Black and white photo of old man in leather jacket reading a book, face looking down and not shown. Photo by Avril.
Photo removed for privacy concerns per UBC: small girl with face painted like a cat. Photo by Avril.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Little girl with patterned head scarf, wrapped in a quilt. Three young girls sitting with violins. Photos by Avril.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Distance photograph of parents and children at Portlock Park for a sporting event. Photo by Avril

Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Two young boys walking on a rocky beach, backs turned to camera. Photo by Avril
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC:
Duncan cutting drywall in his house, back to camera. Photo provided by Duncan.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Couple walking in Ruckle Park, backs to camera, deer on the path in front of them. Photo by Avril.
A RIND IS A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE COMPOST
Salmon Feedlots Must GET OUT of Our Ocean
They are Killing Wild Salmon!

Where salmon feedlots operate worldwide they kill wild salmon, because they break the natural laws that govern them. This 60% Norwegian-owned industry has travelled to their own coast as a demand, spreading devastating devastation and perilous to the wild environment. These companies are driven by shareholder obligations to their stockholders and will never be satisfied, removing more fund from the ocean than they make and rapidly mechanizing to reduce costs. We can no longer accept this business as sustainable.

Ocean Fish Feedlots are Foolish

This is a Canadian environmental lobby that allows a salmon to actually be fed fish from the same fish we are using for the feedlot. In general, feedlots are not sustainable. This is a case where we are not feeding salmon for salmon feedlots but feeding them for salmon feedlots. This is a case where we are not feeding salmon for salmon feedlots but feeding them for salmon feedlots. This is a case where we are not feeding salmon for salmon feedlots but feeding them for salmon feedlots.

For details: SalmonAreSacred.org

Show support for Wild Salmon.

PLEASE SIGN HERE!

Tabitha
Auntie Pesto’s

proudly supports

the following local producers, businesses and individuals.

Red Wing Farm, Bright Farms, Three Gables Farm, Sundown Point Farms, Duck Creek Farm, Seven Ravens Farm, Foxglove Farms, North End Farm, Bonacres Farm, Growing Up Organic Co-operative, Salt Spring Mussel Co. The Garden, Salt Spring Cheese Co., Moonstruck Cheese Co., Natural Pasture’s, The Fishery, Garry Oaks Vineyard, GI Brewery, Pasta Del Vecchio, Country Grocer, Thrifty’s, Salt Spring Gelato Delizioso & Mt. Maxwell Roasting Co.

All these people and many more locally, strive daily to provide you with beautiful products produced with excellence in mind.
SUPPORT LOCAL FARMERS
Your Local Abattoir
coming soon!

It'll do more than just save your bacon!
COME FIND US AT
THE SOUTH END OF
THE LIVESTOCK BARN
Homemade Blackberry Wine

Homegrown blue potatoes

Homegrown turnips & carrots

Salt Spring Lamb

Home grown peas & cabbage
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Emma at the Dragonfly clothing stand at the Saturday market. Photo provided by Emma.

Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Three young girls eating edamame and sushi on a blanket. Photo by Avril.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Distance photo of booth at Saturday Market with vendor. Photo by Tabitha.
Removed for privacy concerns per UBC: Man walking lamb on a leash at the Saturday market with children petting it. Man walking through Centennial Park. Photos by Tabitha.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Local performer and farmer Grace Jordan dressed as the Green Woman at the Saturday Market to promote an upcoming performance. Photo by Tabitha.

Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Young girl selling her hand-painted cards to two other girls at Saturday Market. Photo by Tabitha.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Long distance shot of Centennial Park in spring with cherry blossoms blooming,

Removed for privacy concerns per UBC: Distance shot of spring cherry blossoms at the Saturday Market in Centennial
Park. Picnic table filled with people, children running across the grass. Photo by Paulina.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Bluegrass band playing at the Tuesday farmers market, man standing in foreground with a large camera around his neck. Photo by Tabitha.

Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Local farmer Michael Ableman of Foxglove Farm roasting chiles at the farmers market. Photo by Tabitha.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Boy holding duck, wearing 4H sweatshirt. Photo by Avril.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Young girl standing with sheep at Fall Fair. Photo by Avril.
Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Teen girl dressed in black hoodie holding a black rooster. Photo by Avril.

Removed for privacy reasons per UBC: Two teen girls walking their sheep down the road, backs of girls and sheep to camera. Photo by Avril.
Notes

1 According to the Institute for Intercultural Studies (IIS), founded by Mead in 1944 and whose advisory board managed Mead’s work until the Institute’s closure in 2009, definitive attribution for this quote does not exist. The Institute states: “We believe it probably came into circulation through a newspaper report of something said spontaneously and informally. We know, however, that it was firmly rooted in her professional work and that it reflected a conviction that she expressed often, in different contexts and phrasings” (IIS 2012).

2 I use traditional and exotic carefully here and throughout this document, inclusive of all the complexities, contentiousness and debate that exist around these words within anthropology today.

3 The word “alternative” is one of those all-encompassing terms that today seem to serve as a politically correct placeholder for sometimes-offensive and always-fraught-with-controversy words, for example, exotic.

4 See, for example, Richardson 1997; Ellis and Bochner 2000; Ellis 2004; and Jones, Adams and Ellis 2013.

5 For more on cyber-ethnography see, for example, Jordan 2009; Sade-Beck 2004; and Ruhleder 2000. For an interesting exploration of the virtual and how it bleeds into and informs offline identities, see Neil Blair Christensen’s Inuit in Cyberspace: Embedding Offline Identities Online (2003).

6 See my comments about and integration of Poerksen’s “plastic words,” for example, on page 43.

7 Southey Point appears to be confusingly named as it sits at the far north end of the island but is in fact named after, James Lowther Southey, who was secretary to Rear Admiral Sir R.L. Baynes, who was along with Southey in Georgia Strait from 1857 to 1860 (Salt Spring Archives: 2013). It is pronounced not “sowthy” but “suhthy.” The “correct” pronunciation of the word in the context of the island location is one marker of “local” versus “outsider.”

8 West notes for example Castree 2005; Katz 1998; and Smith 1991.

9 Figures are in Canadian dollars from July 2010.

10 This is my own very loose retelling of the Mayan creation myth. See Dennis Tedlock’s Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life (1996) for a full translation and interpretation of the original. Mary-Joan Gerson’s People of Corn (1995) is a lovely, illustrated children’s version of the Mayan tale.

11 Pellagra is characterized by the “four Ds:” diarrhea, dermatitis, dementia, and death, generally occurring in that order. Early symptoms often include headache and irritability and progress to hallucinations, memory loss and psychosis. As the disease progresses, sufferers
become disoriented and confused, then eventually comatose, dying due to multi-organ failure. If left untreated, pellagra generally results in death in 4-5 years, usually as a result of massive malnutrition from continual diarrhea, complications caused by other infections, neurological symptoms or a combination of all of the above (Hegyi, Schwartz and Hegyi 2004). Pellagra was not recognized in the United States until very early in the 20th century, but it is likely that many slaves suffered from the disease. The first case officially diagnosed in the United States was in 1902 and soon rose to epidemic proportions lasting approximately 40 years, affecting nearly one million people and resulting in over 100,000 deaths. Originally thought to be due to spoiled corn, a Hungarian-born epidemiologist, Joseph Goldberger, proved that in fact it was due to poor diet and was linked directly to the socioeconomic conditions of the American South. In the 1940s a comprehensive government program of food enhancement through fortification of bread and flour with thiamine, niacin, and iron helped to eliminate diet-related diseases like pellagra (Warman 2003; Rajakumar 2000; Bollet 1992).

12 There’s a reason why large purchases of chemical fertilizers by non-farmers set off alarm bells in the halls of U.S. counterterrorism offices.

13 In Canada we have a similar system operated under marketing boards. The egg marketing board, for example, helps to set pricing and handle sales for farmers. The Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) was dismantled by the Harper Government in 2011 creating an open, free market for wheat sales, marketing and distribution despite plebiscites held by the CWB where 51 per cent of barley growers and 62 per cent of wheat growers opposed the privatization mandated by the government.

14 See Don Lotter’s 2009 article, The Genetic Engineering of Food and the Failure of Science — Part 1: The Development of a Flawed Enterprise, for a much more precise, technical, although easy to understand, explanation of how genetic plant engineering works. He also describes a second method, an alternative to using Agrobacterium, where small particles of gold are coated with the transgene packet and these are shot into the host plant, the bombardment incorporating the new genes into the plant chromosome.

15 Despite continued advances in genetics engineering for food crops, there still does not exist definitive proof that GM crops are safe for consumption or that their risks do not outweigh benefits. Even review studies that conclude that GM foods are of benefit to human society cite serious concerns about the risks, noting that “adequate regulation, constant monitoring and research are essential to avoid possible harmful effects from GM food technology” (Uzogara 2000). Monsanto, one of the world’s largest transgenic seed suppliers, actively promotes the benefits of GM crops to farmers through the “Conversations About Plant Biotechnology” website, advertised as “discussions with farmers and experts around the world” (Monsanto 2010a).

16 See the drawn out legal battle of Schmeiser vs. Monsanto for one of the most visible cases of this kind. For a summary see the CBC News report Fifth Estate (CBC 2004). Burrell and Hubicki (2005) offer an interesting legal analysis of the implications of this case in their article “Patent liability and genetic drift: Schmeiser v Monsanto Canada Inc.”
See, for example, Marc Edelman (2001) for a discussion of the changing nature of social activism in the 21st century, in particular his discussions of pan-Mayan activism (p. 300-301) and transnational activist work (p.304-306). In addition, see Keith Hart, Jean-Louis Laville, and Antonio David Cattani (2010); Erika Mein (2009); Jenna Allard, Carl Davidson, and Julie Matthaei (2008); Anne Runyan and Mary Wenning (2004); Laura Delind (2006).

FASNO’s 100-mile diet challenge was just one of many that have sprung up across North America in the past several years. Many of these events are inspired by the book by Alisa Smith and J. B. MacKinnon (2007), The 100-Mile Diet: A Year of Local Eating (published in the United States as Plenty: One Man, One Woman, and a Raucous Year of Eating Locally), which chronicles a year of eating foods from within 100 miles of the authors’ Vancouver home. At the time of FASNO’s challenge I was a member of FASNO’s board of directors and took part in the challenge myself.

Numerous examples exist, both academic and not, of these types of efforts. William Schanbacher (2010) provides a comprehensive examination of the context behind and efforts toward food sovereignty. Moffett and Morgan (1999) offer an interesting discussion on women’s community food projects. Benjamin Wurgraft (2002) explores why consumers choose to shop at Whole Foods for ethical reasons. Clare Hinrichs (2003) offers a particularly insightful exploration of food localization efforts, analyzing both the positive and negative aspects of these types of efforts. Jeff Pratt (2007) investigates the relationships between the concepts of local and authentic. Popular media abounds with personal stories from food activists, such as Brian Brett’s (2009) Trauma Farm, about his farming efforts on Salt Spring Island and Novella Carpenter’s (2009) Farm City, which recounts her urban farming experiences and the reasons behind her work. Lindsey Ketchel (2006), a small farmer, reviews community activism and alternative agriculture in Vermont.

The “saga” of Salt Spring Coffee is one that people still debate on the island. The first Salt Spring Coffee café and roaster was opened in Fulford in the building that is now Rock Salt Restaurant in 1996 by Robbyn Scott, her husband Mickey McLeod and his brother, Ross. The organic coffee became an island institution and eventually they moved the café into the centre of town in Ganges where it still remains a meeting centre for locals and visitors. In 2008, the company applied for a rezoning permit for a residential lot in order to build what would have been the world’s first LEED-certified coffee roasting facility and would have employed at least 50 local people on a permanent full-time basis. What followed was a contentious back and forth between the local government, Salt Spring Coffee and property owners neighboring the proposed new facility. At one point it looked like the application would be approved, after Salt Spring Coffee had been asked to make several amendments to their plans and application but, ultimately, the application was turned down. The company moved their operations to Richmond but the process has left a bitter taste in islanders’ mouths that remains strong today. There are two camps of opinion on the island, one which supports Mickey, Robbyn and Ross and their efforts to build an environmentally sustainable business and facility that would have employed a significant number of locals. The second supports the other side of the coin, led by prominent artist Robert Bateman, which expressed concern about the introduction of industrial zoning into a rural residential area as well as the
potential for contamination of a protected wetland nearby. The debate sparked strong disagreement amongst islanders and highlighted the challenges faced between different sectors of the population, particularly those who support and need, a healthy economy for employment and those who do not rely on the island’s economy for work and place environmental protections above any kind of development proposals.

Inderpal Grewal (2005) provides a comprehensive examination of the historically situated strategic foreign policy context surrounding the human rights concept. The UN, by linking universal human rights to economic development in developing countries, directly chains the human rights concept to the neoliberal economic project.

I have used pseudonyms for all my research participants except when they specifically asked that I use their real names. In those cases I clearly indicate that the name being used is not a pseudonym.

Abattoir, the French word for slaughterhouse, seems to be the preferred term amongst people involved in local food systems. My sense from research participants is that abattoir connotes something smaller and more “humane” than a slaughterhouse, which connotes a large factory for slaughtering many animals at a time. A mobile abattoir is a small slaughter facility that is essentially built into a large truck so it can travel to areas that have no fixed slaughter facility. Generally, mobile abattoirs handle smaller animals like chickens and rabbits, partly for practical size reasons and also because provincial regulations are different for poultry and rabbits than for “red” meat animals like pigs, lambs, and cattle.

I deliberately use the plural and singular forms of “knowledges” to make a distinction between feminist, embodied, situated ways of knowing that are multiple and varied versus the so-called objective, universal, singular sense of knowing that the singular “knowledge” implies.

Their real names.

Phillip Vannini’s Ferry Tales is an innovative and experiential ethnographic project on the Gulf Islands ferries [http://ferrytales.innovativeethnographies.net/](http://ferrytales.innovativeethnographies.net/).

All indented, fully italic blocks of text are direct excerpts from my field notes. Quotes from participants are in plain, non-italic text.

A discussion of the election and all the various meanings, conflicts, relationships, etc. that were exposed within it could be a full book on its own and in the interest of sticking to one small area of examination, I do not explore it more fully here.

This refers to a very contentious policy surrounding riparian protection zones and how those are identified, classified and monitored within the Islands Trust. Some Salt Spring residents see the riparian protection policies as much too stringent and impinging on their rights as property owners. It’s quite a complex issue with arguments on both sides for fish habitat protection over property owners’ rights and vice versa.
Vedic architecture is a composed of architecture and planning principles developed by the creator of Transcendental Meditation, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. It is supposed to create buildings in harmony with the natural flow of the Earth’s energies and as a result promote health, harmony and abundance (and specifically financial) to those living in the home. Vedic architecture has become a large global industry. See for example http://www.maharishivastu.org/ for the largest, not to mention trademarked, Vedic architecture provider in the world. Salt Spring has a significant community of Transcendental Meditation (TM) practitioners, some of whom are working to build a TM community of homes at the top of Mt. Belcher. The cottage I was offered for rent was part of that group of properties.

Beaver Point Hall is the south end’s community hall. Originally built as a community effort in 1934, it is home to many events that have become Salt Spring annual traditions, like the Bean Supper fundraiser during Lent used to raise funds for the hall’s upkeep and the Beaver Point Christmas Craft Fair, a popular fair for islanders and visitors. “True” islanders, in real Salt Spring tradition, generally attend dinner at the fair, cooked by volunteers, on Friday evening and the money raised is used for running the hall. It is also home to many weddings each year as well as dances, concerts and other events that bring southenders and other islanders together.

Patterson’s Market was a small store in Fulford that sold basic grocery items. William Patterson opened the original Patterson’s in Beaver Point (in what is now Ruckle Provincial Park) around 1915. At that time Beaver Point was a small, thriving centre for people living on Salt Spring and surrounding islands and served as a drop-off point for supplies and other goods shipped on Canadian Pacific steamships. Beaver Point not only had Patterson’s general store, which had a telephone, but also a fuel depot and a post office. William Patterson and his wife moved the grocery to Fulford in 1935, where members of the Patterson family continued to operate it until Bruce Patterson retired and closed the store in 2011. It has since reopened as the Salt Spring Mercantile, a freshened-up small grocery store with basics as well as many gourmet, “exotic” foodstuffs like imported salts, a wide variety of specialty potato chips, and ice cream. They also have a small take-out café offering coffee, breakfast sandwiches, hot dogs, and homemade pizzas on Fridays as well as fresh-baked bread, cookies, and pastries. The new owners renovated the space so there is a much more “up-market” feel to the space, there is patio space in front to sit and enjoy your snacks and people watch. I have not have a chance to follow-up with my southend participants since the Mercantile has opened to see if it is still the centre of community that Patterson’s once was, although I get the sense that some of that community gathering has dropped off as the market has become more upscale and targeted towards visitors to the island.
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