LOOKING TO VANCOUVER’S ELDERS:
THE 1960s AND 1970s FOOD COUNTERCULTURE STORY AND HOW IT
INFORMS THE CONTEMPORARY INCARNATION OF VANCOUVER’S
FOOD SUSTAINABILITY MOVEMENT: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY
QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary research is grounded in the Land and Foods Systems Faculty. It combines the Disciplines of Food Systems Research with that of History to investigate the intersection of the 1960s and 1970s Vancouver counterculture movement with food activism. This qualitative research is based on the belief that we must understand history to plan the future. The dominant food system is unsustainable. Thus, sustainability research is imperative regarding that steps that must be taken to move our dominant food system to one that does not compromise the long-term survival of our species or countless others. This research is a modified oral history of Vancouver’s 1960s and 1970s food counterculture movement. It contributes to the explanation of the events in Vancouver food activism in the 1960s and 1970s and communicates the advice, perspectives and experiences of activists from that time with respect to Vancouver’s food sustainability challenges today. This research specifically asks elders in Vancouver’s food activist community to help guide a current and new generation of food activists in that same city.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Camil Dumont.

The interview data reported throughout were covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H11-01359.
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List of Abbreviations

BC        British Columbia
CSA       Community Shared Agriculture
Co-op     Co-operative
CRS       Consumer Resource Society
DDT       Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (insecticide)
EU        European Union
FAO       Food and Agriculture Organization
GHG       Green House Gas
ICF       Inner City Farms Society
LSD       Lysergic acid diethylamide (a psychedelic drug)
LFS       Land and Food Systems graduate program
ISLFS     Integrated Studies in Land and Food Systems
Rio       Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
San Fran  San Francisco, California
SPEC      Society Promoting Environmental Conservation
UBC       University of British Columbia
US        United States
WTO       World Trade Organization
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Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their incredible support in countless ways.
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my mum, Alison. She used to make my baby food herself, from the organic vegetables she grew in her garden. She raised me in a vegetarian home. She understands the value of social justice to a degree I have seldom seen. Without her patience and support I would not have been able to complete this work. Without her love and dedication, I would not be the person I am.
Chapter 1: Introduction: The impact of intergenerational knowledge transfer on our food system.

This specific study is geographically grounded in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Its aim is to understand the story and perspective of people who were identified as “food activists” in Vancouver, in the 1960s and 1970s. Its goal is to document and communicate that story. This specific investigation is born from the understanding that: “It is rational to argue that the global agri-food system is unjust, wasteful and utterly unsustainable in its current form...” (Sage, 2012, p. 250). The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) report of 2016 noted that “About one-third of all food produced in the world is lost or wasted post-harvest” (FAO, 2016, p. xiv). This work aims to make the story and lessons of Vancouver’s initial food counterculture experience accessible and useful as a potential guide for contemporary activism.

This work combines the disciplines of History and Food Systems Research. It is housed at the Faculty of Land and Foods Systems, at the University of British Columbia, Integrated Studies in Land and Food Systems Graduate Program. We must, as a culture and as a species, investigate and interpret where we come from in order to plan where we will go. This study brings these values to a place that intimately touches us all: our food, our food system, and our survival.

Knowledge is passed down in many different ways. Perspectives and landscapes change, constantly. It is at the core of this work that to take action without listening to, and learning from those who came before, is wrongheaded and dangerous. We must enact the opposite. The study
of history helps construct a roadmap for the future. Incorporating the lessons and wisdom of our elders, in all fields, is paramount to managing our own evolution and progress in the best terms possible.

Many of our human-created systems produce unsustainable conditions for the long-term survival of our species on this earth. Of these destructive systems, the one that provides us our food is particularly impactful, obvious and egregious. This is darkly ironic. We are harming ourselves and our environment by the systems we have built and upon which we rely to bring food to our families, our children.

This study touches on why and how we have built a broken food system. Primarily, however, it focuses on the wisdom and stories shared by the local elders of the food counterculture movement. The hope is that this intergenerational knowledge-sharing may be used to frame and execute more effective and informed action in the pursuit of contemporary food system sustainability.

The Land and Food Systems (LFS) graduate program in Integrated Studies (ISLFS) claims that the development of:

Sustainable food systems will require more than technological advances, and must integrate economic, social and environmental relationships […]. New solutions will demand that researchers and policy makers approach the task differently from in the past. We can no longer expect solutions to come from a single discipline. […] holistic approaches that integrate knowledge from across
disciplines [are necessary] to find solutions relevant to diverse communities. (Integrated Studies in Land & Food Systems, (n.d.).)

Incorporating the discipline of History with that of Land and Food Systems research, this work is an effort to contribute to the implementation of the interdisciplinary philosophy and approach of the ISLFS branch of the LFS Graduate Program.

When I was introduced to LFS and started on this academic path, some years ago now, I experienced something new, as a student. It was the first time I was exposed to a faculty that greatly prioritized the concept of ecological sustainability and placed that concept centrally across all areas of investigation. I had never seen that before and it spoke to me. It made sense and helped me to trust the school’s environment. Beyond that though, for the first time in my academic experience and possibly in the totality of my formal education going back to my childhood, I felt like who I was as a person, and what I had lived in my life was welcome and important within the context of my formal and institutional pursuit of knowledge. In his 2009 article: *Towards Integration of Knowledge Through Sustainability Education and its Potential Contribution to Environmental Security*, Dr. Alejandro Rojas explains that, in as much as a UBC LFS’ stream of interdisciplinary courses, the Land, Food and Community series provides an education that actively relies on the traditional academic processes of peer review and empirical investigation of evidence, it also emphasizes that: “…personal experience, metaphors, ideals and a poetic sensibility are indispensable components of the ecology of knowledge…” (Rojas, 2009, p. 133). It is made explicitly clear within the core curriculum of the faculty that one’s *emotions* matter in learning and in knowledge. To me, that was an educational awakening. How I feel *matters*, as a student. Both the context and circumstance in which I conduct research matter in
my efforts to understand our world. Having these guiding principles woven into my program gives me permission to seek knowledge with the entirety of my personhood. I strongly believe it made this work possible.

I recently shared a meal with one of my very close friends and her immediate family. The family had gathered in Vancouver from here and there, around British Columbia, to say goodbye to my close friend’s elderly maternal grandmother. She had died two nights earlier. Over a breakfast of banana pancakes, bagels and coffee in the old family home, in Kitsilano, we spoke of life, death and other things. The family was busy, going over tangible logistics; deciding who would take care of what as they planned the celebration of life and funeral of their departed matriarch. Though there was sadness, the mood was not dark. The kids were busy, building Lego boats and spaceships underfoot and there were many smiles and laughs. Occasionally one of the young ones would toddle up to the small kitchen table where the adults sat and scoop a big bite of flapjack, slathered in maple syrup. It was understood and expressed that the deceased had lived a good and long life and had experienced a good death. She had passed away in her own home, with loving family by her side. She was missed, but she would not be forgotten. Her values and strengths remain, passed down through her children and her grandchildren. And now her great-grandchildren are being raised with that same fiber central in the culture of their families. I felt like I was watching the strength of intergenerational knowledge transfer, right before my eyes. I felt privileged to be included within the intimacy, warmth and love in the room.

The youngest child there, Ryo, was perched upon a supportive knee, at the table, held gently but firmly by his aunt. The boy is just a year or so into his life, into this world. He too was eating breakfast. Every ounce of his being was focused on a small bowl of plain yoghurt that
had been placed in front of him. The challenge of getting that yoghurt into his little mouth required all of his being. He had also been provided a spoon, a bit large for him, but his grip was strong. He was remarkably adept with the utensil, despite his chosen hand placement, which was too close to the end of his tool. He created some complication to the basic physics of spooning food into one’s mouth. He didn’t get frustrated. He just kept at it. Before long the boy’s fat little cheeks and chubby chin were caked with dairy, with some in his hair, and close to his eye. His aunt cupped her free hand below the boy’s process and managed to catch much of the meal that fell prey to gravity before it hit her lap, or splatted down on the floor below. All the while the conversation swirled around other things. The scene continued until the bowl was emptied, refilled, and emptied again. And then his elders, as a team, cleaned him and his overflow up, by instinct and habit, as parents do.

Of the five adults present, I was the second eldest and the only one who does not have children. After breakfast, and after hugs and goodbyes, I set out to return home, to continue to work on this very document. I felt awash with gratitude and love. I felt it for the family I’d spent the morning with, my friends. I felt it for my family. I felt it for my own grandmother who had died roughly a year earlier. And in a strange way, a surprising way, I also felt it for my school and, in particular, my chosen faculty. The feelings and experiences of that morning are deeply woven into my personal version of the Ecology of Knowledge. The recognition I have felt from my Faculty, that my experiences and feelings hold value and have a place in my education, have provided the support and humanization I have needed to trust my academic path. They are in large part, to me, what makes this work valid.

The work is important to me because I believe every person in our human family deserves access to healthy food. I believe in a more holistic definition of the term “healthy” than
one restricted to calorie count and nutritional content. I believe that for food to be healthy, it must meet the nutritional requirements a person needs, but it must go beyond that. It must also be culturally appropriate for the eater. It must be produced free of harmful chemical inputs that degrade soils, pollute waterways, poison the air and destroy the ecosystems of our planet. I believe that if animals are to be used in our food system, they need to be raised and culled without cruelty or undue suffering. I believe wild harvested foods need to be collected in a way that does not compromise the long-term survival and availability of the food source in question or other organisms that rely on it. I believe that the farmers and workers within the food system need to be capable of supporting themselves and their dependents by earning a living wage. I believe that our food system must massively reduce its climate change emissions. The status quo of our dominant global food system consistently fails to meet these criteria.

There are countless beautiful, real-world examples and food stories that meet some or all of the stipulations above. However, they are typically still on the fringes of the food system, the exception to the rule. That needs to change.

I share the story of Ryo and his yoghurt because it vividly reminds me that I care deeply about the future of food. I feel purely in my heart that Ryo deserves to feed himself with goods produced in a sustainable food system. All children do. I feel parents deserve to be able to provide for their babies with the confidence and peace of knowing the food they prepare is not contributing to distress. For most, considering the current state of the food system, this is seldom an option. I believe we have to reimagine, deconstruct and rebuild our food system piece-by-piece until we can with confidence assess it as just, equitable, safe and sustainable for all. Our children deserve it, our children’s children deserve it, and generations well beyond deserve it too.
I understand that the transformation of which I speak will require an enormous shift in much of our dominant global ideology and significant systems change in diverse realms. I do not see how we have any other choice. We must continue to engage with this problem with all the tools and resources we can access. I seek that solution. I am not naïve as to the challenge. I am willing to put in the work.

I confess: I come to this conversation with soil on my hands. I engage with this subject matter with a sunburnt face. My back is strong, if tender.

I earn my living producing food. I am a worker within the food system. I am an urban farmer. Seven year ago, four of my close friends and I started an urban farming project in Vancouver called “Inner City Farms” (ICF). By our second growing season, I had become the Head Farmer and President at ICF. I remain in that dual role.

We have developed a network of front and backyard “farms” that in aggregate total just under one acre, here in our city. We build and maintain agricultural space in these yards. Members of the community who own land, and are interested in contributing to a sustainable food project, provide the space we cultivate. Our “land-hosts” receive a share of our farm’s harvest in the form of a no-fee membership to our seasonal community shared agriculture (CSA) program. We trade vegetables for access to land. We do not use any synthetic chemicals to grow our crops. Our urban farm has evolved into a platform for education, agricultural training, community and relationship building. We transform traditional spaces of consumption, lawns, into spaces of production that increase ecosystem services. We grow beautiful food. We meet people, connect neighbours, and make friends. We work hard, and we have a great time. We eat well. Each year, we manage a seasonal internship program that provides mentorship and guidance in the realm of sustainable food production and cooperative effort. We introduce
bourgeoning farmers to the reality of the work. We provide an opportunity for people who have recognized their discontent with the food system’s status quo to volunteer and channel their energy in roles that mirror their values, beliefs and politics. We are grass-roots educators, and we take that responsibility seriously. Our project relies on the support of many and has a primary goal of providing something so simple yet so very difficult to find: food produced in a way that intentionally minimizes harmful impact. This core organizational value places us in direct conflict with the reality of the dominant, industrial food system. Our project does not generate much income. It is not scalable. It will never make anyone involved rich. And yet it has survived and grown, season after season, for seven years now. The community is interested and is willing to help. And our community is growing. In a sense, Inner City Farms is a concrete example of peaceful, action-based resistance to the ideological hegemony of neoliberal values that dominate our culture and have done so for the last thirty or so years. All of us who volunteer and work the land at our farm are in our mid-thirties or younger. For us, the neoliberal context is all we’ve ever really known. It’s the world we grew up in, the world in which we came of age. And it doesn’t sit well.

We are, at differing levels of engagement, members of the contemporary food activist community. Ideologically, we feel ready to participate and function within an equitable and just food system. None of us knows exactly what that looks like. We do, however, understand the food system status quo as dangerous and unsustainable. We are ready for that to transition to something new.

We want to live with a food system that treats the environment and the land as though we plan for our species to stay for a while, maybe even into perpetuity. We feel ready to participate in a system that prioritizes sustainable land stewardship. We want to contribute to a system that
provides us with the goods we need to survive in a way that takes the value, needs and well-being of future generations into account. We have come to the conclusion that it is beyond time to build a functioning and sustainable food system that supplants the monstrous calamity we are bound to today. We are trying to figure out just what that looks like, from an activist perspective.

This subject matter and the like is constantly discussed at Inner City Farms; as we plant seeds in cell packs, design irrigation webs, dig over garden beds and methodically harvest our crops. The conversation seldom stops.

In part, my personal goal with this research project is to harmonize the two identities that define me. I am a food activist urban farmer, through Inner City Farms and I am a Food Systems academic, through my work at the Faculty of Land and Food Systems, at UBC. That combination has helped me gain access to the stories of those who came before, those who have worked in my community for years, creating a more sustainable food-world. I am a member of Vancouver’s contemporary food sustainability movement. I recognized that, in addition to the knowledge I have access to in the academic sphere, I needed guidance from food activist elders in my community. I have approached them and asked them to share their experiences, stories and advice with me. And they have. It has been an enormous privilege for me to experience this, and deeply personal. I also feel that the research process, in some ways, gave back to them in turn. It is my hope that the stories collected here will help. That they will help us build a food system that nourishes and feeds us without compromising the well-being of the earth’s ecosystems or the capacity of children and future generations to live healthy lives. At the very least, I hope that this work will serve as a record of effort, bravery and gentle rebellion in a quest for peace and justice in resistance to powerful and destructive forces.
This thesis is comprised of a methodological overview detailing how I conducted my research. Chapter one presents the landscape of the dominant food system prior to the North American counter culture movement of the 1960s to 1970s, drawn from a literature review. It is intended to provide the context for why a cultural revolution regarding our food system was necessary in the first place. The second chapter combines data from my interviews and a literature review to show the role counterculture activism had in general, and specifically its connection to food. It emphasizes and places Vancouver’s story within that matrix. The third chapter combines a literature review and my interview data to trace the impact of the dominant food system and its guiding philosophy from the end of the counter culture revolution to the present day. This contemporary context is followed by a narrative built on my compilation and synthesis of the interview data and is presented in a voice of intergenerational sustainable activism advice.
Chapter 2: Method: An interdisciplinary oral history in land and food systems research

As I began to feel the strength of this new sustainable food movement around me, I confess I also had difficulty understanding its direction. I felt a need for guidance, and moreover, that it was possible our entire community needed guidance. I wanted to know if there were people who had come before me, who had experienced something similar to what I was looking to understand, and if so, what action they had taken. What were their stories? Could they help us? It did not take long for me to recognize that, embedded within the countercultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, in North America, and right here in Vancouver, there was a strong component of food activism. However, it became apparent that much of this food activism history remained untold and undocumented. The gap in this story motivated this research project.

In this study, I have looked for a history, in my city, of food activism. The goal with this work is to facilitate and document intergenerational experiences and knowledge of members of the 1960s-1970s counterculture movement in Vancouver and to help guide a new wave of activists concerned with similar issues but in a new time, a changed world. This paper combines a literature review with data from semi-structured interviews I conducted with counterculture food activist in the 1960s and 1970s in Vancouver. These interviews took place in Vancouver during the period of January to September 2013.

This is sustainability research. This study fits into a larger wave of contemporary sustainability-based research that has gained momentum in natural and social sciences in response to the massive environmental and social problems our academic community has
identified in recent times (Rau & Fahy, 2013). Grounded in the Faculty of Land and Food Systems, this work is interdisciplinary. Due to the historic nature of this research, I crossed disciplines and worked under the guidance of a historian, an agroecologist and an environmental social scientist to structure this study. It is recognized, in the literature, that in order to understand and act on issues so grand and complex as “food system sustainability”, it can be valuable for research to be designed in a way that emphasizes collaboration in new and innovative ways (McCormick, Neij, Mont, et al., 2014). There are many complexities to interdisciplinary work. However, it is important to challenge the boundaries, definitions and paradigms of discipline-specific research, particularly regarding sustainability (Gardner, 2013). Considering the consequences, sustainability research must be prioritized.

Through this research project I have had the privilege of asking activists and community members, who were part of the counterculture movement in Vancouver, to share their stories with me. My interviews included specific research questions about their experiences when they were roughly my age. I asked questions in relation to the food movement of their time, what they had seen since then and what advice they might pass on to members of a new incarnation of a similar movement gaining momentum today. I was seeking to learn from their experiences, stories, knowledge and perspectives.

This qualitative research draws from the methodological frame used in the writing of Oral History (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Green & Hutching, 2004). I gathered data by conducting semi-structured interviews with five individuals who had been active in the food movement in Vancouver in the 1970s. These participants were selected using purposeful snowball sampling. I initially asked senior professionals in Food System Education, here in Vancouver, to help identify individuals with expertise in the area of my investigation (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, et
al., 2013). I looked for participants who had been active in the 1970s food movement. Through this purposeful sampling, I was able to identify nine potential participants who met this study’s eligibility criteria of being active in the public sphere of Vancouver’s food counter culture social movement during the 1970s, and fluent in English.

I contacted potential participants via email and succeeded in interviewing five individuals in person at a location of their convenience. Each participant consented to being audio-recorded during our interview (Appendix A). Each interview in this study took between one and two hours to complete. These interviews took place during the period of January to September 2013. These semi-structured interviews were guided by open-ended questions for which approval had been granted by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) ethics committee. (Appendix B).

Once I completed the research interviews, I thoroughly and repeatedly reviewed each recording. I identified and grouped the emphasized themes and similarities within and across the different stories. I also listened for where the stories differed. Two distinct thematic branches emerged as areas of particular relevance to this research: (a) the story of the Vancouver counterculture food movement; and (b) advice from the participants in this research for members of the sustainable food movement today. These thematic branches are unpacked in detail in subsequent chapters. After I had analyzed the themes and content of my data, I followed up with my study participants in March 2016, by email, to again confirm that they felt comfortable sharing their stories and words in my research document. I received consent to ascribe direct quotes to my participants and place them into the research using brief bios (Appendix C).

An oral history is particularly useful both in understanding our past and also in helping us guide future actions (Ketchel, 2004). The responses gathered have been woven together through my analysis of the stories the participants chose to share. This research relies on a modern, open-
interview understanding that the researcher makes no claim to impartiality. All the opposite; my bias is intentionally communicated: I am a food activist, interviewing elders in the food activist community. Such a context is crucial to interpretation of this material (Fontana & Frey, 2000).

As with all oral history, this story and content cannot be taken as the complete untold voice of a population. There are limitations to the method, of course. It is, however, an effective way to gain great depth and insight into pieces of the story at hand. Through listening to and interpreting the lived events of study participants, we are able to access personalized depth that has many potential values (Bloor & Wood, 2006). In the context of food system sustainability, it is hoped that this oral history research can provide guidance and insight for current and future food systems activists.
Chapter 3: The food system landscape that precipitated the countercultural resistance; providing context for why the North American counterculture movement confronted the dominant food system in the first place.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, in North America, a counterculture movement developed and took on a multitude of issues. The movement, made up young people, was looking for a new way to organize power, culture and social norms. They revolted against the 1950s status quo. The post World War II culture of the time did not satisfy the desires of the counterculture community and that new generation wanted to create a new way of life. That counter culture movement was characterized by its philosophical rejection of the dominant normative; from fashion and music to gender, race and the political attitudes of their day. The counterculture was anti-war, anti-establishment, and anti-“straight” society in as many ways as possible. The movement aimed to live in direct opposition to the values of their parents, their teachers and the dominant culture around them (Greene, 2010). One of the social structures confronted and challenged was the era’s food system. It is that specific clash that is of central to this study.

The counterculture movement rejected the assumption that food markets had to be controlled corporately and food itself sold for profit. It rejected the systems and processes of food production that damaged the natural environment. In addition, the counterculture prioritized access to nutritious and healthy foods that the dominant system did not supply. The specifics and story of that resistance will come in the next chapter, based on a literature review and primary data; first we will look back at the history of the North American food system prior to the counterculture revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. This chapter, through a literature review,
provides the context for the North American food system as it led up to the counterculture era. It outlines how our food system became unsustainable in the first place and sets the landscape for the confrontation between our dominant food system and the resistance it met through the counterculture revolution.

The history of agriculture and food systems is long and well explored in the literature (Barker, 2006; Fernandez-Armento, 2001; Mazoyer & Roudart, 2006). The long story of the human food system, for the most part, is one of relatively low ecological impact. Throughout human history, our relationship to food is what we have come to know as one of hunting and gathering. The human population was relatively small. Our ancestors were mobile and responsive to what the landscape and the seasons provided (Federov, 2015). When our species did enter the age of agriculture, farming did not become a rule of human life instantaneously. It took time. Felipe Fernandez-Armento explains that the: “…transition from gathering happened frequently and independently, in a variety of independent environments, and gradually got more intensive in most of them” (2001, p. 99). The human transition from gathering to farming as a primary way for our species to ensure sustenance evolved over millennia. Agriculture in this sense was born some 10,000 years ago in Mesopotamia and along the banks of the mighty Nile. The seasonal fluctuations and flooding of the adjacent plains carried nutrient rich sediments that in turn created great soil fertility and a more sedentary life based on crop cultivation became possible. This process was long and slow and interwoven with the gathering lifestyle our species was accustomed to (Barker, 2006). The two modes of providing sustenance and food overlapped. The beginning of agriculture “…was a phenomenon of ‘human-plant symbiosis’ and ‘co-evolution’, an unconscious relationship…” (Fernandez-Armento, 2001, p. 99). This description of the human-food relationship simply and effectively embeds agriculture in biological
evolution. It explains the birth of agriculture devoid of the implication that it is a human ‘invention’ per se. On the contrary, agriculture is defined as a “…mechanism introduced unintentionally into the process of evolutionary change” (Fernandez-Armesto, p. 100). This is an important contextual perspective: we have, in nearly all of our history, lived with some degree of natural balance with our food system. To have an unsustainable food system is very new to our human course.

The balance between our species and our food system no longer holds true. In the context of human history, that shift happened very quickly. The last one hundred and fifty years or so of our human-food story encapsulate more change than the previous 12000 years combined (Sage, 2012). It is in that timeframe that the “unsustainable food system” we know today was born. One of the developments that contributed to the shift away from sustainability was our transition to understanding food as a commodity. In the context of the North American food system history, the moment is quite precise. It happened in Chicago, in the 1850s. A trading system for corn was implemented and the march toward commodified food had begun (Pollan, 2006). This marked a departure from the way the grain market had traditionally operated and instead offered traders the opportunity to buy and sell millions of conceptual future bushels based on debt and promise (Cronon, 1992). This new way to interpret food had the effect of distancing the producer from the consumer. It marked a shift in interpretation of the goods we eat away from a physical entity that originated at one specific farm, grown by one specific farmer toward an idea of itself; from food to an abstraction to be handled by traders responsive to the demands of industry and the urban marketplace (Cronon, 1992). Roughly a century and a half ago, we began to interact with food under the terms of capitalism. The power of commodification, while significant, can also be difficult to define. Consider this description provided by Karl Marx in 1867:
A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as its use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs, or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (Marx, 2000 ed., p. 331)

The above passage describes how our perceptions change when an item is transformed from “use-value” to “exchange-value”. This interpretive shift, the commodification of food, was
pivotal in the loss of the sustainability of our food system. Through an exchange-value lens, rational actors can act rationally to exploit every last part of a crop, an animal, or nature for that matter, as they pursue the quest for profit. They can, from that perspective, conclude that their actions are justified, consequences be damned. Historian Richard White, writing on a specific fisheries collapse, explains the consequences of managing natural systems using exchange-value primacy to guide behavior:

Each step of the process that led to this result was logical.

It was only the result that was mad. Like many kinds of madness, this one looked quite sane from the inside. One thing followed quite understandably from another until both a kind of environmental insanity and bitter social conflict were achieved. (White, 1995, p. 48)

This rationale for the drive to accumulate capital is a driver for innovation in technology and in efficiency. It also came at a great cost. Take the example of food animals. Once again, using the lens of exchange-value born in Chicago in the 1800s, the understanding of meat animals as “commodities” disconnected human beings from the lives of those animals. Rather than seeing a living cow, people began to interact with steaks and ground beef. The moral component of meat consumption no longer took the foreground. In essence: “…the animal vanished from human memory as one of nature’s creatures” (Cronon, 1992, p. 256). Our relationship to meat consumption shifted dramatically.

Another key contributor to our shift away from a sustainable balance is exemplified by the way we have managed some of our agricultural scientific and technological innovations. Two signpost examples for this are: the discovery and application of synthetic nitrogen, and the period
known as the “Green Revolution.” Technological advancements have affected agriculture at every level. For the purposes of this work, on-farm mechanization will be used as a primary illustration. One of the major implications of the way in which we have applied science and technology in our agricultural systems is how tied food production became to the fossil fuel industry and how massively that step increased our harmful ecological impact.

Bluntly stated, the scientific discovery of synthetic nitrogen, in the realm of agriculture, changed everything. Nitrogen is all around us and abundant in our world. Michael Pollan explains: “…scientists speak of nitrogen as supplying life’s quality, while carbon provides quantity” (Pollan, 2006, p. 42). Life on earth is dependent on nitrogen. Until 1909, nitrogen could only be made “useful” once it had been “fixed” by soil bacteria (Pollan, 2006). In 1909, a synthetic way to fix nitrogen was discovered, which shifted: “…the basics of soil fertility from a total reliance on the energy of the sun to a new reliance on fossil fuel” (Pollan, 2006, p. 44). This discovery affected agricultural potential. The farm, as a result, transitioned to a system that could operate much more like an industry. The use of synthetic nitrogen allowed intensive mono-crops to become more common. This innovation provided a replacement for the diverse and complex systems of the traditional farm. The old systems had been built to mimic and interact with the processes of nature. They were tied to biology and nature’s cycles. This link – in appearance - ceased to be necessary for the first time. The new technology allowed for the implementation of agricultural systems that mirrored machines and employed industrial principles. Petroleum products, largely in the form of chemical fertilizers, became an indispensable farm input. Consequently, the negative impact of farming on our ecosystems dramatically increased (Pollan, 2006).

Another story that illustrates our shift away from a sustainable balance in food systems is
the tale of the Green Revolution. The Green Revolution refers to: “…a technological package of high-yielding varieties of seed, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and irrigation [techniques]…” (Sage, 2012, p. 218) used primarily in the 1960s and 1970s. The Green Revolution is a good example of how mechanistic reductionist science was prioritized over ecological science during this era. The tools of the Green Revolution developed in response to a deep belief in the primacy of chemical agriculture, a view that very much benefitted the industrial agro-business sector and related companies. Short-term crop yields jumped up, certainly, but the severe and long-term damage done to ecosystems in addition to the annihilation of traditional agricultural practices was devastating (Fernandez-Armesto, 2001). The ways of the Green Revolution effectively exemplify the dominant mindset of the time regarding the intersection of scientific knowledge and the food system.

By the time the counterculture movement was beginning to form in the late 1960s, the shift in our human management of the food system as briefly outlined in this chapter, had taken strong root. This shift occurred in roughly one century. In the North American context and much of the West, food had been commodified. It was traded, bought, sold and speculated upon in accordance with the capitalist economic framework of the day. In essence, divorced from the tangible, be it the farm, an ecosystem or nature’s networks. Farming and the petroleum industry were now intimately linked. Cultural prioritization of short-term crop yield and capital accumulation above long-term ecological health and traditional agricultural practices had a negative environmental impact. Chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and the like had become an indispensable link in the agricultural process (Clunies-Ross & Hildyard, 1992). Mono-crops had become the norm. The landscape had both figuratively and literally shifted. A massive reduction in the number of people working on farms was occurring due to increased
mechanization and farm specialization (Federoff, 2015). The influence of agri-business on policy and the market was increasing rapidly as well (Sage, 2012).

As can be seen by this literature review, the longstanding balance between humans and their food systems had evolved, by the mid-1960s, to a place of unsustainability. Technological advancements, scientific discoveries and economic policies had, in a short time, transformed the impact of the dominant food system on the natural world. It was this paradigm the counterculture movement confronted, as we shall see in the subsequent chapter.
Chapter 4: Cultural change and a taste for a new food system; unpacking the counterculture food movement in general, and in Vancouver specifically

This chapter looks at the food story of the counterculture movement in the 1960s and 1970s and its resistance to the dominant food system of that time. Within the story of the counterculture movement, there were many re-imaginings of how the future of food systems might look. There were new ideas, new actions and new relationships with food. This chapter begins with an overall view of the intersection between food and counterculture, and then narrows in scope, grounding the story in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. There is a paucity of research literature regarding the relationship between the Vancouver 1960s and 1970s counterculture community and food systems of the time. One of the goals of this study is to contribute to addressing this gap in the research literature. This chapter combines a review of literature on the role of food in the counterculture generally, and complements it with data collected through my interviews specific to Vancouver’s counterculture movement of the era and that community’s relationship to food.

By the 1950s, in North America, inequity, bigotry, patriarchy and racism permeated significant parts of mainstream culture. These social repressions had not yet been effectively challenged en masse. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, as the Civil Rights movement rose, these repressive beliefs, and the power structures that supported them, began to be challenged. Protests by the anti-war movement, marginalized populations, young people and activists demanding radical change pushed back against the entrenched, conservative establishment of the day. As shown by some of the literature cited below, a new era of social and cultural change was afoot. A
counterculture was born, and within that movement there was hope and imagination for how the world might change to be more just, how people might be more equal. One development within the momentum of the era was the birth of what is now the modern environmental movement. Protecting nature and questioning practices that were ecologically destructive fit into the emergent protest paradigm.

The publishing in 1961 of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* is often credited as the crystalizing moment for the formation and launch of the western environmental movement. Fernandez-Armesto calls it “…among the most influential books ever written” (2001, p. 235); it linked the environmentalist lens and food at the same moment. *Silent Spring* investigated and exposed the ecological consequences of the normative, chemically intensive agricultural practices of the era. It is an examination of dominant agricultural practices through the eyes of an ecologist. Carson presented data that illustrated nature under assault by poisonous agri-chemicals used freely, born of the Green Revolution paradigm. Carson’s work is credited with inspiring people in a new way, placing animals, plants and people within nature’s ecosystems and underscoring the fragility of that web. Moreover, Carson’s work deconstructed the logic of the anti-nature chemical excess of the era (Klein, 2015). This questioning of the system, by a female ecologist no less, was particularly bold. Carson recognized unsustainability, and called the establishment to account. The statement was so poignant that even the Kennedy administration felt inspired to criticize and refute the validity of her work (Belasco, 2007; Lear, 1993). In a quote that reveals the mainstream establishment’s view of women and ecological sciences with stunning efficiency, N.E. Borlaug, one of the fathers of the Green Revolution, interprets Carson’s work as: “…‘vicious, hysterical propaganda’ against agricultural chemicals by ‘scientific halfwits’” (Fernandez-Armesto, 2001, p. 235). Carson’s story transcended those reproaches,
however, and the environmental movement sprung to life. *Silent Spring* held central that conventional agriculture was killing the natural systems of the earth. Ecology and food systems became explicitly linked. Carson had presented work that linked the use of synthetic pesticides, especially DDT, to the decline and poisoning of bird and fish populations in particular. She demonstrated that some of the accepted chemical use in agriculture was holistically endangering the natural environment (Carson, 1962; Lear, 1993).

Within the counterculture, food was not something specific one would necessarily have separated from the “alternative” culture as a whole. The counterculture was an attempt to accomplish the tasks of life in a new way, an alternative way, outside the mainstream. It was, in a sense, particularly normal that new systems and habits around food would be developed, as a reflection of the ethics of the movement in general (Harper, 2013). Food, from the counterculture perspective, was like everything else; it needed to be reimagined - managed and valued differently than how it existed under the priorities of the establishment.

San Francisco, California, was the epicenter of the counterculture movement in the USA, in particular the Haight-Ashbury district (Greene, 2010). The origins of this cultural phenomenon were distinctly American; the movement was characterized by the music, social freedoms and experimentation within the community. Post World War II boundaries and norms were challenged in many ways, more so than most at the time had ever seen. “The Sixties”, as this set time of cultural transformation is known, actually corresponds closer to the period of 1963, or roughly when President Kennedy was assassinated, to 1975 and the end of the Vietnam War. The start and end of this period of social change is somewhat fluid but those are the bookends (Aronsen, 2010). By the dawn of 1967, the peak of the counterculture movement, approximately 15 000 “baby boomers” called the Haight-Ashbury area “home” (Aronsen, 2010).
New and alternative food systems were a part of this period of experimentation. One particularly active group in the San Francisco counterculture community was called “The Diggers” (Belasco, 2007; Gitlin, 1987; Rorabaugh, 2015). The Diggers were organized around the belief that the industrial system, and in particular the food system, was going to collapse imminently. They were decidedly anti-capitalist. They believed that the best way to mitigate the effect of the collapse to come was to reconnect with the land and to create regional food systems. The Diggers got involved with farming and envisioned utopian networks of localized farms that might ensure the survival and evolution of their community, and of all humanity. Their mission was to spread their ideology and viewpoint within the Bay Area counterculture scene and hopefully beyond. They found the young, presumably hungry, community of the Haight-Ashbury district to be a receptive audience. The Diggers used food as a medium for their message. They would prepare and serve meals for free, often served out of old converted buses, to hordes of young people hanging out. The catch was that to get food, one had to listen to the message they presented. The Diggers used food to convey their politics. Food for them was a way to convey the importance of an ecologically conscientious lifestyle. They advocated and actively built bonds with the “back to the landers” and rural commune communities. The Diggers preached an ethic that protected Mother Earth as sacred, and treated her with reverence and spirit (Belasco, 2007; Gitlin, 1987; Rorabaugh, 2015).

“The personal is political” was somewhat of a mantra of the counterculture movement. There is little more intimate or personal than the relationship one has to food in their lives, mouths and bellies. A publication that captured this slogan and translated it into terms that could be practically applied was Frances Moore Lappé’s book, *Diet for a Small Planet*, originally published in 1971. Lappé’s book, which was widely circulated within the counterculture,
advocated a meat-free diet. To go vegetarian, in 1971, was a major departure from the dietary norms of the era (Vesanto, 2016). For mainstream culture, this meant breaking from the culinary tradition one was raised in; it concretized eating as a political act. Becoming vegetarian was also a personal act of change. *Diet for a Small Planet* encouraged people to explore a new food relationship. Lappé emphasized that, in aggregate, personal choices have global consequences. The book spoke to the impact of choice and consumer agency. It presented alternative ways of managing agriculture and health, including recipes and nutritional advice for a new vegetarian paradigm. Lappé was fiercely critical of the mainstream American food system. She paid particular attention to food distribution models as contributors to hunger and famine. She argued against the practice of using farmland to grow feed for what she identified as “inefficient” meat-animals. She took aim at the economic system that created such wasted food-energy (Lappé, 1975). In writing her book in Berkeley, Lappé learned that in the late 1960s, 78% of the grain grown in the US went to feed meat-animals. She challenged the status quo of meat as the primary source of dietary protein and showed how plant-based recipes could effectively meet nutritional needs (Belasco, 2007; Lappé, 1975). *Diet for a Small Planet* became a bestseller. More than a million copies were sold between 1971 and 1975. Counterculture ethics were reaching into the mainstream and affecting the North American diet, and the market.

As the market for alternative foods grew, so too did the desire to purchase those foods in a manner that respected values of the movement. This desire for ethically-sourced foods spurred the reinvention of the cooperatively run food store. Though already tested, if not a particularly popular system, there was a significant boom in co-ops in the early 1970s, tied to the “hippies” of the day. The traditional pre-counterculture co-op was not “health food” centric. The new wave certainly was. Meeting the demand for foodstuff produced by means that fit into the politics of
the movement was more easily attained through the co-op model. It was important to many that
the fruit they ate was not grown using chemical sprays, that it was picked by unionized labor
with adequate working conditions and that bulk goods without excessive packaging were
available. In mainstream stores, the very ingredients needed to cook the recipes in Lappé’s book
and others of the like, were seldom available at all. Shopping without a private shopkeeper
gaining capital and profiting from the whole exchange was also important (Belasco, 2007).
Within the cooperative structure, the consumer had much more influence over which suppliers to
stock, which to boycott and why. Members were able to make those choices from a moral and
political perspective and to resist corporate capitalism at the same time (Belasco, 2007).

The desire to consume food produced ethically was also a primary motive for the
inception of many back to the land communes in the late 1960s (Belasco, 2007; Coates, 2016).
People within the community were keen to try new ways of life, including growing their own
food. However, there was often a very steep learning curve with commune life. Growing enough
food for an entire community with limited experience, equipment or knowledge proved very
challenging. It was often impossible. The romance of the idea often outweighed the actual
experience. Division of labor, organization and strained interpersonal relationships took a toll on
many of the counterculture’s back to the land groups (Belasco, 2007; Coates, 2016). Women
often did the brunt of the work, not practically living the feminist gender equity that was a part of
the countercultural rhetoric, often finding themselves in traditional roles of cooking, cleaning and
child rearing. Some members of these communities continued this type of initiative through a
larger bioregional movement, based on a concept of health and sustainable local communities.
However, the commune, as a specific template for social change, lost steam and after a brief
time, and the number of them declined rather quickly (Belasco, 2007; Carr, 2004, Coates, 2016).
The mainstream food industry also took note of the alternative food movement and by 1970 considered it a threat to business as usual. The very values of the alternative food paradigm were an affront to the big players in the food industry. The dominant food culture was comprised of: “… a loose alliance of agribusiness farms, government agencies, scientific authorities, and mass media writers…” (Belasco, 2007, p. 111). In reaction to the emergent counterculture food community, this dominant sector allocated resources to minimize counterculture influence in society and the marketplace. As soon as the counterculture was recognized as a threat to business, mainstream media and industry-friendly scientists framed the hippie food concerns over chemical use as paranoid, and suggested that the health concerns within the movement were little more than conspiratorial imagination (Johnson, 2012). Mainstream marketing was targeting the very ethics of the counterculture movement. For example, pre-packaged and instant foods were framed and advertised as goods that liberated women from the kitchen (Belasco, 2007).

Just as San Francisco was the epicenter of the American counterculture movement, so too was Vancouver, British Columbia in the Canadian context. The sharing of information between the Californian culture and the west coast of Canada was significant (Hunter, 1979). Kitsilano, or “Kits”, on the west side of Vancouver, became known as the city’s first hippie neighbourhood (Coates, 2016) and, by the mid to late 1960s, was home to a rocking “…atmosphere of poetry, music and hedonism…” (Kluckner, 2006, p. 180). Later, as Kits began to gentrify, the counterculture community moved eastward to the Commercial Drive area (“The Drive”). This migration across town coincided with an increase in political organization and social activism within the movement (Aronsen, 2010; Coates, 2016).

With hitchhiking being popular and free, and the weather in Vancouver milder than in the rest of Canada, many young eastern North Americans, curious, eager or both, headed west to see,
with their own eyes, what this new era and atmosphere was all about. Moreover, throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, some 50,000 to 100,000 young Americans fled the US in an effort to separate themselves from the Vietnam War effort. Most of these fleeing Americans ended up in Canada (Zinn, 1999), with Vancouver as Canada’s counterculture destination. The hippie population and community swelled. By May of 1967, the Vancouver counterculture had a voice in the form of the underground newspaper, *The Georgia Straight* (1997). In 1969, the Vancouver anti-war and anti-nuclear testing protest community (with significant support from the University of British Columbia (UBC) Alma Mater Society) organized a blockade of the Peace Arch Border crossing, a short bus ride south of the city, to show opposition to American nuclear testing slated for Alaska (Hunter, 1979). A fledgling organization called “Greenpeace” was born in Vancouver during this time, with the support of what was then known as the “Society for the Promotion of Environmental Conservation (SPEC)”, now the “Society Promoting Environmental Conservation” (Coates, 2016; “Environmental & Conservation Movements,” 2016). Politically active students and faculty at the local universities included Dr. David Suzuki at UBC, who was beginning to be recognized as both a scientist and an activist (Aronsen, 2010). In those years, there were massive “be-ins” at the local beaches: Jericho and Stanley Park. The psychedelic and rock music scene of touring bands and their followers started making its way north to Vancouver from California: The Steve Miller Band, The Grateful Dead, The Yardbirds, and other bands of the like played Vancouver regularly (Kluckner, 2006). It was an active, evolving alternate scene. There had been virtually no hippie culture in Vancouver before 1965, but that changed drastically and rapidly. By the summer of 1967, there was a whole new community in town. The counterculture movement and the City of Vancouver would be forever linked (Aronsen, 2013).
There were different levels of personal engagement, different motives for being a part of the counterculture. Some jumped in and made “hippie” their complete identity. Some kept to the fringes of the movement. Some were more interested in political activism and social advancement, while others wanted primarily to experience marijuana, LSD and free love; these interests were not necessarily mutually exclusive. There was no specific homogeneity; there was, however, a distinct and overt movement of change in reaction to mainstream values and conservatism that had, until then, been Vancouver’s norm. Along with the counterculture movement came a search for a new and alternative way to be in the world, and the distinction between the “square” and “freak” communities was quite obvious to those involved (Aronsen, 2010).

Throughout this activity, there was food. As with every culture, subculture or community, people eat. Much communication and sharing happens around meals, regardless of the scenario or era. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was no distinct “foodies” culture, as there is today. Nor was food as a concept intentionally separated and dealt with singularly in the story of community. However, food system awareness was on the rise. The first ever issue of The Georgia Straight contained a story about The Diggers and their world-view (Georgia Strait, 1997). Food, as time went on, became a medium by which different ideas were tested, alternative organizations built and ideologies expressed.

As with the story of San Francisco, it would be difficult to overstate the importance the role cooperatives (“co-ops”) as an organizational structure played within the 1970s counterculture in Vancouver, including in the food counterculture movement. Gail Cryer recalled the story of a friend who “…moved to The States and he was going to do a Master’s or PhD on food co-ops. Of course when he got there [it] must have been San Fran or something like that,
everyone was doing a Master’s on food co-ops!” (Cryer, 2013). Co-ops were particularly popular within the counterculture. They offered an alternative organizational model that, by its very nature, differed from the top-down hierarchy of typical business. This alternative structure invigorated the movement. Farms were organized as co-operatives, as were individual houses, and housing complexes, businesses, credit unions and more. There were even co-ops formed with the express goal of helping other groups organize co-ops. Activists like Amy Dalgleish, who were active on diverse fronts, fighting for women’s rights, environmental protection and more could see that within the co-op structure many causes of interest converged. Dalgleish was one of the instrumental activists behind the formation of the “Marginal Market Food Co-op” in Vancouver (Amy Dalgleish Memorial Endowment Fund, 2016, vancitycommunityfoundation.ca). There were significant numbers of activists interested in getting involved with the co-op movement; it was an effective rallying point that brought people together. And one co-op was often a member of another, larger co-op. For example, the Consumer Resource Society, or “CRS”, as it was known, began as a resource group in 1972, and later became a “workers’ co-op.” (Chaland, 2001). CRS had a mandate to help organize and form new co-ops pertaining to diverse projects (Cryer, 2013). When interviewed for this food counterculture project, Judy Harper smiled and said: “I don’t think we thought of it as a ‘food community’ particularly. It was more of a co-op community. For me, anyway, cooperatives were more the focus, rather than food per se…” (Harper, 2013).

The predominance of cooperative structures was a pervasive theme in all of the participant interviews. It is useful to differentiate between a workers’ co-op – where the business is controlled by its members and the members also do the “work” or labor, and a “consumer co-
op” - where the consumers of the co-op’s goods are members. In consumer co-ops, members usually pay a nominal fee to purchase from the business itself.

The intricacies of the cooperative landscape in Vancouver in the 1970s are quite extensive and beyond the scope of this project; suffice to say that there was significant overlap between food and co-op activism. The “cooperative” was a central institutional model for the food counterculture landscape in Vancouver in the 1970s. Though the movement is usually framed as being in opposition to the values of the state, certain events contradict that. Many co-ops of the era were started with financial assistance through grants or community funding originating from the public sphere (Cryer, 2013). Through the structural re-imagining of the retail component of the system, members of the counterculture food movement found ways to increase the availability of health food, both produced and supplied, in ways that were more respectful to the ideals of the movement. They developed food co-ops in resistance to capitalist business practices (LeMaistre, 2013).

Prior to the 1970s, food available to consumers was not particularly healthy, the typical diet wasn’t healthy, and even those who wanted to eat an alternative diet had limited options. For example, it was difficult to obtain whole-wheat flour in Vancouver, prior to the alternative food movement (LeMaistre, 2013). Before the 1970s, “Salads were: a wedge of iceberg lettuce, a cucumber and a tomato, and that was at the best restaurants in town” (Barbolet, 2013). The counterculture movement showed that food could be something new; vegetables could be prepared in a way that was delicious and interesting and good for you. It was through the counterculture movement that the dominant culture in the community was introduced to ethnic foods and the concept that food could be a lot more fun. It was also through the counterculture that the demand for organic or chemical-free foods evolved. The 1970s food movement afforded
an opportunity to take action based on one’s values. Repeatedly, political and value-based systems were translated from the ideological to the actual in the context of the 1970s food counterculture.

Michael Levenston remembers making this link. His focus was on conservation benefits that were within reach if one was willing and able to produce one’s own food in a garden in the city. Mr. Levenston’s primary connection to the food counterculture movement came through the lens of environmentalism. His personal revelation of food, and specifically in his case, food gardening, as a link and an access point to environmental preservation is something he regards as significant. He describes:

There were things involved in this that interested me, whether it was air pollution; garden, soil pollution; garden, community development: through community gardening […] all these things that appeal to me, that sort-of ‘do good’ for Canadian society,
I could get at through the garden. (Levenston, 2013)

That same sentiment, where one’s idealism or values are translated from concept to concrete actions comes up when Herb Barbolet describes his experience at a retreat he attended. Mr. Barbolet was politically active, as was his circle of friends and his community. They had been working on a few projects and had achieved some goals of community mobilization for various issues - but they had bigger ideas. He remembers:
We held a retreat at Camp Alexander, at Crescent Beach.

We were sitting around a fire one night and a group of us there, the women in the group said: ‘You guys, if you know it all, and you organize it all, how come you don’t live the way you talk?’ And we said: ‘uh-oh …uhm… shit.’ […] They were right, of course, and we formed Community Alternatives Society.

(Barbolet, 2013)

The Community Alternatives Society was a concept, based in co-op structure that linked communal housing in Vancouver with a rural farm site in Aldergrove, BC. The connection between people and where their food came from was central to the idea. It was one of the first attempts, if not the first, in Canada, to create an intentional, activist community that was both urban and rural at the same time. These were very radical ideas and the pathway wasn’t always smooth, but the application of philosophy and values and their translation into concrete projects was clear and effective. A place was being made for living in a new way, an ecologically responsible way, based on political and personal values.

Another significant story of intertwined co-ops is exemplified by the experiences at CRS workers’ co-op, the Fed-Up Co-op, and the East End Food Co-op. In the early 1970s, CRS was an anti-capitalist, politically motivated workers’ co-op with a goal of supporting and initiating new food organizations that could provide for the alternative community. Fed-Up was a food distribution co-op operating from a warehouse in Vancouver. Fed-up’s members were other co-ops, primarily back to the land communities in rural BC and Yukon. This was quite a complex operation that, by the mid-1970s, was seeing nearly a million dollars a year in food ordered by
the member network: purchased, re-divided, re-packed, and shipped to all corners of BC and the Yukon. Fed-Up was run with rotating, volunteer coordinators who would take turns coming in from their distant communities to learn for a week, work for a week, and then train the next volunteer for a week. The warehouse staff was made up of co-op member volunteers as well. There were near fifty rural buying clubs (co-ops) ordering through Fed-Up at the peak of its operation (Cryer, 2013; Harper, 2013).

Fed-Up’s distribution system worked well for the rural supply, but it was not particularly efficient in the urban context, where people were easily able to buy food at the local grocer. CRS and Fed-Up collaborated in alternative food distribution. CRS took on the task of organizing a cooperative storefront in East Vancouver to serve the alternative urban population. Thus, yet another co-op, The East End Food Co-op, was born. For the organizers, this store represented the manifestation of anti-capitalist sentiments. Members, who also did the work, owned the store equally. No one profited economically from people eating food. This initiative was an attempt to take the coop movement even further, beyond the structure of a consumer co-op. Structuring as a workers’ co-op was exciting for the CRS activist organizers involved in starting the East End Food Coop. With the same goal of having a hand in production, CRS started a fruit canning operation, a beekeeping business and a bakery (Uprising Bread Bakery). These initiatives all shared the goal of democratizing production and subverting capitalist norms by placing workers in the role of owner and operator (Cryer, 2013).

These CRS undertakings brought people and ideas together. For the people involved, community building and skill development for the people involved was very important. One primary philosophy underlying the workers’ co-op was that everyone needed to learn all the different roles in the operation. This meant that one week you might be doing bookkeeping,
while the next week you might be doing plumbing. There was a broad diversity of experience among members. The teamwork necessary to move the projects forward was significant. Through the process, many excellent friendships were formed. Mostly, it was intensely satisfying for the members who were at the center of the initiatives to “walk the talk” and build real-life, practical, working examples of a completely new way to live and relate to food. The opportunity to meet the needs of the community, such that the personal and communal politics of the movement were congruent, was very fulfilling. Judy Harper, who worked within the community, shared the emergent sense of agency she experienced:

Having something a bit bigger than your own personal life to believe in and work at… [It] makes your life a much richer thing. And things do begin to change, I mean, very slowly but I mean, it does! I think social change does happen, it may be slow, but it just gives people an idea of other possibilities that they might not have thought of before. […] Doing something for yourself, I think that was something back in the 70s. We were sort-of creating this organization and this whole structure of food distribution, we were creating it for ourselves. We didn’t need someone to do it for us. (Harper, 2013)

The Vancouver food counterculture movement in the 1970s was an environment of learning, trial and error, excitement and value-based decision-making. Members of the community were trying new things and putting political theory into practice as best they could. It
was a period of massive growth in food awareness. For many, it opened their eyes to the larger impact of food systems. It influenced personal lives regarding health and diet. The impact spread through the counterculture community (Barbolet, 2013; Cryer, 2013; LeMaistre, 2013).

Within the 1970s Vancouver food counterculture movement, themes of personal health and food agency, access, ecological awareness, governance, commerce models and social justice are central. For the study participants, as with the counterculture food movement in general, levels of engagement, topics of interest and motives were mixed. Some themes, however, were emphasized as primary, and overlapped. One of the most important motives for engagement was personal health. In the early 1970s, the availability of counterculture food staples such as whole grains, soy protein products and brown rice was extremely limited. As people learned more about nutrition and personal health from alternative perspectives, the demand for the foods of the movement increased, and people started to organize ways to access them. In addition, demand was increasing for goods produced in ecologically sensitive ways. Pesticide and chemical use in agriculture had put people off; they didn’t want to eat food that had been sprayed or treated in poison within the movement. Urban eaters started worrying about what rural farmers were doing to their food, and their planet. Another related issue of concern was excess food packaging. The demand for bulk alternatives to “plastic-food” increased greatly within the movement.

The counterculture demand for these alternative goods encouraged community members to organize food procurement strategies. The thought of circumventing the dominant market system to gain access to desired goods appealed to the values of the community. Many felt that corporations and private companies profiting from food was offensive and wrong. An alternative to the supermarket was sought and developed. Food cooperatives and buying clubs became very popular within the alternative community and increased in membership.
The members of the counterculture community were committed, brave, somewhat naïve and also very strong willed. They worked diligently and sacrificed significantly to make the gains they believed in. There was also a lot of fun to be had, and the experiences of self-determination and resistance to systems that were perceived as unjust was very rewarding (Harper, 2013). A big part of the food and co-op movement was geared toward challenging the norms of commodified labor and top-down hierarchical governance structures. There was a very political energy alive within the organizing and experimentation of the community (Cryer, 2013).

One significant challenge was that the co-ops and alternative management structures were formed in a greater capitalist context. Their impact was limited by the dominant values that engulfed them. Organizations that ran on anti-capitalist ideology, within a capitalist state, were by definition steeped in conflict. Despite this, the co-op model did flourish, and many were established. However, consumer co-ops, which challenged social structures to a lesser degree, were more likely to succeed and survive than the more radical workers’ co-op model. The CRS experience bore this out (Cryer, 2013). The needs of organizations based on the values of the counterculture community, at times, were simply too inefficient within a capitalist context to have much of a chance. Herb Barbolet provided the example of a restaurant that was opened with the values of the movement central to its operation:

[It] lasted until the management structures that evolved wound up being five different power centers. So, there was a consumer cooperative, and it was a cooperative, then there was a management coop, then there was a union and then there
was another management team that came and tried to
coordinate all the rest… that didn’t work. (Barbolet, 2013)

The experiences within this story repeated themselves in different food projects. Egalitarian ideology could be enough to stop projects all together, considering contextual capitalist demands.

In the evolution of the East End Food Co-op, at one point, there was a particularly contentious decision to be made. The core group of members was split on whether or not there should be a paid position instituted to help operational management. In many ways, this went counter to the philosophy of the CRS and co-op community. Gail Cryer recounts:

We did put a lot of effort into everyone knowing as
much as possible and certainly making the decisions
was everyone’s business […] when we started the food
co-op the name was going to be ‘Two Hundred and Forty
Storekeepers’ because we were going to be twelve collectives
of twenty people each […] each collective would run the store
one day a month, or one day a week, or whatever it was,
and in fact, we did do that! […] And we did that for a long,
long time, like years! …but it was crazy. (Cryer, 2013)

Over time, at the East End Food Co-op, the reliance on volunteerism started to wear thin.
Volunteering itself became too much of a time commitment. Some felt that volunteers had no accountability and that the constant training and retraining was tedious and prohibitively
inefficient. Others saw monetizing a position as counter to the vision of the project. Gail Cryer articulated the opinion of those within the co-op who resisted instituting a paid position at the time:

> It was still at the very beginning, and we were saying let’s try to do it with volunteers, we’ll keep costs down, we’ll all learn so much from it, we’ll learn how to manage a store and we’ll learn how to get along with each other. If we go to a hired manager, we’ll never be able to come back to this. If we stay with the volunteerism for a while longer, at any time in the future we can change. (Cryer, 2013)

The paid management position, in the end, was instituted, after many long meetings, discussions, arguments and a democratic vote. Slowly thereafter, the East End Food Co-op transitioned into a consumer cooperative, which is how it continues to operate today.

From a traditional business perspective, CRS’ other food production operations, the beekeeping project and the cannery, were also inefficient, and they ended up closing down as a result. These projects did last for some years but the costs prohibited them from being economically or socially sustainable. Uprising Breads Bakery was privatized, as was CRS in the end. There is irony that so much of the anti-capitalist sentiment of the time was so deeply connected to starting businesses and trying to manage them. In a sense, the lack of experience, business knowledge, disinterest in the entrepreneurial mindset and outright contempt for traditional capitalist business models cost some of the organizations their survival. In addition,
the rules of capital exist in capitalism. This came up with the CRS projects that ended up being privatized. Undercapitalization was a catalyst to the privatization of both Uprising Breads and CRS.

Ultimately, the impact of the food counterculture movement was absolutely significant. The community philosophically rejected the norms of the dominant food system. Within the movement, it was unacceptable that the food system provided in a way that contravened the ethics and values the counterculture was confronting. In reaction, the counterculture movement organized and built new models in resistance to practices deemed offensive and wrong. Those actions spurred enormous change in how our food systems began to be understood. The food counterculture movement has influenced how we eat to this day. Health food has gained legitimacy; the entire health food industry was basically born out of the counterculture. Organics and the North American vegetarian meal option are a result of that time as well. The 1960s and 1970s era was a great period for the spreading of consumer awareness and education (Vesanto, 2016). The massive increase of the availability of foods produced and sold in a way that put personal, social and ecological heath at the forefront of the food procuring process can be traced back to the counterculture era (Johnson, 2012). The concept that the act of eating could be ethical, and thus that supporting a food system that aligned with one’s values would then encouraged proliferation of those values, gaining salience thanks to this movement. The awareness of the benefits of holistically healthy food reached mainstream markets. That said, much of the political motive at the center of the movement remained fringe to the dominant culture. The counterculture did have impact but it did not significantly subvert capitalism. The larger goals and ideas of the food counterculture fell prey to what historian Warren Belasco
refers to as: “‘Hegemonic process’ – the way mainstream institutions confront, handle and tame subcultural dissent and deviancy” (Belasco, 2007, p. ix).

As this chapter illustrates, the food counterculture movement had a massive impact on our awareness of the interconnectedness among food, nature, health, justice, economics and our future. The ideas for a food system revolution, born in the counterculture, did not manage to supplant the dominant stream. However, dominant food systems were significantly influenced.

The next chapter outlines the consequences of the dominant food system’s ability to resist the foundational changes attempted by the food system activists of the 1960s and 1970s. I will share the experiences and perspectives of this study’s participants in regards to what came next in the story of food system sustainability, after the resistance of the 1960s and 1970s. The next chapter also includes knowledge and advice shared by the members of this study. This advice is directed specifically to the emergent food sustainability community of today, here in Vancouver, in light of how the social, ecological and economic contexts surrounding food activism have evolved since the 1960s and 1970s.
Chapter 5: Looking to where we’ve been, to see where we may go

Today, human impact on natural ecosystems has pushed us to a place that has compromised the future survival of our species, and many others. Despite that, our dominant food system operates on similar lines as the one the counterculture food activists of the 1960s and 1970s were working to change. It is unsustainable, as we know it today. Our dominant food system is one of the primary drivers of climate change and ecological destruction (Klein, 2014; Sage, 2012; Stiftung, 2014).

This chapter has three sections. In section 1, “The Post Counterculture Food System, Impact and Context”, through the literature review, unpacks the evolution of the dominant food system in relation to the globalization of markets guided by the neoliberal philosophies that have come to prominence since the end of the 1970s. In doing so, this section also outlines the contemporary social and ecological context facing food activists today. There is a community in Vancouver that is motivated to confront the elements in our society that perpetuate the dominant food system paradigm. There is a groundswell of interest in food justice and a desire to transition our food system to a sustainable one. The landscape is different. Current conversations echo the narratives of the food counterculture activists who participated in this study. I know this because I am a member of Vancouver’s food system sustainability community today. The participants in this study are, in essence, my elders. This chapter includes the presentation of data from study participants framed as a passing of knowledge and information from food activist elders to a member of a new generation concerned with food justice and food system sustainability today. The goal of an Oral History, which is the method I borrowed from in this interdisciplinary work,
is to understand interpretations and stories from our past, but also to help guide us in the future.

Section 2 of this chapter: “Listening to the Elders; Intergenerational Food Activist Advice, Looking Back to See Ahead”, presents my interview findings specifically framed as advice for the generation of new activists today. This section is written in the voice of an advisor. Some of the study participants remain active in the food justice movement since the end of the counterculture movement. All remain informed on food issues. Their perspectives may be valuable in the search for potential food-sustainability activism and strategies within the contemporary movement. The third section is a brief summary of the chapter.

5.1: The post-counterculture food system story: context and impact

As the counterculture wave lost momentum, as the 1970s faded, the winds of social revolution in North America tamed. During the counterculture movement, many causes and ideas were advanced for people and social groups that had been severely marginalized prior to the movement. This change was important but the dominant culture reorganized and reasserted power and influence. In the end, the forces that dominated prior to the 1960s and 1970s were not truly subverted. The counterculture had been a relatively unified, if somewhat disorganized movement, antagonistic to the values of the main stream. As it faded, however, it tended to evolve into pockets of issue-specific interest groups that prioritized particular causes over any larger system change (Gitlin, 1987). The power and values of the dominant system survived, and regained strength. The counterculture was not able sway enough minds to heed the warnings set forth by Rachel Carson in the early 1960s. By the 1980s, “...the radical hopes and trends of the 1960s had given way to the conservative ascendancy of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher”
By 1984, in a story that is indicative of the transition of the times, the iconic hippie herbal tea company, “Celestial Seasonings”, had been sold to mainstream food giant Dart & Kraft for close to 10 million dollars. The same fate held true for many alternative companies. Instead of growing into perpetuity and changing the world, the influence of the counterculture movement saw a decline (Aronsen, 2010). Herb Barbolet, a member of the counterculture movement in Vancouver, remembers the end of the hippie era and the change in ideology that swept in thereafter. There was a fast transition from the excitement and energy of the 1960s and 1970s to the dawn of the neoliberal era:

…and then came the eighties, and the ‘me generation’
and the song that was popular was ‘Look out for Number One’
[the doctrine of the] Chicago School of Economics, and…
the whole shift, Reagan, and Thatcher, and all that happened,
and within a couple of years it was all gone, and nobody remembered it… (Barbolet, 2013)

As modern, western capitalist ideology gained global influence in the 1980s and 1990s, the new wave of neoliberal values began to permeate and dominate much of the global political and economic order. Economist Paul Mason defines neoliberalism as follows:

Neoliberalism is the doctrine of uncontrolled markets:
it says that the best route to prosperity is individuals pursuing their own self-interest, and the market is the only way to express
that self interest. It says the state should be small (except for its riot squad and secret police); that financial speculation is good; that inequality is good; that the natural state of humankind is to be a bunch of ruthless individuals, competing with each other.

(Mason, 2016, p. 8)

The emphasis on liberalized trade, based on these values, became entrenched in 1994, the year the World Trade Organization (WTO) was established. WTO member states agreed that open markets, along with increased foreign investment and imports, were the best template for global trade. The door to trade liberalization was blown wide open. The European Union (EU) and the United States (US) appeased their local populations, to a certain degree, with protectionist policy that contrasted sharply to what the rich nations were demanding of the developing world. Goods flowed into poorer countries from the industrialized North and the entire system was set in motion by theories of competitive advantage. Poor countries were encouraged to buy from rich countries if the goods in question could be found at lower cost; local communities and small-scale industry suffered (Sage, 2012).

The dominant food system was embedded in this new neoliberal landscape. Giant agribusiness companies were ready for the new world order in the realms of farm technology and the products needed within the chemical farming paradigm (Sage, 2012). The emphasis on farm technology and mechanization in agriculture drastically affected the farm sector’s workforce. In the U.S. for example, the percentage of people employed in agriculture dropped from 16% in 1945 to 1.9% by the end of the 1990s (Federoff, 2015). By 2010, in Canada, less than 2% of the employed population was employed in agriculture (The World Bank Group, 2016).
Mechanization of farming provided higher yields and higher productivity (Blue, 2010). However, it also came in tandem with a much higher and more expensive baseline of farm inputs (McKenzie & Williams, 2015) that contributed to cycles of farmer debt (Feagan, 2007). Another major result of the twentieth century’s increased mechanization on farms was the inverse relationship that it had with working farm animals: there were fewer and fewer working animals as there began to be more and more machines. While there were cost savings on labor and animal husbandry, fixed costs of technical farm equipment are high. The process of mechanization was a boon for companies such as John Deere and the like: “By 1986, the top four [farm equipment] companies accounted for 80% of tractor sales in the USA” (Sage, 2012, p. 44). Total net sales and revenues at John Deere in 2008 were 28 billion dollars (Sage, 2012). The new farm paradigm, like much of globalization, was primarily of benefit to large, multi-national corporations.

The new neoliberal “normal” opened markets for established corporate powers in many ways and the “market-first” vision proliferated globally. Methods of agriculture from the dominant Western scientific perspective were set in motion from a market and export paradigm, damaging local food systems and local food security. Junk food became available, and cheaply. Patented seeds arrived on the market; the North had, largely via food, succeeded in exporting the “…prevailing economic paradigm of neoliberal free trade” (Sage, 2012, p. 23). It all happened very quickly. The architects of the experience framed it as a development strategy aimed at raising the poorest to a higher standard of living. However, those who actually benefitted most were local elites and foreign owned businesses (Klein, 2015).

Within the dominant paradigm, the meat industry flourished; animal product was primarily produced in enormous, concentrated facilities where the animals themselves were
conceived of exclusively as “units”, not living, breathing sentient creatures. The factory and the farm truly became one and the same. In Canada, 700 million food-animals are killed every year. In the U.S. the number is 10 billion annual kills (McLeod-Killmurray, 2012). Commodified meat is the norm.

While the factory-farm evolved to be our dominant production paradigm. It developed hand in hand with a devastating impact on our planet’s ecosystems.

We are affecting the planet’s atmosphere through anthropogenic GHG (green house gas) emissions and causing global climate change (Porter et al., 2014). Biologists claim that we are entering a period of mass species extinction. They project species extinction of between 20-50% within the next few decades (Stork, 2009). Human impact on ecosystems is responsible. The new ecological paradigm states that we are entering the sixth extinction event in our planet’s history; a devastation to a degree unseen since the Cretaceous extinction period, 65 million years ago (McCallum, 2015). It was reported in 2012 that the food system is responsible for 20-30% of global anthropogenic GHG emissions released into our atmosphere (Vermuelen, 2012). In 2014 it was reported that roughly 30% of the GHGs emitted could be traced to the direct and indirect production of agricultural livestock (Stiftung, 2014). The food system is the single greatest driver of climate change (Charlton, 2012; Klein, 2015; Sage, 2012).

In the shortest of time, humans, as a species, built a dangerous and unsustainable food system. We have done so by breaking our relationship with nature. We have forgotten that we are nature, and that our food is nature. We have habituated ourselves to making decisions from market-guided places. We have distanced ourselves from our food. We have disrespected the limits of biological systems. We have put short-term gain ahead of long-term planning. We have not prioritized ecological health, animal welfare or social justice. We have, in one hundred and
fifty years or so, built an unsustainable food system that resembles a machine more than anything else. As a result, we threaten our own survival and that of a multitude of species on this planet. This is the ground floor for current ecological and environmental activism. The primacy of impact linked to food makes food-sustainability activism a logical place to push against this enormous, terrifying circumstance.

5.2: Listening to the elders: intergenerational food activist advice; looking back to see ahead

This section of this chapter communicates my interpretation of the advice shared by 1960s and 1970s food counterculture participants in this study from a current perspective, to current food activists. I present this data using a singular voice of guidance. The information has been paraphrased and summarized for clarity, and to convey how I absorbed and heard the messages from these elders. The following content for this section derives directly from the interviews I conducted for this study. This is what I heard:

This is an era of fast moving information. There are more issues and causes to be engaged with and educated about than there will ever be time to know. Be careful of this. The fast moving pace of media today and the enormity of the task at hand are potentially overwhelming, and you’re no help to anyone, or to yourself if you are burnt out. There’s great value to doing things slowly, baking bread, making food for yourself and the people in your community, riding your bicycle. Whatever it is you do in order to keep yourself in health and balanced is justified; learn that about yourself (Cryer, 2013; Harper, 2013).
Food is an excellent starting point for any type of discussion. It is also a great medium around which to organize. Gardens, shared meals, farm events - these are great reasons to gather groups and to start educating and organizing (Barbolet, 2013; Levenston, 2013). There is a popular foodie movement today. On one hand, beware of the potential indulgence of that scene. It can be frivolous. However, it is not necessarily so. It is very valuable to connect with people over something you have in common, particularly if you are connecting with people who may not come from an activist paradigm. There is power to great food. To share food is a great way to connect with others, sharing a meal is a way to gain access to people, to connect with their lives, their beliefs. What is important, though, is to ensure you do not sacrifice the sustainability or food justice components of great food. Integrate with the foodie community if you are genuinely interested but do so with authenticity and be true to your work within the sustainability movement (Barbolet, 2013; Harper, 2013; Levenston, 2013).

Align sustainable food and healthy food. There are lots of people who are interested in nutrition, fitness and personal health. Those communities are accessible through food. Try to make sure ‘sustainable’ food and ‘healthy’ food overlap (LeMaistre, 2013; Levenston, 2013).

Educate and spread awareness about your cause actively and consistently. People want to learn. People want to eat good, tasty food that is produced in a way that’s not harmful to the environment. Be consistent in your message, plan your talking points with intent and refer back to them when necessary. Be willing to provide the “good news” story; with food, that is often where you will find yourself. When you are afforded a platform, through the media or otherwise: be prepared to share your message, and be effective. The interest in food issues comes and goes but it always seems to be close to the surface of the popular imagination, it truly connects us all.
Be actively strategic with your message, however, be very careful to avoid dogmatism and “green-washing”, they will set you back (Barbolet, 2013; Levenston, 2013).

Connect urban food initiatives to rural farms and agricultural communities. Urban food projects are very important for educational purposes, but never forget, rural food production is where nearly all farming happens. Do not build an urban food movement that omits, marginalizes or comes at the expense of rural farmers. Communicate and collaborate with as many different and diverse food producers as possible (Barbolet, 2013; LeMaistre, 2013).

Get involved with the democratic process and mobilize support. Learn how the system works and use existing policy effectively. Get elected yourself or get people elected to public office and social positions that increase the sphere of influence. Then make new, better policy. Understand the history of the farming and food in your region and beyond. There have been valuable wins already, the Agricultural Land Reserve and the Vancouver Food Policy Council, for example. Learn about them, get involved, and build upon them. Be aware, too, that just because you know someone or you yourself end up in a position of governance or power, it won’t mean your ideas will be put in place easily. It is very difficult to balance the diverse interests and agendas of diverse stakeholders, even when you are in charge. That said; do your best to achieve those positions or to help allies achieve them (Barbolet, 2013; LeMaistre, 2013).

Understand the capitalist landscape you are operating in. Knowing the rules of the game is imperative. Much activism relies on volunteerism. That is great but it is also a barrier. Vancouver is a very expensive place to live. The activist life is often a humble life. If you can find a way to make a living while doing the work, all the better, and people need to be able to earn a livelihood. Volunteer burnout is real, be careful of that without turning your back on volunteerism as an enriching experience and an important resource. Be creative, intentional and

Build community actively and rely on the strength and support true community and friendship brings. Have as much fun as you can. There is nothing more inspirational than a person who is inspired. Keep that thought close. If you are discouraged or down, reassess how you are spending your time and your efforts. Don’t be discouraged if change happens slowly. It does happen. In the process of activism, teach yourself to imagine a better tomorrow. Talk about utopias, try things, engage a creative fearlessness visualize a better tomorrow. Work toward that goal but do be cautious not to insulate yourself with like-minded people to such a degree that you are no longer challenging the dominant paradigm you set out to change in the first place (Cryer, 2013; Harper, 2013; LeMaistre, 2013).

The interview participants shared that today: “There’s just so much more to worry about … to try and change.” (Cryer, 2013). There is awareness of the ecological reality we are living, yet: “climate change issues are not being addressed on a significant enough scale in North America” (LeMaistre, 2013). However, participants also mentioned that one must not dwell only on the difficult side of the story: “You’ve got to give the positive and the negative together” (Levenston, 2013). The heightened level of awareness today of ecological and health issues, and the role of food in these spheres, in comparison to what the participants in this study saw in the 1960s and 1970s, cannot be overstated (Barbolet, Cryer, Harper, LeMaistre, Levenston, 2013). And yet there are still so many people who are coming to these issues for the first time (Levenston, 2013). “We need more awareness on every little bit of food that comes into this city … one of our major goals is to speak to the urban public, which is massive, about the production
of their food, anybody doing this … is a part of that huge awareness … there’s a ‘good’ there … We want the learning to continue” (Levenston 2013).

There are powerful organizations that were born out of the 1960s to 1970s counterculture in Vancouver that continue to work on social justice issues today: Greenpeace and SPEC are just two examples. The East End Food Coop still exists, as does Uprising Breads, and there are several housing coops in the city, started in the counterculture era, that are still functioning. New organizations and new voices have been directly created or influenced by activists since the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Vancouver now has a “Food Policy Council”. The establishment of this Council took years of planning and effort by teams of people, many of whom were active in the earlier counterculture movement (Barbolet, 2013). Diverse and new initiatives now exist that are geared to the betterment of the food sustainability movement (Levenston, 2013). In Vancouver, the Mayor and Council have declared intentions of making our city the “Greenest City in the world” (http://vancouver.ca/green-vancouver/greenest-city-action-plan.aspx). The young and vibrant food activism community that is alive in Vancouver today is not starting at square one. This community is largely built thanks to the effort and work of many who have contributed for years, and continue to contribute to the fight for a better tomorrow. As Gail Cryer observes: “A lot of things have grown from what we knew then” (2013). There are new avenues in academia and literature that combine with these experiences to bring us to a very interesting and well-informed place within the food sustainability movement in general, and in Vancouver in particular (Levenston, 2013).
5.3: Chapter summary

Today’s global landscape, from the perspectives of climate science and ecology can seem desperate and bleak. The path we have followed since the counterculture movement has been very destructive. On the other hand, we are armed with information and knowledge about what is causing our climate to change: it’s us. It is empowering that we are able, as a species, to change ourselves, although we do seem to find it difficult sometimes. We have knowledge from diverse streams and disciplines that provides potential solutions and avenues to change our food system to one with a sustainable future. Our study of agro-ecology, our critical scientific investigation, our attempts at sustainable food system education, our understanding of organic farming practices; these endeavors and more point to the massive commitment and effort undertaken in an attempt to modify and change our dominant food system and allow it to function without the dangerous impact it has today.

At the conclusion of his book: Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture took on the Food Industry, historian Warren Belasco makes a series of “if only” statements in regards to the food landscape of the 1960s and 1970s:

If only the food industry had spent more on research and less on ideological propaganda. If only politicians had appropriated more for exploring alternatives to agrichemicals. If only reporters had spent more time understanding rather than ridiculing those alternatives. If only the countercuisine hadn’t been quite so open to ridicule, so easily stereotyped,
so weakly grounded. If only those utopians had studied the mistakes and weaknesses of earlier food radicals…

(Belasco, 2007, pp. 245-246)

This quote speaks to me. In it, Belasco laments that the movement he was a part of did not listen to the food radicals that came before him. If we pay closer attention to our history today, maybe we don’t have to repeat some of the mistakes we can more easily identify with the benefit of hindsight. Elders of Vancouver’s food movement do have advice to share, and they have shown themselves more than happy to communicate it. Our present challenge is enormous. It is to make the “dominant food system” and a “sustainable food system” one and the same. We have no another option. It seems sensible to investigate our past as much as possible in our attempts to understand just how we might practically go about actively confronting and reinventing the unsustainable food system of today. This chapter is a piece of that investigation.
Chapter 6: Conclusion: The time is now, learning from experience and perspective

I have had some fantastic privileges within the context of this research project. I was able to sit down with some of the members of Vancouver’s 1960s and 1970s food counterculture movement and ask them to share information, perspectives, stories and advice. I am grateful for their time and I personally take their words to heart in my parallel work as an urban farmer, food systems educator and activist. Often, when I think about how far we have to move our food system in order to reduce its negative impact and shift it to a place that is sustainable, I feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. Speaking with my elders about their experiences has, however, helped me gain some much-needed perspective. Current activists, sacrificing and working in order to make a better future, are links in an intergenerational chain of the like-minded. It feels good to know that.

My experience as a researcher, regarding this project, has been difficult at times and very fulfilling at others. Some of the most important lessons I have learned run alongside the material but don’t factor in it all that prominently. For one, I was gently reminded that my generation did not invent the values of sustainability. Of course we didn’t, but the dominant systems in our world so often feel so powerful, so huge and omnipresent it can feel sometimes feel like we are the first to push back. We are not, and there is strength in that. Dominant narratives often fail to capture the stories of resisters. We don’t always get to hear the stories of those who came before, and fought against its development of the dominant paradigm along the way. Often neglected, in the dominant food system narrative, are the many stories of cultures and communities that developed low-impact, reliable, subsistence-based food systems all over the globe. To assume that the dominant story is the only story is a grave and dangerous cliché. This project makes
space for the lessons and experiences of one of those communities of resistance. Those who experience resisting the dominant path in previous times have knowledge that can inform the current version of the fight.

This project was made possible in part because of the willingness of two senior professors of the Faculty of Land and Food Systems (LFS), Dr. Arthur Bomke and Dr. Alejandro Rojas, to try something different. Their encouragement to try something new, a project that crossed disciplines and reflected who I am as a person, allowed me to pursue this knowledge and experience. I am also very grateful to have had the opportunity to get to know and work with Historian Dr. Coll Thrush for this project. He has acted as my guide and my mentor through the machinations of it all. He also helped me see our world in a different way.

On a few occasions, through my role as a teacher’s assistant for the core undergraduate series in my faculty: Land, Food and Community, I had the chance to invite Dr. Thrush to come across campus to speak to LFS students about his work and about what seeing the world through the lens of a Historian can bring. Dr. Thrush, on a couple occasions, asked me to assist him in his lectures. My job was quite literally to hold a rock on one side of the room. Dr. Thrush had tied a long string to that rock. He’d tied another rock to the other end. He would unwind the string so it stretched clear across the front of the lecture hall. Dr. Thrush would then solicit a volunteer from the class to hold the other end. The string became a metaphor for the timeline of the earth’s History, where one end was the creation of the planet, and the other end was present day. Dr. Thrush would walk down the timeline of our planet and stop to point out and explain where significant events took place, in time. He would pack all of human history into one end of the string. The story of dangerous human impact on the planet that threatens its ecosystems was represented by the tiniest of slivers in time, right at the ‘present day’ rock. It was an effective
teaching tool for me. In a sense, our species is a baby on this planet. Our recognition that we are powerful enough in our actions to endanger the planet’s carrying capacity and biological systems is very, very recent. It makes some sense that we have not yet solved this dilemma. Dr. Thrush is quick to point out that this perspective does not mean we have all the time in the world to realign our balance with nature, all the opposite. What was able to convey though, is that the rate of change, historically has been much slower than what we are seeing now. We have only been an unsustainable species for a minute amount of time. Many people are working on fixing our global imbalance. All we can do is try to apply the knowledge we have gained and use the tools at our disposal to work toward a better tomorrow.

Naomi Klein, in her extensive investigation of the causes and potential solutions to the climate crisis, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Versus the Climate*, concludes that: “only mass social movements can save us now. Because we know where the current system, left unchecked, is headed” (Klein, 2014, p. 450). Though Klein readily admits that there is not a perfect historic analogy for the climate crisis, she nonetheless looks to the past for examples of social justice movements as examples of what is needed today. She also reminds us that the fight never stopped:

All these past movements, in one form or another, are still fighting today – for full human rights and equity regardless of ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation; for real decolonization and reparation; for food security and farmers’ rights; against oligarchic rule; and to defend and expand the public sphere.

(Klein, 2014, p. 458)
This is very important for contemporary activists to understand. We are not starting a new fight. We start from a place that has been made possible for us by those who fought before. One of the most consistent and powerful assertions by the participants of this study is that there has been a dramatic increase in food systems awareness in their lifetimes. This awareness reaches deeply into the mainstream today. Jim LeMaistre remembers the first days of the East End Food Co-op: “I think a lot of people who weren’t involved thought it was a bunch of hippie freaks talking about strange foods” (2013). That attitude has changed. What were “strange hippie foods” are now normal foods. Without the willingness of the food activists of the 1970s to seek alternatives then, food-sustainability projects of today would not exist as they do.

In the early 1960s, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* presented us with a choice: we could continue on the ecologically destructive path we were on, or we could chose something new, something that might change the future, and make it more likely to be bright (Carson, 1962). We did not, as a culture, make the right choice. Thirty years later in 1992, at the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio, twelve year-old Vancouver activist Severn Cullis-Suzuki gave a speech to the international delegates in attendance. It later became known as “The Speech that Silenced the World” – she stood steadfast in front of an auditorium of our world’s leaders and spoke truth to power:

…You don’t know how to fix the holes in our ozone layer, you don’t know how to bring the dead salmon back up a dead stream. You don’t know how to bring back an animal, now extinct. And you can’t bring back
the forest that once grew, where there is now a desert.

If you don’t know how to fix it, please, stop breaking it.

[…] Do not forget why you are attending these conferences, who you’re doing this for. We are your own children. You are deciding what kind of a world we are growing up in. Parents should be able to comfort their children by saying: ‘everything’s going to be alright, it’s not the end of the world, and we’re doing the best we can’. But I don’t think you can say that anymore. Are we even on your list of priorities?

My dad always says: ‘you are what you do, not what you say.’ Well, what you grown-ups do makes me cry at night. You grown-ups say you love us but I challenge you, please, make your actions reflect your words. (Cullis-Suzuki, 1992 www.youtube.com)

That speech was nearly twenty-five years ago. The 1992 Rio Earth Summit was, at the time, the largest and most important international gathering aimed to address human impact on the environment. Still, our dominant systems stayed the course, in many cases intensified, and our negative ecological impact worsened. The time for effective action and change is overdue. Sustainability cannot remain a fringe priority. It must overlap with dominance and become a unified goal, first and foremost, if we are to ensure any sort of prosperity for future generations on our planet.

In the gathering of this research, I have placed myself as an ear for the younger food activism community in Vancouver. I hope to have done so with humility and a degree of tact that
respects both my peers and those who were approached to share their experiences of activism some thirty-five years ago or more. My challenge and responsibility now, with this work, is to share what I have learned in a way that is accessible and honest with anyone who may want to listen. My goal, from day one, has been to create a working document that stimulates conversation, encourages action and ultimately change. How exactly I will do that I have not yet figured out. I am already in a position of humble influence within the current sustainable food system, activist community in my city. My goal now is to act as a go-between of sorts with the information the participants in this study shared with me, and my community at large.
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Looking to Vancouver's elders: How the city's 1970s food counter-culture story connects to and informs the contemporary incarnation of said movement: A Qualitative Study

Consent Form (Page 1 of 2)

Who is doing this study?

Principal Researcher:

Dr. Coll Thrush, Professor
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Co-Researchers:

Dr. Alejandro Rojas, Professor
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Co-investigator (contact person):
Camil Dumont
University of British Columbia

Why are we doing this study?

We are research team working with the University of British Columbia and are interested in learning how Vancouver’s 1970s food counter-culture story connects to and informs the contemporary incarnation of said movement. We are trying to understand local food counter-culture issues in a complete and complex narrative. This research is being conducted as part of Camil Dumont’s Master’s thesis.

Who can participate in this study?
If you were active in the public sphere of Vancouver’s food counter culture social movement during the 1970s, and you are fluent in English, then you can participate in this study.

**What are we asking participants to do?**

If you consent to participate in this study and return the signed consent form, you will be contacted by Camil Dumont, Co-investigator, to set up an initial interview. The initial interview takes approximately two to three hours. There may also be a follow-up interview of one to two hours. The interviews will be audio recorded. Notes will be taken from the audio recording. The interview questions are designed to learn more about your experience and participation in the Vancouver food counter-culture movement during the 1970s. Participants will be given the opportunity to review, clarify and possibly expand upon or redact the information from the interview notes.

**Confidentiality**

Given that your eligibility for this study is based on being in the public sphere, you may be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. Therefore, at the time of the interviews, you will be given the opportunity to request that the information collected in the interviews be kept confidential. The principal researcher owns the completed interview recordings and notes and only the research team has access to them.

**Participation**

If you agree to participate in this study:
1. any questions you have related to the study will be answered;
2. you have the right to contact Dr. Thrush or his associates at the above numbers and request the study findings when they are available;
3. your participation is voluntary, you may refuse to answer any questions which are of concern to you and you may withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences to you;
4. you will be offered the opportunity to review, clarify and possibly expand upon or redact the information from the interview notes;
5. you may request an audio-recording of your interview(s);
6. you may request a transcript of your interview(s).

If you have any concerns about your rights or treatment as a research participant, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

____________________________________  __________________________________________
Signature                                                                 Date

____________________________________
Printed Name
Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Guidelines

1. How would you describe your role in the 1970s food counter-culture movement?

2. What did you do?

3. What motivated you to get involved?

4. Who else was involved?

5. Did you feel supported by your community? How?

6. Was your experience different from the “mainstream”? How?

7. Did you have larger scale goals? If yes, what were they?

8. How did the local Vancouver food counter-culture movement fit into a large context?

9. What were your hopes?

10. What were the obstacles, if any, that you faced? Within the movement? Or outside the movement?

11. How do you think you were perceived by others within the movement? - outside of the movement?

12. Were there successes? What were they?

13. Were there failures? What were they?

15. What is your involvement in food issues today?

16. Why has your involvement changed, if it has?

17. What connections do you see between food issues today and those of the 1970s?

18. Do you feel that you influenced change? How?

19. Do you feel that the food counter-culture movement lost momentum in the 1980s and 1990s? If so, why do you think that happened?

20. Do you think that there has been a resurgence or a gaining of momentum in the last decade or so? If so, what do you attribute that to?

21. What, if anything, encourages you about today’s food counter-culture movement?

22. Does anything discourage you or worry you about today’s movement?

23. Have food issues changed since the 1970s? How so?

24. Have any food issues remained the same? Which ones?

25. What advice would you give to young people who are concerned about food issues?

26. Is there a forum where you share your opinions and knowledge with younger food activists?

27. How do you feel about the latest incarnation of the food counter-culture movement?
28. Are there any current food issues that are not being addressed that you feel should be? If so, what are these concerns?

29. Do you have hopes for the future of the movement?

30. Is there anything you feel you would like to share about your experience of the food counter-culture movement then and now?
Appendix C: Participant Biographies

*Herb Barbolet* has a personal and professional background in community development, planning and political economy. He became more involved in food issues specifically after the formation of the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) by the British Columbia provincial government in 1973. Mr. Barbolet’s initial involvement focused on issues of farmland protection, farmer advocacy and the urban-rural divide in BC. He has spent much of his career working on food-systems issues and policy and has become one of BC’s most prominent food activists. Mr. Barbolet was a founder of Farm Folk City Folk, and has been connected to and consulted on multitudes of community initiatives and formations of non-profit organizations. He also worked in the production sector of food systems and was a member of the farm that introduced mixed “baby-greens” salads into Vancouver and the lower mainland.

*Gail Cryer* initially became involved with the food counterculture community in Vancouver in the mid 1970s when she connected with grass-roots organizers who were interested in expanding the Vancouver food cooperative movement, from wholesale, distribution and retail perspectives. She was central in CRS (Consumer Resource Services) and remained involved with that organization for many years. Gail was one of the original members to start the East End Food Co-op. She worked in the cooperative food community to increase the availability of healthier, more ethically produced food for Vancouvierites through organizations that incorporated social justice into their framework.

*Judy Harper* had lived on Lasqueti Island, in the Georgia Straight, from roughly 1971-1977, as part of the “back to the land” movement. From Lasqueti Island, Judy’s community would order healthy food through a Vancouver-based cooperative distributor called Fed-Up. While living on Lasqueti, Ms. Harper would travel to Vancouver and volunteer at Fed-Up as part
of the co-op membership agreement. In 1977, she relocated to Vancouver more permanently and became one of the earliest employees of that co-op. Judy remained in the natural food distribution industry until her recent retirement. She has is an avid food and flower gardener and has lived in a communal cooperatively run household in Kitsilano for over thirty years.

Jim LeMaistre was involved in community work and planning in the lower mainland and spent some of his professional career with the BC Ministry of Agriculture. In the early 1970s, he lived in a communal home in Vancouver that purchased much of its dry goods from a cooperative buying club. Mr. LeMaistre was involved with the coordination of purchasing for his household and became implicated in a project to open a retail storefront, the East End Food Co-op, to better meet the needs of urban Vancouverites seeking healthy, alternative food.

Michael Levenston was introduced to food counterculture from a conservationist perspective. He was studying and working in energy conservation, in response to the energy crisis of the 1970s. In a working group, a colleague suggested investigating the connection between urban food production and energy conservation at both the household and systems levels. Research on backyard gardens, primarily in immigrant communities in Vancouver, was shown to align with the goals of energy conservation and the environmental movement. As a result, Mr. Levenston and some of his colleagues formed “City Farmer”, an organization designed to share knowledge regarding ecological conservation with Vancouver urbanites through workshops, demonstrations, advocacy, research and multimedia. Mr. Levenston continues his work with City Farmer today.