

**Sowing the seeds of a collective autonomy: An analysis of post-capitalist possibilities in food-based livelihoods**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral  
Affairs in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

Carleton University  
Ottawa, Ontario

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation explores the existence and diverse manifestations of post-capitalist possibilities within food-based livelihoods in Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec. Highlighting the experiences, motivations and relationships of farmers interested in a food economy 'done differently,' my research analyzes how these possibilities are reconciled with day-to-day negotiations of making a living. Food has long been a driver and tool of social change, however, in recent years there has been a groundswell of interest in food provisioning as a site of social and economic experimentation in both academic and popular discourse. This excitement is juxtaposed against an increasingly difficult situation for farmers, as they struggle to stay afloat in the face of an often hostile political and economic climate. Farmers offer a unique vantage point to explore post-capitalist possibilities because their experimentation and envisioning of alternatives is deeply grounded within their livelihood and the challenges they face to sustain it.

Drawing on new theoretical and analytical tools provided by poststructuralist approaches to political economy and ANT, as well as the diverse economies and Alternative Food Network literatures, this project calls for an understanding of the economy and food provisioning that is situated and in flux, holding space for the material needs of survival as well as the values, desires and relationships that give our lives and livelihoods meaning. Through in-depth conversations with farmers, as well as interviews with key stakeholders in alternative and local food movements, and an auto-ethnographic analysis, my project curates a collection of stories and experiences that speak to a particular kind of farm, farmer subject and food network within a diverse and complex food landscape. This research suggests that the kind of experimentation taking place points towards an emerging collective autonomy: post-capitalist possibilities based in a disengagement from hegemonic forces and structures by building relationships of mutual aid and reciprocity and a collective sense of self. Through a complex process of coping and prefiguring, these farmers are finding innovative ways to make ends meet that are both reactive and transformative in their orientation.

## **Acknowledgements**

Undertaking a PhD can feel like an incredibly solitary and lonely journey, and yet you find yourself nearing the end with a long list of individuals to thank for their support and encouragement, realizing you were in fact not alone at all.

Thanks Mom, Dad and Gabby for the words of wisdom, copy editing skills and delicious Sunday dinners.

Thank you Janet, I could not have asked for a more supportive and committed supervisor. You have always had my back, all the while offering helpful insight and nudges to improve my work.

Thank you Wally, Peter and Mike for being such an engaged and “student centred” committee, as Janet says. Thank you to Paula, Marlene and Kaitlin for indulging my, often last-minute and slightly frantic, email requests.

Thank you friends who offered words of encouragement and a reminder of the wonderful world away from my dissertation. Thank you Punch Up Collective for bringing such camaraderie and inspiration to my life this past year.

Thank you Alex, for all the little and big things and everything in between.

Last but certainly not least, thank you to the farmers who shared their time, their thoughts and their dreams for a different world and a different kind of food system. Your persistence and perseverance is an inspiration.

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## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

This is a project about possibilities and potential, and the process of weaving those possibilities into present day realities and lived experience. It is also a project about farming, about those who farm and what alternatives they seek to enact through their work. It originated out of a desire to understand how we can prefigure alternatives to capitalism in the here and now; and how farming has become fertile ground for these kinds of experimentations.

I am not alone in exploring these issues. In recent years there has been a renewed interest in alternatives to capitalism, most notably from scholars utilizing poststructuralist approaches to the economy (Leyson and Lee 2003; Gibson-Graham 1996; 2006; Williams 2005; Peterson 2006). Leyshon and Lee (2003), editors of *Alternative Economic Spaces*, suggest that while 1995-2000 was one of the longest periods of sustained growth in the history of capitalism, it was also during this time that “new theoretical and practical challenges to global capitalism arose to plant seeds of doubt in the minds of those who believed that the spread of neo-liberalized, global capitalism to all parts of the world was inevitable” (2003: 3). Through a re-reading of the economy that situates the hegemony of capitalism as in part a discursive product, rather than an absolute material reality, these perspectives make visible a rich diversity of economic practices that were previously unacknowledged (Gibson-Graham 1996). In particular, Gibson-Graham's concept of a diverse economy, where capitalism is but one of many economic rationalities, has served as a focal point for academics interested in an economic analysis beyond the capitalist canon (Cameron and Gordon 2010; Dixon 2010; Traugger and Passidomo 2012).

At the same time, the concept of Alternative Food Networks has gained a lot of traction amongst scholars analyzing efforts by consumers and producers to reform, circumvent or transform conventional food systems (Andrée et al 2010; Jarosz 2008; Hinrichs 2000; Holloway et al 2007a). Growing concerns over health issues and contaminated food scares, the effects of globalization and environmental degradation, issues of access and food deserts (among others) have led many to question conventional food systems and seek alternative means of provisioning their food. As Morgan et al. write “the field of food provision has become one of the most controversial in the political arena as well as at the level of everyday life” (2006: 3). Indeed, food is a lightning rod for a multitude of issues and political projects, as both a tool and site of social transformation.

### ***1.1 A Challenging Agricultural Landscape***

All of this interest comes at a time when agriculture is undergoing a series of profound shifts. Farming has never been easy or particularly lucrative, but the situation for farmers has undoubtedly been getting worse. Farmers find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place, a reality that has forced many out of farming entirely<sup>1</sup>. Soaring land prices, coupled with increasing input costs and stagnant incomes have squeezed farmers financially to a point where, aside from large industrialized farms or those producing for highly specialized niche markets, many farms are not actually making any money. In 2011, there were 205,730 farms in Canada, down ten percent from 2006

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<sup>1</sup> The category of farmer can include a wide variety of people. My own definition of a farmer is anyone who makes a part of their livelihood from growing food, which can include small hobby farms and large corporate farms. Statistics Canada defines a farm operator as “[t]hose persons responsible for the management decisions in operating an agricultural operation. Can be owners, tenants or hired managers of the agricultural operation, including those responsible for management decisions pertinent to particular aspects of the farm — planting, harvesting, raising animals, marketing and sales, and making capital purchases and other financial decisions.” (2012:np).

(Statistics Canada 2011a); most of that loss coming from small farms. Between 2006 and 2011 there was a 6% increase in the amount of large farms (with gross receipts of over \$500,000) and 11% reduction in farms with receipts less than \$500,000 (Statistic Canada 2011a).<sup>2</sup>

Winson argues that Canadian agriculture underwent a series of fundamental changes beginning in the 1950s. Brought on by technological and economic developments, this shift had “profound social and political consequences for the farm community and beyond” (1993: 89). Farmers were faced with a “cost-price squeeze” (where the costs of producing farm commodities were not keeping pace with the returns farmers received for producing that product), while tractor-use was becoming more widespread as was the use of chemical farm inputs. We also began to see growing corporate concentration in food processing, coupled with a shift in power towards food processors and away from farmers. The result according to Winson, was a social differentiation within the Canadian farming community, where some farmers chose (and were able) to take advantage of new productivity opportunities and adapt to changing prices while others were unwilling or, more likely, not able to do so (1993:90).

These are trends that continue to reverberate within Canadian agriculture today. For example, while overall revenue is increasing on Canadian farms, the actual net income of farmers remains the same (NFU 2011b:8). Part of the problem is that farmers have not seen an increase in the prices they receive for their products. The retail cost of food products has risen steadily in the past 30 years, however, the prices paid to farmers has stagnated over the same time period (Qualman and Tait 2004). In 2011 the average net income for farm families in Canada was \$110,563, a figure that initially does not

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<sup>2</sup> These numbers are adjusted to reflect 2010 constant prices

seem very alarming. However, the vast majority of that, \$83,609, comes from off-farm income. Government program support and adjustments for capital cost allowance account for roughly another \$24,000. What we're left with is a negligible \$2,280 (StatsCan 2011b). To put that number in perspective, according to the NFU's 2011 report on Ontario farmers, "adjusted for inflation, the realized net farm income today is less than it was during the Great Depression" (NFU 2011a: 11). It should thus not be surprising that in 2010, 48% of all farmers<sup>3</sup> reported having an off-farm job (Statistics Canada 2011a). In fact, what is surprising is that this number is not higher. Having an off-farm income as part of the overall farm household income is a long-standing practice of many farms, however, the number of farms with an off-farm income has increased, as has the contribution of these monies to the overall household income. Jetté-Nantel et al. note that "between 2002 and 2006, the share of total income originating from off-farm sources for operators of unincorporated farms (with gross farm revenue of \$10,000 and greater) grew from 55% to 62%" (2011:1). One farmer I spoke to recalled a story another farmer told him illustrating the evolving role of off-farm income:

I had a friend who started working off the farm, in the 80s, to be able to afford going on a holiday once in a while. And then in the 90s she was still working off the farm and it was to help cover the cost of clothes and those sorts of things. And then in the 2000s she was working off-farm to cover the farm bills. Right?

A key challenge is that the market value of farmland continues to rise every year in Canada. In 2010, the value of Canada's farm capital (which includes land, farm buildings and livestock) rose 5% from 2009; due in large part to the steady increase in the value of land. In Ontario the value of an acre of farmland in 2010 was \$5,062, a decade earlier its value was pegged at just over half that, or \$2,964 (Statistics Canada 2011c).

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<sup>3</sup>This number refers to the primary farmer, not just a member of the farm family.

This makes it particularly difficult for new farmers wanting to access land for the first time, or farmers looking to expand their land base. In part because of these rising land prices and farm inputs costs, farmers are increasing their debt load every year. Statistics Canada has identified outstanding farmer debt as Canada at \$66.4 billion at the end of 2010 (the most recent data available). That's an average of \$322,753 per farm<sup>4</sup>, nearly triple the average household debt.<sup>5</sup> The financial sector appears only too happy to finance growing farming operations and reap the interest payments, regardless of the long term implications of this debt load on the viability of these farms (NFU 2011a: 14).

Martin and Andrée suggest that Canada is at the “heart of the neoliberal global food system” (2014:173). In recent years the Conservative government has pushed through several policy changes that have negatively affected farmers. In the summer of 2012, the government passed a bill ending the Canadian Wheat Board's monopoly over the sale of grain, making way for a “free market” for Canadian wheat farmers. As I write this, the Conservatives are pushing Bill C-18 through Parliament, a bill that would take even more power away from farmers and increase their reliance on seed companies. The Canadian government is also currently pursuing a free trade agreement with Europe (CETA) which some farm organizations and civil society groups fear would further erode farmers' ability to save seed and restrict procurement policies that promote local food (NFU 2012:8<sup>6</sup>).

What many have dubbed the “farm crisis” in Canada is not solely attributed to the current government. To the contrary, the shifts in government policy towards export-oriented production and deregulation have their roots in the 1980s if not further back.

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<sup>4</sup> In 2011 there were 205,730 farms in Canada (Statistics Canada 2011a).

<sup>5</sup> The average household debt in Canada was \$110,000 in 2009

<sup>6</sup> This information is also based on personal observation from CETA working group meetings.

Qualman and Wiebe liken the policy shifts implemented by the Canadian government in agriculture to an IMF Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). As they forcefully argue:

[m]any Canadians think that the IMF and World Bank apply their structural adjustment programs only in countries such as Korea, Jamaica, Peru, or Argentina. The Canadian government, however, has restructured agriculture and rural Canada using policy tools remarkably similar to those of the IMF/World Bank. In Canada, the instruments of structural adjustment have been the WTO, the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (CUSTA), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and an ideologically-driven campaign of deregulation, privatization, and budget-cutting by governments beginning in the 1980s (2002: 4).

These policies have meant an emphasis on production for export, deregulation, reductions in public spending on agriculture and an agro-food chain increasingly dominated by large corporations. While the resources and technology to produce food efficiently exists like never before, it is increasingly difficult for Canadian farms to survive financially. As we will cover in this thesis, even niche, value-added sectors of agriculture, such as local and organic, are not immune. These statistics and trends are not meant to suggest that farming as a whole is no longer viable in Canada, but that smaller farmers in particular are facing an increasing number of obstacles that it difficult for them to survive.

### ***1.2 The Research Project***

It is from within this rich constellation of debates and discussions that my project has taken shape: investigating the potential for, and existence of, postcapitalist possibilities within food-based livelihoods. On the one hand, farming is a difficult industry to survive in; but on the other, food production is the site of much social and economic experimentation. How do these two phenomena interact in a meaningful way? Specifically, how are experiments in postcapitalist possibilities reconciled with day-to-day negotiations of making a living? As the trends above suggest, the prospects for the future of agriculture in Canada are less than encouraging. Yet despite this, farmers

continue to farm, to produce food and find ways to make ends meet. How do farmers interested in non-capitalist possibilities create and incorporate them into their livelihood? An argument could be made that nearly all farmers are compelled to engage in non-capitalist activities in some way or another, as a matter of survival. However, this research focuses on farmers with an active, conscious commitment to doing things differently; taking things not as they are, but imaging and acting toward what they could be.

The central argument framing this thesis is that farmers can and do enact a diversity of postcapitalist possibilities through their work, their identities and their relationships with others. Through an examination of a group of farmers, their farms and their broader food networks, I argue we can see the emergence of a collective autonomy. By collective autonomy I mean postcapitalist possibilities that are based in a disengagement from hegemonic forces and structures, seeking to create relationships of mutual aid and reciprocity, and a collective sense of self. This collective autonomy is pursued through a complex mobilization of coping and prefiguring strategies, whereby farmers are finding ways to make ends meet that are both reactive and transformative in their orientation. Put differently, they are simultaneously coping with the present world, while working to enact an altogether different one.

My research starts with the assumption that we operate within a diverse economy, where capitalism is but one of several economic production systems and economic rationalities in existence. The question that drives this inquiry then, is not, *are* there alternatives to capitalism in food provisioning, but rather, what kinds of postcapitalist experimentation is occurring and what kinds of possibilities are being created? By

exploring the economic activities and relationships that challenge conventional experiences and identities under capitalism, I highlight both the economic diversity currently in existence and encourage its further development. This leads to an exploration of both the ethics and actions of individuals, and the relationships and networks that form between individuals and groups.

When I first became interested in the idea of a diverse economy, I was very focused on enterprise models and organizational structures as the key element to strengthening non-capitalist possibilities. However, I've come to recognize the importance of what Gibson-Graham (2006) call a process of becoming: the process of shedding our old identities and ways of viewing the world to be capable of imagining, enacting and valuing possibilities other than capitalism. They emphasize not only collective experimentation, but the cultivation of ethical subjects capable of enacting and desiring these possibilities (Gibson-Graham 2006:xxiii). The process of unlearning capitalism is just as significant as creating different ownership structures or labour relationships. As a result, imagining and enacting a diverse economy can be considered both as a collective effort done in collaboration with others, and a deeply personal and individual path of transformation. I want to understand how these farmers approached their work as farmers, why they did what they did and how they valued their labour. By shedding light on the social and cultural dynamics that underpin material networks and relationships, I hope to illustrate the importance of cultivating non-capitalist ways of being as a central component of imagining and enacting diverse possibilities in food provisioning.

To investigate these issues I engaged in an iterative research process, the primary

component of which is a series of interviews with small-scale organic farmers in Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec. Through these conversations, as well as scoping interviews with key stakeholders in alternative and local food movements and an auto-ethnographic analysis, my project curates a collection of stories and experiences that speak to a particular kind of farm, farmer subject and food network within our diverse and complex food landscape. These farmers have created several important openings of postcapitalist possibilities, in their actions, intentions and identities. While each farm is unique in its own way, there are several commonalities to their experience and practice of food provisioning that point towards a common pursuit of collective autonomy outside the dominant food system. Each of these farms tells a story of resilience and perseverance, taking on the difficult task of not only imagining a world other than the one we currently live in, but working to incorporate such possibilities into their day-to-day lived experience. Their stories are also a reminder that the cultivation of these possibilities face many challenges and limitations. As I shall argue, without further collective intervention and support, these possibilities risk being limited to those who have the privilege to experiment.

Food provisioning is an enticing area to explore possibilities outside of capitalism in part because it occupies a seemingly contradictory place in society. In some ways food and farming are highly capitalistic; Goodman and Redclift (1992) refer to food as the “ultimate commodity.” And yet, in other ways, farming operates as a small but persistent thorn in the side of capitalism. Theories of agriculture's integration into capitalism are complicated by the existence of peasants and small farms, what Hetherington (2005:21) calls the “not-quite-capitalism of small-scale agriculture.” As Winson asserts:

Despite the trend in capitalist economies towards large-scale enterprises and away from family or artisan labour working alone in small groups, the production of food stands apart from the production of most other commodities in that much of it is accounted for by a numerically significant and politically influential population of small commodity producers (1993:7).

While the number of small commodity producers has certainly decreased since the publication of Winson's work in 1993, his overall thesis continues to hold weight. Even in its commodity form, food brings people together, while most commodities have the effect of fragmenting social life (Winson 1993). The crucial role that food plays in our social transactions and interactions led Winson to refer to food as an “intimate commodity.” Food is something that literally becomes a part of us by ingesting it, and it is also essential to our survival, two qualities that few other commodities possess (1993:4).

### ***1.3 Theoretical and Discursive Points of Departure***

Coming into the project my interest lay not only in how these possibilities were organized, and acted out, but how we understand and talk about them. The words and language we use are important both because they help us understand what we are researching, but also because they help to shape the very thing we are studying. As Martin and Andrée assert, drawing on Fairbairn: “how we structure our understanding of the world through language helps to define what can or cannot happen next” (2014: 176).

Recently there was a story published by CBC News about extreme abuse allegations at Canada's largest dairy farm<sup>7</sup>. The article included quotes from one of the owners of the farm, who insisted that they had no knowledge of these actions, placing the blame squarely on the workers. The owners referred to themselves as a family farm, and

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<sup>7</sup><http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/chilliwack-cattle-sales-to-fire-8-workers-caught-on-tape-abusing-cows-1.2670098>

it was as if that term gave them a level of legitimacy and trust in the face of these allegations, when in fact they were a multi-million dollar corporation that just happened to be co-owned by six brothers. This is just one example of how particular language is mobilized to highlight certain claims to truth and obscure others. The use of the word organic is another telling example; controlling not only who can use the word but the meaning behind it has become one of the most hotly debated issues in both the academic literature and in food and farming networks. While language is always subject to particular interpretation and limitations in terms of how much nuance it can capture; at the very least, we can acknowledge the assumptions we ourselves bring to the table, and what possibilities we hope to encourage through their use.

*Developing an economic language of difference*

In approaching this research one of the pressing questions was how to talk about the economy and economic difference. In our everyday lives we have such a rudimentary understanding of capitalism that there is little room to fully account for the messiness and complications of the economy. Popular discourse frequently equates the economy and capitalism as one and the same. A conceptual slippage occurs where the production and exchange of goods and services is automatically understood as a capitalist production and exchange. A key road-block in understanding economic activities as anything but capitalism, is the very way that we view the economy. Our common, everyday understanding of the economy privileges certain activities, scales and actors, while dismissing and erasing others. Gibson-Graham encourage us to develop a new economic language to explore and make sense of the diverse economies we participate in. They argue that much can be learned from the ways in which feminists have challenged the

“boundedness” of their subject, problematizing the categories of women, sex, gender:

whereas feminist theorists have scrutinized and often dispensed with the understanding of the body as a bounded and hierarchically structured totality, most speakers of 'economics' do not problematize the nature of the discursive entity with they are engaged. Instead, they tend to appropriate unproblematically an object of knowledge” (1996: 96).

Feminist political economists were among the first to raise questions about dominant understanding of the economic. Waring (1996) makes the case that the way in which we measure and view the economy necessarily influences what we find out about it. When economic activity is that which contributes to a particular understanding of growth, much of the work people engage in, particularly women, is invisible because it is not seen as contributing to growth: key examples are unpaid work in and around the household, subsistence agriculture, voluntary work and reproductive work (1996: 47). By contrast, any cash-generating activities, regardless of their moral or legal nature, are considered economic activities because they (perversely, in some cases) contribute to growth. Such cash-generating activities include deforestation, arms production, the sale and exploitation of children, and the production of harmful chemicals. In highlighting the skewed manner in which activities are given an economic value, Waring exposes the economy as something that is constructed, based on particular assumptions and ontological underpinnings.

More recently, feminist scholars have expanded on Waring's work to highlight social reproduction as an important mode of production and the household as a significant site of economic activity. Safri and Graham (2010) for example, see the global household<sup>8</sup> as the site of diverse economic activities, both capitalist and non-capitalist.

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<sup>8</sup>Safri and Graham define the global household as “an institution formed by family networks dispersed across national boundaries. These networks are composed of nuclear and extended families and friends” (2010: 100).

They argue for the potential of the global household as a site for social and economic transformation through collective decision making and communal appropriation and distribution of surplus (2010: 118). Their analysis contributes to a more inclusive understanding of economic activities, one that opens the door to sites of economic activity organized by a logic other than capitalism.

Some scholars of economic alternatives to capitalism seem to purposefully leave the question of “what is capitalism” open to debate.<sup>9</sup> Many of the scholarly influences of this project suggest that focusing on such a definition is in fact problematic, an indication of the need to de-center capitalism in our analysis of the economy. Gibson-Graham, for example, express a hesitation in precisely defining capitalism, writing that they are “loath to define [capitalism]”(1996:3), in part because there are multiple forms and contexts to capitalism, and in part because so many of the dominant understandings of capitalism have become a road-block to its deconstruction. They contend that despite the stated objective of left theories of capitalism to encourage an anti-capitalist politics, quite the opposite has occurred. The dominant understandings of capitalism have led to a “crisis in left politics” where “the project of understanding the beast has itself produced a beast” (1996:1). These understandings of capitalism make it seem impossible to overcome, except as the result of an “evolutionary necessity or the millennial project of a revolutionary collective subject” (1996:4). Similarly, Kauffman writes that capitalism is often invoked without an accompanying explanation, and that when we do define capitalism, the definition used is problematic in its ever-widening reach:

among people who understand the ways that capitalism is devastating to our lives, the analysis of capitalism that they use seldom fosters creative thinking

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<sup>9</sup>Both the diverse economies literature and the alternative food network literature are prone to glossing over these clarifications, or in some cases ignoring them all together.

about practical steps to take here and now to challenge it. Opponents of capitalism tend to see it as a system so tightly organized that it operates as an organic whole. This leads to imagining that it operates like a dragon: a malevolent force working with a single-minded focus intent on destruction. Or like a dictator: the supreme seat of power working its evil through control of others. Seeing capitalism as an organic whole leads to the view that the only way to challenge it is to shatter that whole and begin to create a new society from scratch” (2012:7-8).

Despite the negative consequences of some definitions of capitalism, it is still important to provide clear parameters of what we mean by capitalism and postcapitalist possibilities. If we are to see through the fog of capitalocentrism, we must know what we are looking for, or at least what we are not looking for. The challenge is developing an understanding of capitalism that allows us to identify its presence, without paralysing our ability to see beyond it; to transform overarching statements of capitalism into tangible pieces of the puzzle, into components that can be identified. Gibson-Graham argue that there is no essential identity to capitalism, there are only particular elements, qualities and characteristics. They encourage us to think of capitalist practices or capitalist sites, as opposed to an organic whole. These sites or practices can only be known and understood in their specific context. Similarly, Kauffman urges us to view capitalism as a set of interrelated practices that can be pulled apart, replaced bit by bit, in multiple places and settings (2012: 11). Gibson-Graham choose to focus their attention on the appropriation and distribution of surplus as a means of identifying capitalist and non-capitalist class processes. Taking their cue from Resnick and Wolf (2002), a class process is capitalist when surplus labour is appropriated from employees, often through wage labour, and distributed among owners (1996:16). Cameron and Gordon, similarly draw on Resnick and Wolf to define capitalist enterprises as “a form of enterprise in which non-producers (e.g. a proprietor or a board of directors) appropriate and distribute the surplus labour produced by paid labourers (Cameron and Gordon 2010: 6).

Several food-specific studies have explored the diverse economies and postcapitalist possibilities present in the production and consumption of food, and provide insight into what these (and their capitalist counterparts) might practically look like. Dixon (2010) discusses a range of food provisioning activities from civic agriculture to gleaning and dumpster diving. She writes that not all of these are necessarily anti-capitalist. Drawing on Gibson-Graham, she argues that whether these activities embody “transformative political possibilities” depends on the accumulation and distribution of surplus value, and the ability of individuals and organizations to be accountable to one another. Traugger and Passidomo engage in a similar analysis, examining postcapitalist possibilities in food through three case studies of food organizations in the US. They conclude that a key feature of these possibilities is the creation of a space for deliberation that “reorients the subjects of farming (producers, distributors, and consumers) toward a more integrated, interdependent and cooperative economics of agriculture” (2012: 283). Finally, Cameron and Gordon use a diverse economies perspective to highlight different labour arrangements and kinds of enterprises in Newcastle, Australia. They find evidence of a “diverse and resilient food economy that is comprised of an array of economic practices (including paid, unpaid and alternatively paid labour; market, non-market and alternative market transactions; and capitalist, non-capitalist and alternative capitalist enterprises)” (2010: 1).<sup>10</sup>

These studies point towards several sites and practices of postcapitalist possibilities. They also highlight that experimentation occurs within material

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<sup>10</sup> These categories are drawn from Gibson-Graham, who in their classification of economic diversity provide for “alternative capitalist” that are distinct from “postcapitalist.” I find it more helpful to understand capitalism as heterogeneous, with many potential variations within it, rather than identity a separate category of alternative capitalism.

relationships, social identities and interpersonal networks. Building on the work of these authors and others, my project identifies three areas of postcapitalist experimentation: economic relationships (labour, exchange), treatment of resources and items of exchange, and subjectivities. These key elements of an economy allow us to consider the appropriation and distribution of surplus, the treatment of food as a commodity, the potential for land tenure outside of private property and a profit motive, and finally, how individuals see themselves, their work and their role within a community. This approach offers a balance between an understanding of capitalism as an impenetrable whole, while still acknowledging its wide reach and presence. Rather than seeing the economy as organized under a unifying regime or mode of production, this approach allows for a distinction between different modes of production, rationalities and relationships that exist simultaneously and at times uncomfortably alongside one another. By isolating core components of an economic model, it becomes possible to highlight where elements of capitalism come into play in different facets of the economy, and where something different is taking place. For example, a business may be organized as a worker cooperative in which all workers equally distribute surplus amongst themselves, but they may engage in market transactions with their customers where their products are sold strictly as a commodity.

*Livelihoods: The art of making a living*

A consequence of seeing economic activity as inherently capitalist is that we tend to have very blunt and dichotomous terms to understand a vast array of economic activities and entities. The labour and land relationships of farms do not consistently fit into the category of business, yet that is the box these farms are forced into. As one

interviewee described, people are faced with two very stark options when setting up an enterprise: they can create a for-profit business or they can establish a not-for-profit organization<sup>11</sup>. A business is assumed to act out of a profit motive, while an NGO (non-profit organization) serves a particular community or social purpose.<sup>12</sup> These are both legal definitions imposed by the state, but they also serve as a means of assigning value in popular discourse. The problem is that these conceptual boxes assume that businesses are in fact making money, and that they follow a profit-seeking ethic, when many “businesses”, particularly farms, do not.

*Table 1. Canada Revenue Agency Definitions*

Definition of a non-profit organization	Definition of a business:
<i>A club, society, or association that's organized and operated solely for: social welfare civic improvement pleasure or recreation any other purpose except profit.</i>	<i>an activity that you intend to carry on for profit and there is evidence to support that intention. A business includes: a profession a calling a trade a manufacturer an undertaking of any kind an adventure or concern in the nature of trade.</i>

(CRA 2012; CRA 2014)

We muddy the waters even further by trying to unpack what is meant by profit. When we use the term “profit” what do we mean? The profit accumulated by a large corporation (distributed to its shareholders) is very different than the profit a farmer or small-business owner makes, which amounts to whatever money is left over after paying expenses and (perhaps) their salary. In a study conducted by Alkon on two farmers'

<sup>11</sup> A third option would be a co-operative, however this requires a minimum of three people for a worker cooperative and five members for all other type of co-operatives. Even within a co-operative structure, its members must categorize themselves as either for profit or not-for-profit.

<sup>12</sup> There is as growing interest in so-called third options such as a public benefit or community interest corporation. There is no legal framework for them in Ontario, and social enterprises generally find themselves in murky waters with the CRA.

markets in the US, a market manager makes a telling comment in explaining why the market wasn't a good fit for some of the vendors: “they wanted to make money and that's not what this market is about” (market manager, as quoted in Alkon 2008: 493). Did this market manager expect farmers to come and volunteer, to not be compensated for their time and labour?

A similar comment is made in Clark's research into a collectively run punk cafe in Seattle. One research participant noted that they felt a kinship with the cafe because, among other things “it's run for people not profit” (2004: 420). In this context, there is not a clear sense of what distinguishes “for people” from “for profit.” While individuals may feel a sense of affinity based on the lived experience of that space and the relationships, intentions and values that create and maintain it, the binary of for people or for profit fails to capture that nuance. We assign particular values to “making money” or “making a profit” yet few people would deny that people need to cover their costs including paying their bills, having a place to live, feeding themselves and their families. Even within non-for-profits, there is a need to pay staff, electricity bills, however, they are not labelled in the same way, despite behaving similarly to many “for profit” enterprise. By using these rudimentary economic concepts, we continually re-affirm a series of false dichotomies that assumes making money is capitalist and antithetical to broader social justice goals. This is not to say that, in practice, these objectives are not often in conflict and opposition, but that they do not necessarily have to be so. As a result, we should avoid such rudimentary language that assumes they are mutually exclusive.

In the context of these very limiting, polarizing concepts, the idea of a livelihood

helps to move us towards a more nuanced and complex understanding of making a living. One of the farmers in my study used the concept of a livelihood to describe his work, explaining that he found farming to be an “honourable livelihood.” The use of the term was, to me, a much better reflection of the work that makes up a farm and the rationales behind the decision to farm. I had been searching for a word that would encapsulate the complex art of making a living without the prescriptive baggage of more commonly used words such as business or enterprise, and the concept of a livelihood provided the space and flexibility to do so.

It is unusual to use the concept of a livelihood outside of global development studies or rural development strategies, but I find it a very useful concept for this project. A livelihoods perspective is particularly useful to explore farming and food-based economic activities because on a farm the lines between business and personal, labour and leisure, worker and kin are so blurred, it doesn't quite fit the parameters of a “job” or “work.” For farmers, the farm is both a place of work, a home, and a place of leisure. Bessant suggests that a livelihoods perspective “affords an integrated understanding of the many livelihood systems, processes and strategies operating at the farm household level” (2006: 63). A livelihood, as defined by Chambers, is simply “the means of gaining a living” (1995: 174). The concept of a livelihood implicitly challenges the capitalocentric economic discourse that sees only jobs and employment, rendering activities that do not fit these limiting categories, invisible. Within a livelihood there is no divide between between productive and reproductive labour, cash or barter, all are included in an overall assessment of a household's needs and the ability to satisfy them.

While employment, or work, often carries with it an assumption of capitalist

labour relations<sup>13</sup>, a livelihood analysis focuses on the skills, resources and relationships individuals and households possess<sup>14</sup> and how they can be used to realize their own labour power in sustaining and nurturing themselves. It encompasses all the various resources and activities undertaken by someone in order to meet their material and social needs. The utility and strength of the term is its ability to encompass what Scoones calls the “complex bricolage” of activities that individuals combine (2009:172). This includes natural resources (land, soil, water, biodiversity), physical resources (buildings, equipment, transportation or technology), human capabilities (skills, knowledge, ability to labour, good health), economic or financial resources (cash, savings, access to credit, household remittances), and social resources (resources drawn from relationships, networks, affiliations and associations) (Bessant 2006). It bridges and connects different sectors, industries, scales that reflect the diversity of people's lives. For example a farmer may also be their own mechanic, electrician or plumber. They may cut their own firewood for fuel or perform odd jobs in the winter. Or as highlighted earlier in this chapter, they or a member of their household may have a paid job outside of the farm.

There are a multitude of concepts and frameworks that have been proposed, through which to re-organize and re-conceptualize food provisioning activities, yet few address the issues of economic sustainability, or basic self-sufficiency and resiliency of those producing the food. Maxey notes that despite all the attention being given to “alternative” food networks in the literature, there is still a missing piece in terms of how these networks actually operate, and how the different elements of sustainability are negotiated, not only environmental sustainability, but social and financial as well

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<sup>13</sup> See Standing 1999 and Gorz 1989 for an instructive discussion of the ideas of work, labour and employment.

<sup>14</sup> What we would call capital in a capitalist analysis.

(2006:232). The issue of earning a living is often an uncomfortable or taboo subject in the context of alternatives to capitalism. While the financial viability of farm is certainly discussed in other literatures (for example in rural sociology, and the political economy of agriculture), I would argue that there is often a disconnect between those conversations and the discussions of alternatives that occurs around Alternative Food Networks and diverse economies.

In some cases those seeking to earn a living are explicitly excluded from the discussion of alternatives, as if attempting to earn a living somehow taints or takes away from the “alternative-ness” of the activity. Carlsson and Manning's discussion of nowtopia is one such example. They use the concept of nowtopia to describe “the myriad efforts to reclaim and reinvent work against the logic of capital” (2010: 925). According to Carlsson and Manning, as more and more people feel dissatisfied and unfulfilled with their paid work, they seek out alternative ways of meeting their needs, forming community and building a sense of identity. Carlson and Manning describe nowtopia as a rejection of the value form inherent in capitalism, and a rejection of the reproduction of capital. These activities include everything from gardening, bike repair, coding software, to music making and radio dj-ing, and provide a forum to bring prefigurative politics into day-to-day life.

I agree with much of Carlsson and Maning's discussion, however, they insist that nowtopian activities are restricted to work that is unpaid. Why not include attempts to create meaningful labour that is sustainable and paid, as opposed to continuing to rely on capitalist waged labour to sustain ourselves? It is as if receiving remuneration for your labour somehow taints the radical possibilities of it. They note that not all unpaid work is

necessarily nowtopian, that it needs to be based on “social and ecological reasons and explicitly not for the proliferation of capital” (2010:928). So here again we see this implicit assumption that any paid work is for the proliferation of capital. These false dichotomies of paid/unpaid and profit/non-profit do little to help us understand the complex relationships that make up many farms. By contrast, speaking of livelihoods opens up new space to consider postcapitalist possibilities that not only includes those making a living, but puts them front and centre.

#### ***1.4 Weaving together the personal and political***

The summer before I began my doctoral studies, my partner embarked on a very different kind of study; he started an organic vegetable farm. Since that first summer five years ago I have worked part-time on our farm for four seasons, typing away at my laptop one day, weeding a row of carrots the next. I did not initially plan for my thesis research to dovetail quite so directly with my farm work, but as time went on I was drawn to food provisioning as a specific site of postcapitalist economic experimentation. Following an initial round of interviews with a range of actors in Ottawa's local food system, I felt it was important to focus on those engaged with food provisioning as a livelihood, just as my partner and I were seeking to do.

As a result of those experiences, my orientation towards this research, and my research subjects, is a deeply personal and sympathetic one. However, it is also a strongly engaged and critical stance. I have been in many similar situations and experiences as those described by farmers in this study, and I share many of their goals and aspirations for re-imagining our relationship to food. I also have emotional baggage as a result of those experiences that influences this project. My desire to talk about

capitalism, to name it and identify it, is based both on an academic interest in particular theories of the economy, but also based on my lived experiences of feeling boxed into particular categories because of the ways that capitalism and a capitalocentrism discourse permeates so many facets of our lives. I want to know how farmers are negotiating their politics and their business because I think it is a fascinating question, but also because it is something with which I have struggled. Throughout the research process it has been a challenge to step outside of my own personal experience, while simultaneously using those experiences as a further level of insight and analysis. In many ways, that negotiation of inside and outside is a theme that travels throughout this work. For me as the researcher, and for the subjects of this research, we have each worked to balance our own versions of inside and outside.

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter Two provides the theoretical landscape that informs this research, tracing the development of poststructuralist approaches to political economy and the study of food. It also lays out the conceptual framework of my argument. Chapter Three outlines the research methodologies as well as the key concepts or perspectives that shaped my research process. Chapters Four, Five and Six discuss the key findings of the research, analyzing how these farmers created possibilities of collective autonomy through coping and prefiguring strategies. Rather than split the analysis between material and social/cultural forms of experimentation, the analysis is divided into different lenses or vignettes: farm (Chapter Four), farmer (Chapter Five) and food network (Chapter Six). Behind each exchange or structure there is a set of values and intensions that shape its material manifestation. Likewise the subjectivities and political commitments of these farmers were developed within

particular economic relationships and activities. Looking strictly at the material relationships and networks of these farms, postcapitalist possibilities are certainly discernible, but not entirely prominent or promising. Many of these arrangements are more strongly coping than prefigurative. It is by extending our gaze beyond these material networks, to include questions of subjectivities and values, that we can appreciate the full scope of experimentation and re-imagining these farmers are undertaking. Chapter Four explores the key relationships that make up a farm (land and labour) and the difficulties in understanding a farm within the economic language of capitalism. Chapter Five highlights the possibilities being enacted within the farmer: the process of becoming new subjects and developing a different set of values and life priorities. Chapter Six highlights the important role played by the broader food network, relationships with consumers, other food producers and actors as well networks of support and solidarity from friends and family. The conclusion, Chapter Seven, takes a step back and provides an analysis of both future possibilities to strengthen a diverse economy, as well as constraints that threaten to limit their impact and accessibility.

## **CHAPTER TWO MAPPING AN EVOLVING THEORETICAL LANDSCAPE**

This chapter lays out the theoretical orientation of my project, loosely defined as poststructural political economy (Gibson-Graham 1996; 2006a; Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2001, LeHeron 2007, de Goede 2003, Peterson 2006, Kristjanson-Gural 2011). It is divided into three sections. The first outlines key elements of a poststructuralist political economy and its orientation towards postcapitalist possibilities. The second section illustrates how these perspectives have shaped the analysis of food and agriculture in, and the third section proposes the key conceptual framework of my analysis, informed by this theoretical orientation.

Poststructuralist theories have opened new doors both in understanding the economy and in studying food. These contributions have pushed the boundaries of political economy and broadened its scope, not only expanding what should be studied, but shifting how that very research process might proceed. They offer new ways of approaching capitalism by challenging the construction of the economic realm and highlighting the importance of subjectivities, and the mediation of the cultural and the material. As LeHeron writes: “the fusion of political economic and poststructuralist thought was a landmark moment in science and social science when the discursive and material were reconnected – and seen as interdependent.” (2007: 29). Most importantly, these theoretical perspectives encouraged me to see the potential for a collective autonomy within the farms of this study, a particular manifestation of postcapitalist possibility based in mutual aid and collectivity. Rather than seeing the economic activities and identities of these farmers as decidedly revolutionary or co-opted, I understand them as a complex performance of coping and prefiguring, where collective

autonomy is a desire and the two-step dance of coping and prefiguring is a means to get there.

### ***2.1 Theorizing postcapitalist possibilities***

Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff (2001) were among the first to outline a poststructuralist political economy (PSPE) approach. They propose an analysis of the economy that is characterized by a rejection of essentialist or totalizing explanations of the world. It emphasizes the construction and use of knowledge, arguing that such knowledge influences material reality rather than merely reflecting it. Subjects, they assert, are formed through particular social and discursive conditions as opposed to representing a universal or all-encompassing identity. LeHeron, taking a somewhat broader perspective than Gibson-Graham et al.<sup>15</sup>, outlines what he sees as “defining dimensions” of the different approaches that make up PSPE. These include “situated, context (of research), (structural) context, embodied, emplaced, embedded, subjectivities and socialities, spatialities and temporalities and ethics and politics” (2007:31). He suggests that PSPE should not be thought of as a single theoretical perspective or approach:

It can be available as a practice but not codified in terms normally adopted within parts of the academy or the academy as a whole and can emerge from diverse origins (reflecting prior work and community experiences, generational interests and pre-dispositions of those involved, disciplinary contributions, organisational affiliations and so on). Thus, PSPE has no obvious or pre-given shape; it goes under different names, its use can be diverse and it may not be codified in conventional terms (LeHeron 2007:36).

Instead of a clearly defined school of thought, it is an assemblage of diverse practices, research tools, tendencies and orientations that can be linked together through a common approach to understanding the social and economic world.

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<sup>15</sup>LeHeron also suggests his work differs from that of Gibson-Graham through his inclusion of the state as an actor.

*(Re)Defining Capitalism and the Economy*

One of the main contributions of these poststructuralist perspectives has been to challenge dominant understandings of capitalism, and more broadly the economy, a theme introduced in Chapter One. This approach views hegemonic systems, such as conventional food systems, and capitalism in general, as incomplete in their totalizing effects (De Goede 2003; Leyshon and Ley 2003; Williams 2005; Wright and Middendorf 2008). For Gibson-Graham, a central problem, and the problem with which we must begin, is how we think about capitalism: the way it is talked about, understood and imagined. They argue that the dominance of capitalism is established and maintained through a series of discursive commitments and imagery:

The virtually unquestioned dominance of capitalism can be seen as a complex product of a variety of discursive commitments, including but not limited to organicist social conceptions, heroic historical narratives, evolutionary scenarios of social development, and essentialist, phallogocentric, or binary patterns of thinking (1996:4).

This capitalocentrism, as they call it, promotes capitalism as an all-encompassing organic whole. This discourse has performative effects that reinforces a sense of inevitability and complete domination (2008: 615). Larner and LeHeron make a similar observation, lamenting that “economic globalisation is still too often taken for granted. Most typically it is presented as a universal backdrop to, or a potent bulldozing force driving, contemporary forms of political, cultural and social change” (2002: 415)

Gibson-Graham aim to deconstruct this capitalocentric discourse by re-reading the economic landscape for difference instead of domination (2006: 54). By situating the hegemony of capitalism as in part a discursive product, rather than an absolute material reality, they aim to highlight the possible existence of a rich diversity of economic practices that were previously suppressed (1996: 6). As Larner and LeHeron note, the

realities people interact with rarely fit squarely in one box or the other:

The situations actors find themselves in are often complex, involving both capitalo-centric and alternative logics. It is this simultaneity of capital-centred and capital decentred subjectivities and identities that especially challenges existing intellectual frameworks (2002:418).

Instead of viewing capitalism as a totalizing force, a myriad of economic systems and communities exist in a “zone of cohabitation and contestation among multiple economic forms” (2006a: xxi). From this perspective, alternatives to capitalism are seen not only as possible, but already in existence. Based on this re-reading, Gibson-Graham articulate a “new political imaginary” based on a “politics of possibility in the here and now” (2006a: xxvi). This politics of possibility involves developing a new language to widen the field of economic possibility, the self-cultivation of ethical subjects capable of desiring and enacting diverse economies and the collaborative pursuit of economic experiments (2006a: xxiii). The economy is re-conceptualized as heterogeneous, containing a range of forms and processes both within and outside of capitalism:

Calling these economies “capitalist” denies the existence of these diverse economic and class processes, precluding economic diversity in the present and thus making it unlikely in the proximate future...But what if we could force Capitalism to withdraw from defining the economy as a whole? We might see feudalisms, primitive communisms, socialisms, independent commodity production, slaveries, and of course capitalisms, as well as hitherto unspecified forms of exploitation” (Gibson-Graham 1996: 262).

This is not to diminish the power of capitalism and hegemonic forces to co-opt, subordinate and destroy alternative practices, but to remind ourselves that the contingency for such alternatives do exist. As Leyshon and Lee suggest, by “re-imagining capitalism as a network that has constantly to be achieved, it becomes possible to identify those places within space economies where the network is very weak, and where potential exists for new forms of alliances, social formations and economic geographies first to take root, then to become established, and finally to flower and bloom” (Leyshon

and Lee 2003: 12). This poststructuralist political economy positioning allows me to approach food-based livelihoods and their broader networks as a set of heterogeneous sites, practises and networks that are continually in flux, rather than an invisible organic whole that is solid and immobile. As Gibson-Graham argue: “A vision of the economy as diverse, multiply identified and complexly overdetermined and economic power as diffuse, segmented, and in motion opens up the possibility for local noncapitalist practices to be the focus for an invigorated economic politics” (2003:127). It opens the door to new ways of understanding and conceptualizing postcapitalist possibilities, setting the stage for a fruitful and insightful investigation of diverse possibilities in food provisioning.

In place of a capitalist economy, researchers have mapped a *diverse economy*, which Gibson-Graham describe as “a heterogeneous set of transactions, forms of labour and remuneration, types of enterprise and modes of surplus appropriation and distribution” (2006: 195). This would include everything from feudal enterprises, informal markets, self-provisioning labour, gift giving and alternative currencies to name a few. Samers writes that the goal of the diverse economies literature and Gibson-Graham's work in particular, is to “relinquish a vision of a largely unimaginable socialism as capitalism’s opposite, and instead, recover and revalorise a multitude of non-capitalist practices and spaces that disrupt the assumption of a hegemonic capitalism” (2005: 876). Economies are seen as contested, their meaning open to redefinition and transformation (Wright 2010; Lee 2000). A diverse economy approach often emphasizes everyday economic practices that are typically overlooked or overshadowed by mainstream understandings of work (as paid, formal employment that occurs in a set

workplace). As Wright observes, this literature is based in an analysis that "demand[s] attention to the quotidian struggles that may reinvent, subvert, reflect, or intensify dominant processes" (2010: 300).

The concept of a diverse economy has been taken up by a variety of scholars to engage in a re-reading and re-imagining of the economy. Gibson-Graham's own research based in Australia, the Philippines and the US has included an examination of large-scale co-operatives (2003; 2006) and the cultivation of community-based enterprises (2006). Williams engages in a re-reading of the economy in the UK to illustrate the diversity of production and exchange relationships through a 'whole economy' approach (Williams 2005; Williams and Nadin 2010). His research highlights the existence, and persistence, of non-market activities and non-commodified forms of work. Through an analysis of hours spent on particular activities in several UK towns and rural areas, Williams (2005) illustrates that households across a diverse socio-economic and geographic range engage in a variety of economic activities that are either subsistence, non-monetized or non-profit. Several other research projects have looked at alternative currencies and timebanking such as LETS (Local Exchange Trading Networks) (Williams et al. 2001; North 1999; Williams 1996), as well as alternative financial spaces such as credit unions (Fuller and Jonas 2003) and social finance organizations (Buttle 2008). Others have focused their attention on different kinds of retail spaces, such as second hand shops (Crewe, Gregson and Brooks 2003) and different types of enterprises such as co-operatives (Bryson and Taylor 2009) and employee-ownership models (Lincoln 2003).

#### *A Commitment to Weak Theory*

In many ways a PSPE is suggestive of a different kind of theorizing altogether. In

refusing to produce an overarching assessment of the economy as uniformly capitalist, PSPE engages in “weak” theorizing by shedding light on the complexities and unpredictabilities of the economy. Sedgwick distinguishes between two different kinds of theories: weak and strong. Strong theory is reductive and seeks to organize and understand a wide domain, while weak theory is reparative and limited in scope. Sedgwick asserts that there is a “methodological centrality of suspicion” within much of current critical practice and suggests that this is based in a tendency towards paranoia. She argues that “in a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naive, pious or complaisant” (2003: 126). Sedgwick draws heavily on Silvan Tomkins who proposes that strong theory is “capable of accounting for a wide spectrum of phenomenon which appear to be very remote, one from the other, and from a common source” (Tomkins 2008 433-434 as quoted in Sedgwick 2003:134). A theory built from paranoia has an aversion to surprises, requiring that what is coming must be already known, that the future should be predictable and preemptively analyzed (2003: 130).

Sedgwick argues that despite this widespread pairing of paranoia and critical analysis, there is no reason why an analysis of systemic oppressions or inequality must necessarily be bound to a particular epistemological commitment or narrative of paranoia (2003: 127). She contrasts a paranoid strong theory with weak theory, theory that relinquishes the paranoid determination to know and to avoid surprises<sup>16</sup> (2003: 146). It involves a shift from asking “Is a particular knowledge true, and how can we know?” to questions of “What does knowledge do... [and] How, in short, is knowledge performative,

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<sup>16</sup> There is a certain irony that Sedgwick's distinction of weak and strong theory could itself be considered a form of strong theorizing, in that it brings forth a binary through which to understand a broad scope of academic work.

and how best does one move among its causes and effects” (2003: 124). Weak theory is open to contingency; instead of demanding inevitability. This 'way of knowing', in the words of Brown and Browne harnesses “pleasure, hope and the possibilities of ameliorating social problems in the present” (2011: 123).

This weak theorizing entails an acceptance of some degree of “unknowability” and a limit to how far a particular observation can be extended. As Pickerill and Chatterton assert, “we have to become accustomed to uncertainty, which is not a sign of failure as the search is not for meta-theory or new dogmas” (2006: 743). The benefit of weak theory, Gibson-Graham suggest, is that it is limited to a particular locality; it does not attempt to extend too far or explain too much. Weak theory could never make claims about capitalism being a unified and hegemonic system, as it “could not know that social experiments are doomed to fail or destined to reinforce dominance; it could not tell us that the world economy will never be transformed by the disorganized proliferation of local projects” (2008: 619). Weak theory is welcoming of co-existence and surprises; it is a commitment to be open to difference and possibility instead of dominance and predictability (Gibson-Graham 2008: 626).

Gibson-Graham's own proposal of an ethical praxis of community economies is a move away from defining 'what capitalism is', or 'what exploitation is' in an abstract, universal sense, to deriving meaning and ethics in a particular context and locality. It is not something that can be predetermined, but is something that is created and decided on in particular situations and moments as we come to them. As Wright asserts, “no economy may be understood in any simple or predetermined sense. No alternative economy is inherently libratory or inherently radical” (2010: 302). Gibson-Graham

suggest that their mapping of economic difference can be understood as an example of weak theory, in that it “offers little more than description, just the proliferation of categories and concepts... it contains minimal critical content; it is simply a technology that reconstitutes the group upon which we can perform a different economy” (2008: 619). Research is approached as a means to open up space to examine, support, envision and enact community economies (2008: 627). While a strong theory of capitalism would seek to exclude and marginalize a diverse economic landscape, the practice of weak theory helps to cultivate an openness towards the tasks of “imagining and enacting a postcapitalist politics” (2006: 8).

According to Gibson-Graham, weak theory requires an ethical practice that involves “the continual exercising of a choice to be/act/or think in certain ways” (2008: 618). They observe that, at present, the academic subject is taught to be distanced, objective and critical, to “penetrate the veil of common understanding and expose the root causes and bottom lines that govern the phenomenal world” (2008: 618). This generally results in very skeptical and negative theorizing that affirms an essentialist and over-determined vision of the world, re-enforcing what is perceived to be dominant (2008: 618). Weak theorizing, in contrast, requires an 'experimental attitude' towards research objects that emphasizes learning over judging and the inclusion of both academic and non-academic subjects:

To treat something as a social experiment is to be open to what it has to teach us, very different from the critical task of assessing the ways in which it is good or bad, strong or weak, mainstream or alternative...This does not mean that our well-honed critical faculties have no role in our research, but that their expression takes second place to the experimental orientation” (Gibson-Graham 2008: 628).

Following Sedgwick's death in 2009, *Progress in Human Geography* ran a collective piece reflecting on the impact of Sedgwick's work. In it, Brown et al argue that

“Sedgwick’s insistence that knowledge is performative offers economic geographers a choice in the kind of knowledge they produce and her work calls on us to take responsibility for the effects of these choices” (2011: 125) They suggest that Sedgwick's discussion of weak theory has provided diverse economies scholars with a way to counter the hegemonic and totalizing representations of capitalism and to resist the pressure to confirm the “violence of capitalism” (2011: 127). PSPE is one way engage in this weak theorizing, as it offers up an analysis of the economy that is open to possibility and uncertainty without pre-defined categories, calling on the researcher to question the very definitions used to investigate the economy.

### *Performativity*

A further insight stemming from PSPE is the performativity of research, a point alluded to within weak theory. Campbell and Rosin (2011) talk of an “ontological turn” in research methods, with calls for a more “enactive sociology” (Lowe 2009 as quoted in Campbell and Rosin 2011) and greater acknowledgement of the ways that research and the researcher are co-constituted (LeHeron and Lewis 2011, Law and Urry 2004). Campbell and Rosin, quoting a talk given by Phillip Lowe (2009), argue that in conducting research, researchers both influence and are influenced by the subjects of their research; that “social sciences enact novel realities” and “create phenomena through the procedures they establish to discover them” (2011:350). Similarly those conducting research are themselves “acted upon” by their research participations and partners (2011: 351).

In the past three decades the concept of performativity has gained significant traction in various academic disciplines and fields of research. The argument that

knowledge and discourse work to produce and perform particular realities has been well articulated by both poststructuralist and feminist theorists (Bergeron 2001; Butler 1993; Sedgwick 2003; de Goede 2003), however, we are only beginning to understand what this might mean for the *process* of doing research. Pratt, a human geographer, reflected in 2000 that “we have yet ... to put much of our theoretical talk into research practices. Our talk may be that of poststructuralists, postcolonialists, or social constructivists, but our practice continues to be that of colonising humanists” (2000: 639).

There are two ways of understanding the performativity of research. The performativity of research outcomes is a much more widely accepted notion; the idea that the research we produce can be used to strengthen or weaken particular possibilities via public policy or funding decisions, or to help sway public support etc. I am more interested in a second interpretation of research performativity, one less widely accepted, that the process of research itself can be thought of as enacting particular realities over others. Instead of viewing our research process as a tool to uncover the answers to our inquiry, the process of research itself is performative, working to create and enact social realities. Law and Urry contend that methods “have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help to bring into being what they also discover” (2004: 393). In the process of research, our modes of inquiry interact with social phenomena. Those interactions, along with a host of other interactions, produce the very realities we are uncovering (2004: 395). Research as a performative practice starts from the perspective of, 'how might my research help craft a particular reality,' as opposed to the perspective of 'how can I discover a particular reality.' As Law and Urry assert:

The issue is not simply how what is out there can be uncovered and brought to light, though this remains an important issue. It is also about what might be made in the relations of investigation, what might be brought into being. And, indeed, it

is about what should be brought into being” (2004: 396).

If we accept that research is in part a process of enacting realities, then the potential exists to consciously support particular worlds over others, or as McKinnon et al. suggest, to “perform the possible” (2008: 275). McKinnon et al encourage us to see this possibility of research in the present, as opposed to some far off future: “rather than looking to the hope of a future transformed world, of victory over injustice, it is a project of locating the glimmers of possibility that exist in the here and now and supporting them.” (2008: 279). For example. Gibson-Graham see the naming and mapping of diverse economies as contributing to “an anticapitalist politics of economic *invention*” (1996: xi, emphasis added). Research then is not just about discovering what is already “out-there”, it is a process of creation.

Law and Urry are quick to point out that just because realities are produced, it does not mean we can produce any reality of our choosing. In a similar way that Butler's discussion of the performativity of gender does not infer that everyday we can wake up and decide what gender we will be today, so too does performativity of the research process not mean that we can create whatever reality we want simply by selecting a particular research method off the shelf. In the words of Law “believing something is never enough to make it true” (Law 2004: 8). So while we cannot conjure things up out of thin air, Law maintains that it is possible to develop methods that help to make certain realities more “probable, stronger and more real, whilst eroding others and making them less real” (2004: 148). We can think of the range of possibilities brought on by performativity as different paths that might be charted by our research. Some are more difficult to to establish and follow while others offer less resistance and are more easily

created. Some paths are created much more slowly than others, just as some possibilities may take more time to solidify and take form. The performativity of research does not operate in a vacuum, it works in tandem with other elements of the research process and the social world in which the research is taking place.

### *Unlikely Bedfellows*

Poststructuralism and political economy may seem like an odd pairing, as they are often seen as antithetical to one another. Indeed, when I first began this project, the idea of a poststructuralist political economy did not make sense. I saw poststructuralism as a confusing body of theory that had little to do with matters of the economy, and concrete material concerns. Yet I've come to find the application of those theories to the study of political economy to be incredibly rich and insightful.

Political economy, in particular radical or critical streams, have certainly engaged with the question of alternatives to capitalism, but much of this theorizing is based on limiting and problematic assumptions of scope and temporality. The possibility for such alternatives is generally situated within a broad counter-hegemonic struggle to overthrow capitalism and to replace it with another dominant or universal economic system. As a result, alternatives are seen as something which will occur in the future. The current task is to build capacity and political agency of the masses in order to move beyond our current economic system (See Albo et al 2010, McNally 2006, Wood 1995, Sklair 2002). As Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff argue “the progressive project of building an alternative, noncapitalist society is relegated to a revolutionary future, distant and discontinuous from the practical political terrain” (2001: 2). This perspective largely dismisses autonomous or prefigurative strategies, seeing them as ineffective in achieving

political hegemony or “transcending capitalism on a world scale” (Albo et al. 2010).

And yet, a poststructuralist political economy perspective is not necessarily a rejection of the many insights of Marxist or radical political economy. Gibson-Graham for example, see their work as engaging with both poststructuralist feminism and postmodern Marxism, and write that their critique is not meant to “denigrate the significant contributions of many Marxists who have attempted to theorize economic difference and transition in ways that eschew this teleological and capitalocentric representation” (2006: 214). Gibson-Graham's critique of the way that capitalism has been theorized within some strands of Marxism is not a rejection of Marxism as a whole. They suggest that Marx's language of economic difference has often been misrepresented as a theory of economic evolution where “capitalism is situated at the pinnacle of development and all other forms of economy are represented as precapitalist or as forms of primitive capitalism” (2006: 59). Instead, they write that Marx saw capitalist modes of production not as the only economic form in existence, just the one he choose to focus his attention on.

Laffey (2004) makes a helpful distinction between a poststructuralism that is positioned as “after Marx”, that builds on a historical material approach, versus a poststructuralism that is “instead of Marx”, defining itself as against historical materialism (2004: 460). Laffey's concern is that by positioning poststructuralism and historical materialism as antithetical to one another, it cuts off the potential to engage with or make use of contributions from each other. He asserts that a Marxist critique of political economy remains vital to theorizing capitalism, while at the same time a poststructuralist call to think differently about subjectivity is “integral to making sense of

our world” (2004: 467). Indeed there are those taking up this PSPE theoretical framing who could fall into this “instead of” camp. Critics of the diverse economies literature argue that some scholars over-emphasize space and locality at the expense of examining the full scope of relations of production and distribution that may exceed those boundaries (Fickley 2011). Samers (2005) cautions that this type of analysis can display a worrying degree of commodity fetishism, where the products or services in question are assumed to be more progressive or less exploitative without a complete look at the production processes behind those products or services. Within a PSPE approach there is a need to account for how value is “consumed, exchanged and produced across time and space” (Fickley 2011: 243), as well as examining how surplus value is produced, appropriated and distributed throughout the network of economic relationships. The PSPE approach taken in this project is one that builds on the insights of a Marxist political economy, positioning poststructuralist political economy as an offshoot or further development of radical political economy, instead of a complete rupture or departure.

*A new (critical) way forward*

It may seem as though this approach to theorizing is a step away from critical analysis, that limiting the scope of our arguments and viewing our research process as performative signals a retreat from making engaged contributions to transformative social change. However, I believe it would be a mistake to characterize this as a lack of critical engagement or normative assessment. A PSPE approach is not a lack of critical engagement, it is indicative of a shift in how to approach a critical analysis. Weak theory does not necessarily preclude any judgements or critical analysis. What it does is point to

a different beginning from which to make those observations. As De Sousa Santos and Rodriguez-Garavito argue “the role of critical thought and practice is to broaden the spectrum of possibilities, through experimentation in and reflection on alternatives for building a more just society.” (2006: xxii). They describe a “hermeneutics of emergence”, where the aim of research is to strengthen rather than weaken the potential of these alternatives. This does not mean they do not critically and rigorously analyze the data and cases in their research, but that there is a stated objective to their research, to underscore the emancipatory features and potential of these alternatives to give them greater visibility and credibility (2006: xxii). Similarly, Massey contends that public scholarship is strengthened by an approach that seeks to construct, not just critique:

It is salutary, and politically important I think, not always to be in a position of critic (I think of all the easy, anti- State stuff, and sniping from “the margins”- which academics rarely inhabit - that litters much theoretical and “critical” writing); to be forced to be constructive and to take a different kind of responsibility (2008: 495).

Acknowledging the role of subjectivities, of values, desires and intentions (both our own and those of the subjects of our research) opens up an important site of transformation.

As Carolan eloquently observes:

Social change requires bodies not only endowed with resources, like social, economic, cultural, and political capital – an important take home message provided by a political economy approach. Social change also requires bodies that think social change ought to occur. How do bodies become tuned to the status quo (or to alternatives)? What makes bodies want change? These are important questions; yet they go largely unanswered in the agro-food studies literature. Lest we forget, at the heart of change/status quo are living bodies (2011:13).

PSPE theory, then, can be seen not as a retreat from critical analysis but as a different starting point; one of hope and possibility rather than cynicism and scepticism.

In describing recent trends and orientations in political economy, Clement and Vosko comment that

Political economy embodies “uncommon sense.” It seeks to abandon the common-sense view that certain things (e.g, capital or markets) and social and economic systems (e.g., capitalism) are irreducible rather than relational and always in process or flux (Ollman 1993, 11-12). Political economy aims to trouble and challenge conventional ways of framing issues, in particular, in the present era, the neoliberal paradigm and its project (2003:xiii).

A poststructuralist political economy perspective takes this troubling one step further, looking inwards to the ways that we as political economists reify certain categories and dominant understandings; exploring how this might have particular effects, or encourage certain acts of vanishing. LeHeron suggests that political economy is often limited in that it first and foremost sees economic relationships through a capitalist lens: “representing the economy as capitalist prioritised a politics around the antagonisms within capitalist production” (2007:29). Coming out of Marxist traditions, political economy has generally been focused on understanding material conditions and realities in order to change them. A poststructuralist political economy approach broadens that focus, by “privileg[ing] the exploration of possibilities as a strategy to approach decisions and actions” (LeHeron 2007: 36). Rather than trying to “explain the economy and market forces so that political and social interventions can direct economic processes” (Clement 1997:4), a poststructuralist political economy perspective argues that how we explain the economy is itself an act of political and social intervention.

## ***2.2 PSPE in Food and Agriculture***

While not always labelled as such, we can see traces of a poststructuralist political economy perspective emerging within the study of food specifically. Carolan suggests that scholars of agro-food studies have yet to take this jump wholeheartedly, however, there are moments and openings where such an analysis is beginning to take shape. He notes a growing emphasis on processes of becoming, giving space for multiplicities and a

shift towards co-experimentation that sees knowledge as relational rather than absolute (2013:420-421). According to Carolan, things within agro-food studies have gotten “messier”, something that he sees as an opportunity to push the discipline into new territory. He points to on-going debates about the nature of the current food regime<sup>17</sup> as an example. While in the past, there was general consensus on the defining characteristic of particular food regimes, we are currently faced with multiple differing proposals for how to understand the current landscape. With everything from a green capitalism regime (Friedmann 2005), a “food from somewhere” regime (Campbell 2009), a corporate food regime (McMichael 2009), a financialized food regime (Burch and Lawrence 2009) or an American neoliberal food regime (Pechlaner 2012); “there is remarkably little consensus as to where we are at today” (Carolan 2013: 418). This, Carolan suggests, is an indication that food scholarship is beginning to acknowledge that there are multiple things going on at once, different processes and trends, depending on where and what you are examining. Perhaps there is not one food regime, but multiple food regimes. Building on Carolan's argument, I suggest that we can see this shift towards PSPE in two specific respects within the agro-food studies literature:

- How we study food provisioning
- How we characterize food provisioning

#### *How we study agro-food networks*

Since the 1990s, scholars have moved away from a strict political economy analysis to produce a more contingent and relational analysis of food provisioning. Agro-food studies has historically been firmly rooted in political economy, developing a

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<sup>17</sup> The concept of a food regime was first developed by Friedmann and McMichael (1989) and describes a “temporally specific dynamic in the global political economy of food” (Pechlaner and Otero 2008: 351-352).

commodity chain analysis of food provisioning that sought to expose commodity fetishism and uncover the (often exploitative) social relationship behind the food that we consume (Dupuis and Goodman 2002: 6).<sup>18</sup> However, following critiques that these approaches were too rigid and deterministic in their understandings of power and agency, scholars began to incorporate new conceptual tools to highlight cultural elements of food provisioning and bring a more relational and contingent approach to food. Writing in 1997, Watts and Goodman made note of an emerging reformulated political economy perspective within agro-food studies that was marked by “a growing engagement with poststructuralist critiques of totalising modernist epistemologies, and a critical attentiveness to the workings of cultural power and discourse” (1997: 7). In these approaches food consumption and production activities are organized into hybrid networks of people, devices, objects and non-human living things that are situated and partial (Whatmore and Thorne 1997). One of the first such engagements, generally referred to as the cultural turn in agro-food studies, was by Arce and Marsden. In 1993 they argued that a chain approach led to a deterministic and functionalist understanding of connectivity that missed the complexity of human agency. They suggested speaking instead of food *networks*, as a way of showing how both human and non-human actors “shape and are shaped by the political cultural and social environment” (Jackson et al 2006: 132).

Relational approaches such as Actor Network Theory (ANT), Conventions Theory and circuit-based approaches gained prominence as innovative ways to highlight both the material and cultural dimension of food networks (see Goodman 2001; Gouveia and Juska 2002; Lockie and Kitto 2000; Whatmore and Thorne 1997). As Lockie and

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<sup>18</sup> See for example Frieland 1984 and Fine 1994

Kitto note in their analysis of different theoretical perspectives in agro-food studies, with ANT, “in place of global systems and processes spreading over and colonizing spaces, we find temporally and spatially situated sites and actants linked together into actor-networks” (2000: 7). Reynolds agrees, writing that it is not just a linguistic shift but a significant conceptual one:

Moving from a terminology of commodity chains or systems to a network analogy...facilitates a shift away from a fixed, linear, and unidirectional view of economic firms engaged in commodity production, distribution, and consumption to emphasize the fluid multidirectional flows of material, discursive, and knowledge resources among a variety of individual and collective social agents” (2002: 408).

Whatmore and Thorne argue that an ANT approach sees food networks as “performative orderings (always in the making), rather than systemic entities (always already constituted)” (1997: 289). Networks are not self-sustaining, as is often the assumption with a chain approach, they are created by, and depend on “capacities and practices of actants-in-relation” (Whatmore and Thorne 1997: 302). These networks can be stabilized and strengthened over time through modes of ordering that influence the ways in which agents are “enrolled” into networks. Modes of ordering mobilize particular rationalities, for example, Whatmore and Thorne suggest that alternative commodity networks are enacted through a mode of ordering of connectivity based on notions of partnership, alliance, responsibility and fairness (1997:293).

Conventions Theory focuses specifically on these modes of ordering by emphasizing the “rules, norms, and conventions” that underpin economic systems. Applied to the study of food provisioning, it illustrates how actors assign particular values and sense of worth to different foods and production techniques (Murdock and Miele 2004). A particular mix of conventions is negotiated within a network, which then

interacts with natural, social and technological resources (Murdoch and Miele 2004:109). Murdoch and Miele use conventions theory to explore the conventions that shape the culinary networks of fast food culture and the Slow Food movement (2004:112). Different networks will have a particular mode of ordering that reflect particular conventions over others, and this will lead to particular set of materials and actors.

The network analogy acknowledges that food and the meanings surrounding it rarely take a linear path from production to consumption, rather they involve complex and multi-pronged connections (Hughes and Reimer 2004; Barret et al 2004). The network metaphor still allows for the recognition and identification of particular nodes and actors, but the relations and connections are seen as a “complex web of interdependence” rather than a fixed or unidirectional relationships (Hughes and Reimer 2004:4). It also allows for a consideration of multi-directional flows of information and material that support and underpin these relationships (Hughes and Reimer 2004:4). This conceptualization helps avoid a prioritization of one aspect of the network over another. As opposed to looking at specific sites or actors, Lockie and Kitto assert that an ANT approach to food provisioning should focus on the relationships that make up the network:

We argue that an approach consistent with the ontology of ANT would be one that focussed on the discursive and material resources, or intermediaries, on which putative actors draw in attempting to influence relations between food provision and consumption. The object of analysis and potential generalization is thus not the agent, institution or process, but the relationships through which these are constituted” (2000:14).

A key contribution of these approaches has been the insistence on acknowledging non-human actors such, as nature and technology, in the creation and disruption of relationships throughout food networks (Murdoch and Miele 2004; Lockie and Kitto

2000). ANT emphasizes that both human and non-human actors have agency in networks; that objects and nature play a role in transforming the networks of which they are a part. Goodman (2002) for example writes that an ANT approach explores the idea of mutual enrolment in food networks, that “certain foods may beckon us” (Guthman 2002:298). ANT helps to show how “natural and social entities become entwined with one another in the heterogeneous networks so evident in the food sector” (Murdoch et al 2000:112).

A network approach provides a much more contingent and situated account of food production-consumption than the commodity chain approaches. Gouveia and Juska assert that “ANT rejects the a-priori conceptualization of forces determining the separation and linkages between consumption and production, nature and society” (Gouveia and Juska 1997: 374). Networks are “always localized, working in real places and at specific time” and can only be known and understood through an examination of their workings “on the ground” (Hughes and Reimer 2004:5). They produce particular visions or translations but they are always temporary and based in a specific context; other competing or alternative visions or translations could always be produced. Networks are not self-sustaining as is often the assumption with a systems or chain approach, they are created by, and depend on “capacities and practices of actants-in-relation” (Whatmore and Thorne 1997: 302).

The strength of these network approaches is in highlighting how food provisioning relationships are both materially and discursively maintained. However, some critics argue that in the process, the politics and power of networks are obscured (DuPuis and Goodman 2002). Gouveia and Juska observe that ANT's emphasis on

agency generally does not include an analysis of the “historical-specific economic arrangements and configurations of power within which such agency is engendered” (1997: 375). Similarly, Wilkinson suggests that the ANT lesson of decentering human agency may have been learned too well, noting that with all the attention being given to “microbes and residues and technological processes” we have forgotten about workers and farmers (2006: 27). Raynolds, while sympathetic to the critiques of political economy, cautions that an emphasis on the subjective and symbolic can go too far. She argues that the challenge is “to maintain a commitment to issues of power and politics, without resorting to overly structural, rigid, unidimensionally ‘driven’ models of what are in reality complex, dynamic, and fluid commodity networks” (2002: 407).

Both political economy and poststructuralist perspectives have been criticized for developing a one-dimensional analysis; it is here that a poststructuralist political economy lens can help to identify integrative approaches that achieve a middle ground between what DePuis and Goodman call “how we 'grow food' and how we 'know food’” (DePuis and Goodman 2002: 6). Recent attempts at such an analysis are an important starting point for envisioning a poststructuralist political economy approach to studying food provisioning. Holloway's et al's Possible Food Economies framework, for example, is an attempt to analyze both the symbolic and material presence of food across each of the analytical fields. Their framework is an attempt to show how particular mappings of arrangements have effects, creating particular producer-consumer relationships with the ability to exist over time and resist dominant power relationships (2007:7). Holloway et al suggest that food networks involve a process of becoming, bringing an ANT-inspired understanding of agency where it does not necessarily have to involve intentionality. As

opposed to concluding the definitive existence of resistance or not, through these analytical fields we can see how resistance might be expressed, contained or eliminated. As Holloway et al. assert, these fields can be used to explore how particular food networks and systems offer “possibilities of resistance” (2007:83) and an understanding of how “the specific ordering and spatiality of particular projects can effectively challenge centres of power in food supply” (2007:90).

Raynolds outlines a similar approach to a revised political economy analysis in her study of consumer-producer relationships in Fair Trade Coffee. She employs a commodity network approach based on a commodity chain analysis but includes “key insights from cultural studies, actor-network theory, and conventions approaches” (2002: 404). She identifies three main areas of revision: including actors and actions of consumption, the symbolic and discursive components of commodity networks and an analysis of the competing conventions that organize commodity networks. Through this revised political economy approach Raynolds seeks to highlight how individual and collective actors “ideologically and materially construct, maintain, and transform commodity networks” (2002:404). In these perspectives we can see some of the “defining dimensions” of PSPE that LeHeron speaks of; an analysis of economic relationships that is situated and embedded, that strives to understand economic diversity in all its material, discursive and cultural manifestations.

#### *How we characterize food provisioning: Alternative Food Networks*

The second key area where the influence of PSPE is apparent is within the discussion and critiques of so-called Alternative Food Networks. A very popular term in the literature, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) refers to the various efforts by

producers, consumers, policy actors and social movements to re-imagine and re-configure the relationships of food provisioning. Seen by many as “templates for the reconfiguration of capitalist society along more ecologically sustainable and socially progressive lines” (Goodman et al. 2012: 3), AFNs refer to food networks that incorporate different values and practices in terms of quality, farming practices, organizational structures and cultural traditions (Sonnino and Marsden 2006: 189). From farmers' markets, labelling schemes, to local, organic food and food box programs, alternative food networks are said to espouse values of sustainability, social and political embeddedness and the relocalization of food (Andrée et al 2010; Jarosz 2007; Hinrichs 2000; Holloway et al 2007; Parkins and Craig 2009). They are a reaction to the economic rationality of efficiency and standardization of the increasingly global and corporate food system, where food is little more than a commodity to be scientifically and technologically intervened upon. As Feagan et al observe:

the political economy of food systems has truly been transformed in the last fifty years, and the range of environmentally degrading impacts and the general destabilization of rural and regional economies and their associated sociocultural spheres have raised profound questions and concerns about both the means and the ends of the dominant industrial food production mode (Feagan et al 2004: 237).

Kneafsey et al (2008) describe AFN's as efforts of consumers and producers to rebuild relationships of trust and reciprocity in the face of a “disconnected” food system. They write that this idea of disconnection “refers not only to structures and relationships within the food system, but also to perceptions and feelings about the food system” (2008:6). While not discounting the economic exchange inherent in these relationships, alternative food networks seek to prioritize the moral, aesthetic and ecological components of food (Parkins and Craig, 2009).

AFNs have garnered much interest in recent years. Despite this excitement,

Alternative Food Networks, both in theory and in practice, are the subject of increasing critique and challenge. Not everyone sees these alternative forms of agriculture as a panacea for the challenges facing farmers, nor is there consensus on the kind of alternatives these activities are creating. Much of the criticism has centered on the use and meaning of the word alternative as it perpetuates a false dichotomy between so-called alternative (good) and conventional (bad) food systems (Maye et al. 2007; Andrée et al. 2010; Parkins and Craig 2008). A discourse of alternative vs. conventional is overly simplistic and glosses over important intricacies and complexities of food systems (Jarosz 2008; Hinrichs 2000; Holloway et al 2007). As Follet argues:

the discussion of food networks is incomplete when left at this dualism of conventional versus alternative. The alternative food system is a heterogeneous mix of networks vastly different from one another in their ability to address issues of welfare, sustainability, choice, and power distribution” (2009: 49).

The idea of alternative is a normatively ambiguous term that does not give any clear sense of the intentions, perspectives or desires of those involved, other than to suggest they are in opposition to, or distinct from some element of conventional food systems. This has led to a whole host of diverse practices, institutions and networks being described as “alternative,” often without critically examining the kind of alternative space they are creating and who is encouraged to participate. Holloway et al (2007) note the pitfalls of maintaining a dichotomous approach, arguing that while the use of 'alternative' may seem attractive, the concept itself is difficult if not impossible to define:

Although discourses of ‘alternativeness’ might be powerful in stimulating challenges to what are felt to be, or experienced as, unjust economic relations, ‘the alternative’ itself is a slippery concept, resisting definition and shifting as soon as attempts are made to tie it down. (Holloway et al 2007: 80).

Such a discussion also suggests the possibility of passing judgement on a particular model in its abstract form, thereby minimizing the importance of considering

the specific social, political and economic context in which these practices occur. As Jarosz insists, food systems “are not static objects or sets of relationships. They emerge from political, cultural and historical processes” (2008: 242). The diversity and contingency of alternative food networks is based on their particular constellation of ecological, political, economic and socio-cultural processes rooted in place (Jarosz 2008: 231). In addition, echoing the observations of Larner and LeHeron (2002) that individuals rarely exist within only one economic model, Cameron and Gordon (2010) point out that producers and consumers often operate within both what are termed alternative and conventional food systems or activities, making it difficult to cleanly delineate between the two.

Several authors have also warned against the equation of spatial proximity or scale with desired values or outcomes, a common practice with AFNs themselves and the research about them (Hinchins 2000; Allen 2010; Goodman and DuPuis 2005). Goodman and DuPuis (2005) caution that we should not be too quick to embrace the supposed connection between the localization of food and the promotion of social and environmental justice. While they are clear that “place” has a role in building alternative food networks, they contend that an unreflective localism permeates much of the discussion around alternative food ,which promotes a problematic “set of norms or imaginaries about place” (2005: 360). Marsden et al (2000), for example, suggest that the distance between producer and consumer is not necessarily the crucial factor, rather it is the degree to which products carry with them information about their conditions of production. Here we see elements of Conventions Theory and the role played by modes of ordering.

### *Alternative for whom?*

Several scholars have also raised questions about the values and practices within AFNs that emphasize individual consumer action and work to exclude people of colour and marginalized communities. Guthman's (2008a) analysis exposes the production and reproduction of whiteness within alternative food movements. She argues that many of these movements fail to address issues of class, race and privilege. Goodman and Goodman (2007) , found that the vast majority of CSA members in the United States are well educated, middle-class, and of European-American descent. Rather than acknowledging the overwhelming white, middle-class make-up of participating consumers, Guthman's research (2008a; 2008b) suggests that movements tend to adopt a position of colour blindness and promote an assumed universal ethic around food. This claim to universality and colour blindness works to shift the responsibility of inclusion and participation to those currently excluded. DeLind, speaking to the popular "eat local" movement, critiques its individualistic and consumer-focused discourse:

There is little about the term locavore that speaks to whole persons- people as residents, poets, bus drivers, grandmothers, and neighbourhood activists- as people who must practice the complex art of living with each other...It is a segmenting and isolating perspective that fosters, however inadvertently, a sense of me rather than a sense of we (2011: 276).

Allen engages in a similar analysis to DeLind, exploring the degree to which local food initiatives advance equity. She concludes that while there is a lot of potential for localization to bring about advancement in equity issues, "local" does not automatically signal a stronger commitment to social justice. Other important considerations include analyzing how social relations of power and privilege affect participation and decision making (2010:298). Both Allen (2010) and Guthman (2008a) call for a renewed emphasis on social justice that puts the equitable distribution of power and material resources at the

forefront of the discussion. Similarly, Goodman (2010) cautions that without a strong focus on social justice, AFNs risk devolving into a niche market for those who can afford it:

social justice needs to be the centre-piece of a reinvigorated food policy to promote equal access to nutritious quality foods and in ways which sustain “fair” livelihoods for farmers, farm workers and other actors in food provisioning...without deep-seated political and institutional change, alternative food networks are likely to be confined to provisioning “better-off people” in narrowly circumscribed spaces of consumption (Goodman 2010:205).

Several authors have identified the need for “new conceptual and methodological tools” (Sonino and Marsden 2006:184), as well as a more rigorous critical analysis. Instead of trying to assign blunt labels to food provisioning model, Johnston (2008) argues that we should attune ourselves to the sometimes subtle degrees of emancipation and domination, to evaluate the degree to which food practices embody a transformative food politics. Tregear (2011) asserts that the AFN literature is at a crucial point where a growing body of work is challenging the prevailing assumptions and approaches of the field. Tregear cautions that despite the valuable critical reflections offered by some in the field, the AFN literature “has reached something of an impasse, with some debates and exchanges appearing to entrench scholars in established theoretical positions, rather than encourage the breaking of new boundaries” (2011: 420). She insists that a moment of critical reflection is needed to assess how best to move forward. Hinrich agrees, suggesting that the literature could benefit from a deeper critical analysis and moment of reflexivity:

various labels, such as 'local', 'alternative', 'quality', 'transformative' and 'sustainable' have been affixed to these new manifestations. But in the rush of documenting and fostering these encouraging changes in the food system, we may not ask how well these labels work as broad equivalents or whether they, in face, represent distinct content” (2010:18)

Speaking specifically of local food, Ilbery and Maye argue that despite the high amount

of attention afforded to it, there has not been sufficient in-depth analysis: “while advocacy for local food is high, there is a lack of empirical evidence about the actual shape and scale of such food supply chains” (2006: 352)<sup>19</sup>. As Holloway et al. remind us, we should be “wary of the risks of romanticising the radicalised ‘alternatives’ in such a way that they are not subject to the same degree of critical reflection which is currently being applied to ‘mainstream’ food supply systems” (2007:4).

These critiques emphasize many key elements of PSPE. They highlight the problems and limitations with the use of alternative or conventional as abstract categories with assumed normative orientations. They are arguments for more situated, contextual analysis of food provisioning, as opposed to broad pronouncements. They also call on us to be more precise and articulate in our examinations of particular models, sites and activities. What should be taken from these critiques is not that these practices or systems are failed models, but that the ability to enact a transformative politics is not guaranteed in the structure itself. It requires a particular context and set of contingencies. The language of “alternative” may not be very useful, but the critical discussion it has generated provides valuable insight into the kinds of questions we should be asking, and the types of observations we should be striving to make in a poststructuralist political economy analysis of food provisioning.

### ***2.3 Coping and prefiguring towards a collective autonomy***

From a poststructuralist political economy perspective, the economy becomes the site of near-endless possibilities. Our economic relationships and identities can be the site of experimentation and struggle to both imagine and enact a different reality. As the

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<sup>19</sup> In the 9 years since the publication of this article there has been a growing empirical investigation of local food, but the need for more in-depth analysis remains.

previous section laid out, food provisioning is increasingly being examined and understood in these terms, a direction that I believe has many fruitful possibilities to help overcome some of the limitations of the existing literature. One such possibility that I find particularly promising is that of a collective autonomy. Understanding some of the experimentations undertaken by farmers and other food network actors as forms of collective autonomy can be a means of addressing the limitations of the alternative/conventional dichotomy, and highlights a particular orientation based in prefiguration and self-determination, representing a shift away from counter-hegemonic struggles of mass transformation.

The concept of autonomy or autonomous has a long and rich history within political and social theory. Put simply, it is the ability of people to self-organize. It is most strongly associated with the autonomist movements in Italy during the 1970s-1980s and more recently with the works of postmarxists, autonomist marxists, and postanarchists (See for example Hart and Negri 2000; 2004, Day 2003; 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Agamben 1993;2005, Bey 1987), yet its general idea can be traced back to early anarchist theories of Kropotkin and Bakunin<sup>20</sup>. Autonomism as a specific, defined politics dates back to the 1960s with the publication of the Red Notebook by a left wing faction of the Italian Socialist Party. The theories espoused in the Red Notebook volumes became known as “workerist” and formed the basis of autonomism (Fuller, 2001). The workerist position rejected hegemony and instead called for the creation of autonomous space for the working class, a path to transformation without the state, labour unions or political parties. As Fuller describes it:

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<sup>20</sup> Autonomism is generally thought of as a particular strand of anarchism rather than a unifying principle, and there continues to be much debate about the value of a counter-hegemonic or non-hegemonic orientation.

If capitalism had historically used the working class as a force for development and appropriated their demands, then a precondition for the liberation of the class was its separation, its 'autonomy' from capitalism at a political level. What this meant was a subjective non-acceptance of the system, a day by day revolt. In practice it meant the 'strategy of refusal'--the refusal of workers to be integrated into the production process. This could be achieved through absenteeism, wildcat strikes or other unofficial action. The key point, though, was that workers had to fight for themselves and not leave the struggle to their union or party (Fuller, 2001).

Ince (2010) connects the idea of autonomy to prefiguration, referring to autonomy as “a form of social, lived practice that is embedded in continual prefiguration in the spaces of everyday life” (85). It is a merging of individual freedom and collective organization.

Chatterton and Pickerill apply the idea of autonomous to more recent activities through their concept of autonomous geographies. Chatterton defines autonomy as “a desire for freedom, self-organization and mutual aid” (2004: 545). Building on this notion of autonomy, he and Pickerill engage in an analysis of autonomous geographies, which they describe as spaces where people seek to constitute “noncapitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation” (2006: 730). They employ an understanding of autonomy that is best expressed as a desire, as opposed to a complete reality. It is a contextual autonomy, capable of multiple trajectories of both resistance and creation (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006). Autonomous geographies are the “incomplete terrain where daily struggles are made and remade, both symbolically and materially, and where people live by their beliefs and face contradictions from living between worlds - the actually existing and the hoped for” (2006: 737). At its core it is a rejection of all roots to power, a call to build collective spaces of mutual aid through non-hierarchical decision-making.

Pickerill and Chatterton suggest that autonomous geographies represent a shift away from a universal notion of social transformation and revolution. Much in the spirit

of poststructuralist political economy, they write that locally-based experiments of “futures in the present” (Cleaver 1979) are often overlooked in the quest to understand global phenomena and struggles: “[the] area that has been neglected through a concern with bigger, global concerns is the specific practices of activists and how they challenge, deal with and imagine alternatives to life under capitalism in the everyday” (2010: 475). The aim of these autonomous spaces is not to seize power but to reject the very notion of power and institutions that demand obedience and conformity. Instead of a revolutionary logic, “a plurality of voices is reframing the debate, changing the nature and boundaries of what is taken as common sense and creating workable solutions to erode the workings of market-based economies in a host of, as yet, unknown ways” (Chatterton and Pickerell 2006: 738).

What is significant about the idea of autonomous is that it is implicitly calling for a shift from what Day calls a ‘politics of demand’, to a ‘politics of the act.’ Day describes the politics of demand as “actions oriented to ameliorating the practices of states, corporations and everyday life, through either influencing or using state power to achieve irradiation effects” (2004: 733). A politics of demand seeks to improve existing institutions and everyday experiences by “appealing to the benevolence of hegemonic forces and/or by altering the relations between these forces” (Day 2005: 80). Day recognizes the practical appeal of a politics of demand but insists that it is necessarily limited in scope, writing that “it can change the content of structures of domination and exploitation, but it cannot change their form” (Day 2005:88). Making demands and waiting for responses in a sense perpetuates the existence of these very structures by legitimating their existence. A politics of the act, by contrast, is about breaking the cycle

of demand and desire by “inventing a response that precludes the necessity of the demand” (Day 2004: 734). It is about creating an alternative here and now, taking direct action instead of demanding action of others. A politics of the act exposes the fantasy upon which the politics of demand is based; that hegemonic structures will recognize and validate the demands being made and respond in an appropriate way (Day 2005: 89). A politics of the act seeks to simultaneously work against capitalism while building alternatives that lessen its reach (2004: 735). Applied to food provisioning, this does not equal the popular refrain of “voting with your dollar,” an ill-thought out and limiting concept at best. Autonomous possibilities in food provisioning are about building a new social and economic world through their relationships, identities, priorities and values.

Initially I thought there would be clear parallels between the idea of autonomous and the stories of these farmers; and in some ways there were. There were autonomous elements in the kinds of possibilities being created. Many were based on a desire to disengage from capitalist methods of value, exchange and labour. There was also a non-hegemonic orientation to how they expressed their politics, choosing to create alternatives rather than trying to influence the dominant system or structure to change. And yet, in other ways I struggled to apply the concept to individual farms and farmers. They were not seeking to be completely self-sufficient, or to remove themselves from exchanges with others. At times the term felt too political, too abstract for the messy day-to-day activities I ended up talking about with farmers. In analyzing the interview data, I realized that while it wasn't always possible to identify autonomous possibilities at the level of the individual farm or farmer, taking a step back to the broader food network, I could see a collective autonomy. By collective autonomy, I mean the creation of a food

network or food community that seeks to be separate from or outside of the capitalist food system, building new relationships based in mutual aid and reciprocity.

The early tradition and origins of autonomous were highly political and explicit, however it has come to encapsulate a broader array of activities that might not necessarily be as provocative in their articulation. For example, Chatterton and Pickerill use the concept of autonomous geographies to explore both anarchist social centres and low impact development projects; seemingly two different kinds of political activities, yet both seeking to create a different kind of social world that operates outside of dominant ways of being. The collective autonomy that I'm proposing here is more of an implicit and experiential autonomy, grounded in the messy negotiations of not only day-to-day living, but a day-to-day livelihood. The farmers I spoke to didn't necessarily come into farming with a vocal affinity to autonomous politics, rather they were looking for ways to build a particular kind of food system that embodied many of the ideas and values of a collective autonomy.

Maxey uses the concept “independent interdependence” to describe the strong feelings of independence expressed by farmers, alongside a “self-acknowledged interdependence” ((2006: 237). Farmers sought to be independent from structures they saw as disempowering, such as the state, commercial agricultural and large retailers. They also expressed their independence in their thought process, their willingness to take risks and act differently than their peers. Yet, as Maxey notes, their daily lives were still deeply interdependent through a series of networks of human and non-human actors (2006: 237). The idea of a collective autonomy invokes this state of “independent interdependence.” The farmers in this study are building spaces of experimentation and

prefiguration inhabited by many people. They are not seeking to be autonomous from one another, they are seeking autonomy from broader economic and political structures and institutions.

This set of values and political orientation outlined within a collective autonomy as conceptualized in this project are also present in other movements and forms of social and economic transformation. For example, an argument could be made that the farmers in this study are part of a new generation of back-to-the-land-movements (Jacobs 2006)<sup>21</sup>. Indeed several of the farms highlighted in this research started their journey towards farming by going “back to the land,” first as homesteaders before starting an enterprise. However, according to Jacob only a small minority of back- to-the-landers make their living from food provisioning, an important distinction that shapes both how these politics and values are enacted and what obstacles stand in their way. While these farmers and back-to-the landers share many of the same values and interest in disengaging from dominant systems and institutions, the way in which they achieve those goals is decidedly different, and would perhaps be more closely tied to an autonomous politics, as opposed to a *collective* autonomy. Some elements of the co-operative movement could also be seen as enacting a collective autonomy. One of the farms interviewed was organized as a co-operative and strongly identified with the co-operative principles. However much of the co-operative movement in Canada and the United State has lost its radical orientation, preferring to comfortably exist within capitalism.<sup>22</sup> In contrast to the back-to-the-land movement, within the co-operative movement we find

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<sup>21</sup> See also Belasco's (2006) *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took On the Food Industry* for a historical examination of the consumer side of food and the rise of what he calls “countercuisine” of the 1960s.

<sup>22</sup> This was an argument taken up in my Master's Thesis (2008) *Co-opting Precariousness? Can Worker Co-operatives Be Alternatives to Precarious Employment?*

elements of collectivity, but lack an autonomous orientation.

The political orientation and values described within the framework of collective autonomy can also, in some ways, be understood through other conceptual and analytical frameworks. Food democracy was one such concept that I encountered early in my research. The concept of food democracy is a popular lens through which to talk about experimentation in food, defined by Hassanein as the idea that “all members of an agro-food system have equal and effective opportunities for participation in shaping that system, as well as knowledge about the relevant alternative ways of designing and operating the system” (2003: 83). During one of my initial scoping interviews, one participant relayed the story of an orchard in the Ottawa area that was recently bulldozed to make way for a development project. The farmer had sold his farm and as apple trees were not considered environmentally significant, their removal was permitted. This person lamented that these thousands of apple trees were destroyed without the input of the community, that the community as a whole lost that orchard and didn't have any control or power in the decision of what to do with those trees. Their solution to this was that every household should have a couple of fruit trees in their own backyard. Thus, no one one person could make a decision would affect the local supply of apples to such a degree (Scoping Interview 01). This proposal invokes the key sentiment behind food democracy, the idea that people should have a say in their food network.

The story struck a chord with me because I thought, well of course given the opportunity Ottawa residents, as consumers, would be against the destruction of that orchard. However, that sentiment is likely not based in a desire to work on that orchard; they don't want to run that orchard, or carry the risk and stress of that farm business.

They want that orchard to exist for when they feel like indulging in some local apple picking. That's a simplistic characterization to be sure, but I do think there is often a discourse of food democracy that assumes an interest or willingness to participate, that many food producers, including myself, do not consistently see happening on the ground. As the snow starts to thaw in the early spring, our farm would always get emails inquiring about our produce and describing how excited they were to participate in the farm and come visit. My partner would refer to this as spring fever, as inevitably the number of people who actually showed up for farm visits or workbees was always significantly lower than those who showed such enthusiasm a few months prior. In the context of a livelihood-based inquiry, food democracy as a conceptual framework leaves too many questions unanswered about how that participation also extends to responsibility.

Food sovereignty is perhaps the most ubiquitous term used in association with alternative forms of agriculture and food provisioning. As Andrée et al understand it, food sovereignty encompasses struggles for “control, autonomy, democratic participation, and agency” (2014:4). Its mobilization does get us away from the binary of alternative and conventional, and the principle of food sovereignty could be taken up as part of a strategy for collective autonomy. A collective autonomy within food based livelihoods may indeed be predicated on a commitment to, and desire for, food sovereignty. One farmer in this study (farm 6) spoke passionately about food sovereignty and did use it as a central piece of her politics and motivations.

While speaking to some of the themes drawn out of the research, I felt food sovereignty was in some sense, too broad of a term. I did not find it as useful a term as

collective autonomy in part because of its popularity and ensuing elasticity. The realm of food sovereignty encompasses a wider array of actors than collective autonomy; including state and institutional actors as well as social movements. As Martin and Andrée (2014) observe, the concept of food sovereignty is increasingly being applied to diverse and at times questionable contexts, raising questions about what exactly is included under the umbrella of food sovereignty. Depending on how it is understood, food sovereignty does evoke a kind of autonomous politics, particularly in the Global South, but that is not always the case. To me, a collective autonomy has a stronger and more precise orientation, occupying a more specific space within the landscape of possibilities. In addition, collective autonomy speaks to a process, a mode of being and positioning oneself in terms of how to articulate and enact alternatives. I see food sovereignty as more of a value or objective, with many different paths that can be taken to achieve it. Collective autonomy is more dynamic, asking us to think about not only what postcapitalist possibilities might be created, but how that process of envisioning and enacting is taking place.

Agrarian citizenship, a third concept worth considering, is arguably more focused than food sovereignty; placing an emphasis on those who are involved in food provisioning as a livelihood. However here too, the breadth of possibilities, as well as the diversity of strategies highlighted to achieve them, makes it difficult to pinpoint a particular kind of postcapitalist alternative, and a particular orientation towards bringing them into being. For example, the broad social transformation that Whittman (2009) speaks of in her exploration of agrarian citizenship in Brazil was a different kind of possibility than a collective autonomy, one that sought to influence a wider terrain and set

of actors. The agrarian citizenship that Wittman (2009) speaks of has a more direct relationship with the state. While Whitman identifies a shift away from involvement with political parties and more mainstream farm unions, the state is still a central site of claims making and negotiation. Within a collective autonomy, the relationship to the state is decidedly distant; not necessarily as a rejection of the state, but as an orientation to enacting alternatives that does not view the state as a necessary or central actor.

Agrarian citizenship, has a more political (as opposed to economic) orientation, perhaps even more so than food sovereignty. The concept of citizenship evokes a discourse of rights and claims making; a vocabulary that was not strongly articulated by my research participants. Again, this is not a critique of the concept of agrarian citizenship, but it does suggest a misalignment with the activities of the farmers interviewed. There also appears to be a more formalized collective identity and organized collectivity in cases of agrarian citizenship. While these were indeed important themes that came out of my research, the forms of collectivity were more informal and often unstructured.

While some of these theories and frameworks see the farmer as a potentially political actor, my analysis sees farming itself as an inherently political act. A farmer is not merely political because of what farm organization they are involved in, or what social movements they support. They are political because of their chosen livelihood and how they perform that work. Lyson makes a similar distinction in his discussion of civic agriculture, noting that civic agriculture is distinct from a civic farmer:

Civic agriculture should not be confused with civic farmers. Farmers who vote in local elections, sit on school boards, are active members of local service clubs such as Rotary, Lions, or Kiwanis, and otherwise participate in the civic affairs of their communities may be seen as “good citizens.” However, a farm or food business that is not woven into the social and economic fabric of the local

community, that produces only for the export market, that relies on nonlocal hired labour, and that provides few benefits for its workers is not a civic enterprise, regardless of the civic engagement of its operator (2005:94).

The concept of civic agriculture describes a form of agriculture that is embedded in the community, much like the sets of relationships that I describe in this thesis. According to Lyson, civic agriculture “embodies a commitment to developing an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable system of agriculture” (2005:94). A strength of this framework is that it mobilizes an understanding of sustainability that is multi-pronged, acknowledging the financial and social components of sustainability in addition to their more popular counterpart of environmental sustainability. However, like many of the current analytical tools in agro-food studies, Lyson falls victim to the dichotomous trapping of strong theorizing by seeking to understand the current state of farming as one of two possibilities: civic agricultural and conventional agriculture.

One of the strengths of a collective autonomy is its multi-facedness, that it can speak to social and economic questions, as well as questions of subjectivities, individual values and emotions. A collective autonomy within food provisioning, as described in this project, involves a material and social practice based within mutual aid, and reciprocity, as well as an internal process of becoming that highlights a shift towards collective subjectivities and post-consumer values. Any one of these elements taken on their own could lead towards any number of postcapitalist possibilities, or possibilities within capitalism. It is the interaction between, and combination of, these different facets that create what I identify as a collective autonomy. Much like Levkoe (2011), who argues that a transformative food politics must involve the incorporation of multiple elements, in his case, the transition to collective subjectivities, a whole systems approach and a reflexive localism, I see a collective autonomy as a practice that necessarily

involves multiple components. Similarly, Chatterton (2004) talks of autonomous geographies as having territorial, social, and economic manifestations.

In line with the theoretical location of this project, within weak theory, poststructuralist political economy and the performativity of research, my aim here is not to argue that collective autonomy is a decidedly superior analytical framework than others. Using the lens of collective autonomy highlights certain things over others, and has particular strengths and weaknesses. Choosing to explore the actions and desires of the farmers in this study through the lens of collective autonomy is an attempt to draw out particular themes, and in doing so other themes or potential avenues of inquiry are inevitably excluded.

The concept of collective autonomy, more so than other frameworks, is able to capture and bring to the forefront the shift away from hegemonic struggles and mass-movement building that is not present to the same degree within either agrarian citizenship or food sovereignty. On the other hand, the lens of collective autonomy does not emphasize the role that state or larger institutional forces may play. Instead it highlights the individual practices and smaller collective forces and informal networks. While not featured in the overall analytical framework of my project, these other concepts are useful in making sense of particular pieces of farmers' stories that contribute to the overall framework of collective autonomy. These are choices that we each must make as researchers and the answers may be different every time. To me, in this context, with this group of farmers, collective autonomy allowed me to make particular insights and observations that I believe pushes the study of agro-food networks and diverse economies in positive and intriguing ways.

### *Coping and Prefiguring*

In the case of the farmers in this study, this collective autonomy is enacted through a series of coping and prefiguring strategies. The creation and desire for a collective autonomy is both a reaction to present realities (coping) and a proactive imagining of a utopian food system (prefiguring). Farmers and their families have a long history of developing coping strategies to make things work. Coping strategies are intended to make it easier for farmers to exist in the current agricultural landscape by lowering their costs and, accessing new markets or revenue streams. Coping is a reaction to current realities, trying to make a difficult situation a bit more palatable, a bit more work-able. The farmers and farms that are the focus of this study share in this practice of coping. They are shaped and influenced by the structural forces and large scale trends described in Chapter One, and are forced to employ a variety of coping mechanisms to make it work. At the same time, their activities and orientations go beyond an attempt to cope with currently realities. They are also actively trying to implement strategies that would transform those realities, prefiguring a different kind of food system based on a collective autonomy.

Prefiguration can be understood as the inseparability of means and ends, closing the gap between the real and the ideal (Maeckelbergh 2011). As van de Sande describes:

'Prefiguration' or 'prefigurative politics' refers to a political action, practice, movement, moment or development in which certain political ideals are experimentally actualised in the 'here and now', rather than hoped to be realised in a distant future. Thus, in prefigurative practices, the means applied are deemed to embody or 'mirror' the ends one strives to realise (2013:230).

Similarly, Siltanen et al. define prefiguration as "an effort to bring desired futures actively into being in the present" (2014:263), acting "as if" things are already different.

Originating in new left movements of the 1960s and feminist organizing, prefiguration places value on everyday experience and the daily act of living one's theoretical positions (Siltanen 2014; Yates 2015). Prefiguration is a political practice and process that, as van de Sande notes, is inherently “experimental and experiential” (2013: 232). These strategies may not be directly confronting dominant systems or structures, instead they are seeking to evade them or work outside of them to build other possibilities. Yates (2015) suggests that prefiguration has been taken up in two main ways in the literature, one in general reference to the building of alternatives and the other a more specific reference to a particular dynamic in how activities are performed. The prefiguration I speak of here reflects both; referring to a particular dynamic in the building of alternatives.

The dualism of coping and prefiguring implies that beyond just reacting to reality, there is also an element of imagination and experimentation. The chosen coping mechanisms of these farmers are, in many cases, also prefigurative in nature. Coping and prefiguring is a two-step dance that has both material, social and cultural manifestations; shaping how these farmers see themselves and their community, how they structure their economic relationships and exchanges and how they define a good life. As Hetherington observes, the key to understanding the complex ways that the practicalities of farming interact with values or ethics is to see the ways that they are connected: “The trick is not to understand the material world as separate from that of ideas, but to see these are interconnected in complex and novel ways” (2005:101). By engaging in coping strategies that are also prefigurative, these farmers were able to make their current realities more palatable, while simultaneously working to circumvent those constraints

and re-imagine themselves and their economic relationships. Farmers were seeking ways to adapt and survive that were simultaneously transformative.

Siltanen et al. remind us of the need to be specific about what kind of alternative is being prefigured as “prefiguration is not by definition positive, and its embedded vision of political processes and goals is open to evaluation and critique” (2014: 276). Indeed, prefiguration in an abstract sense is quite vague; one could prefigure any number of possibilities. As Yates observes:

Prefiguration forms part of a general understanding of politics as an instrument of social change. Yet it is often not clear if it is a tactic, orientation or way of doing protest, an alternative type of movement activity or a combination of these, and it is rarely apparent where distinctions with other types of political activity ought to be made (2015: 2).

Much like Gibson-Graham's politics of possibilities, understanding the lived experience of these farmers as, in part, a series of coping and prefiguring strategies is the first step of an analysis of economic diversity and postcapitalist possibilities. Albritton, in a critique of Gibson-Graham, writes that “begging in the street, a good deal of petty crime and forced labour are all non-capitalist economic differences, but how do they contribute to the rewriting of capitalism?...Do we simply want a greater diversity of capitalists and more diverse forms of exploitation?” (2001: 175). Here, Albritton misinterprets the aim of highlighting this economic diversity, but his critique serves as a useful reminder that mapping diversity to show the range of capitalist and non-capitalist economic processes is not an end in itself, rather it is a first step in a broader process of imagining and enacting diverse economies. Jonas asserts that the purpose of mapping or highlighting economic diversity is not to celebrate all of them as non-exploitative, but to “highlight a locus of potentially progressive economic politics that is often overlooked” (2010: 13). In the context of this thesis, the focus is on the prefiguration of a set of postcapitalist

possibilities based in a collective autonomy, but there are perhaps other kinds of possibilities also in play, and certainly other actors in other contexts might prefigure an entirely different set of possibilities.

In addition, the distinction between coping and prefiguring is not meant to suggest that particular activities are strictly one or the other. Rather than understand them as a strict binary, the distinction is meant to highlight a difference in orientation and rationale. A particular action or value is unlikely to be wholly either prefigurative or coping. Indeed there are likely few examples that could be characterized as “pure” representations of coping or prefiguring. The most interesting cases presented in this thesis are those strategies that are simultaneously coping and prefiguring; providing two different rationales for the same activity or value. The same activity may also be undertaken by different farmers for different purposes and distinct ends. Coping and prefiguring strategies can be understood as multiplicities that manifest differently based on context and situation. Participating in a farmers' market may, in many cases be largely a coping strategy for some farmers, but for others it may have prefigurative potential. The use of coping and prefiguring helps to make visible what I see as a significant difference in farmers' approach to challenging circumstances. To be sure, coping and prefiguring are not all that these farmers are doing. The argument here is that 'coping and prefiguring' is the process through which farmers are enacting postcapitalist possibilities.

Of course this prefiguration does not occur in isolation. It is shaped by the surrounding realities that farmers must cope with. As Mount asserts, engagement within an alternative food system does not exempt participants from the influences of wider systems and relationships (2012: 111). The experience of these farmers does not suggest

a cheapening of their politics, but a more practical and grounded form of experimentation. The various strategies of coping and prefiguring worked as a daily praxis; bringing together concerns of soil health and biodiversity, with production benchmarks and pricing, alongside community building and quality of life.

Hetherington highlights this negotiation in his research into organic farmers in Nova Scotia. He observed a pattern where, after farming for approximately five years, most underwent a process or moment of “waking up” where, despite their political or utopic convictions, “the practicalities of living from organic farming, the economic difficulties and the social isolation that many feel catch up with them” (2005: 16). This wake-up often led farmers to stop farming, or to undergo significant changes in how they viewed the world and their farming practices. Referencing this idea of “waking up”

Hetherington writes that

the revolutionary aspirations of most young organic growers are soon put to the test of dealing with input costs, beetles, worms, blights and a finicky market. The systematic disillusionment of a high proportion of organic growers is the first indication that the ideas with which they come to the field are anything but appropriate to that field (2005: 88).

This disillusionment is not a complete rejection of their utopian values, rather Hetherington observed that “in its place something much more interesting, flexible and hopeful emerges” (2005:89). Maxey (2006) makes a similar observation to that of Hetherington's, noting that farmers' values and intentions shift over time. He suggests that many came into farming based on concerns about climate change, food security or connecting people to the food they eat. However, as they progressed their motivations became more personal and mundane, not that those other concerns disappeared, but other day-to-day concerns became more pressing.

I would not describe the the experiences of the farmers I interviewed in exactly

the same terms as Hetherington's, but he does capture the messy negotiation that takes place as farmers seek to balance their pursuit of a livelihood with their values and ethical commitments. As opposed to a linear framing, implied in the concept of “waking up,” strategies of coping and prefiguring are a continual praxis, observed in both new and seasoned farmers.

*Farming as Praxis: between co-optation and transformation*

There is a tendency within critical scholarship to oscillate between absolute rejection and uncritical celebration, particularly when talking about alternatives to capitalism. This plays out in agro-foods studies as well. Campbell and Rosin make note of a “grand binary that has organised wider academic constructions and categorisations of organic agriculture and food” (2011:352). While much of the earlier (and some current) engagements with Alternative Food Networks have a tendency to uncritically celebrate their potential, the backlash against these perspectives can also go too far in dismissing their ability to bring about meaningful change. In our attempts to rectify uncritical assessments of these activities and models, perhaps we have swung too far the other way, falling into some of the same strong theory traps that were originally a point of critique.

Many have used the example of organic agriculture as an indication of the futility of attempting to build alternatives in the face of capitalism, arguing that what was once a holistic and politically-driven approach to farming has devolved into a “technical fix” that mirrors the industrial conventional food system in an increasing number of ways (Guthman 2004a, 2004b, Allen and Kovak 2000). Buck et al's conventionalist thesis, revisiting Kartauky's Agrarian Question, argues that organic farmers are increasingly pressured to adopt more conventional practices in terms of labour, marketing strategies and

production techniques. This was followed up by Guthman's widely cited 2004 book tracing the history and development of organic farming in California, which became a key piece of evidence in critiquing organic and its descent into corporate agriculture.

Guthman argues that the current state of organic agriculture regulation “undermine[s] the ability of even the most committed producer to practice a purely alternative form of organic farming” (2004: 301-302). But what is a pure alternative form of agriculture? This type of language falls into the same trap as the much criticized discourse of alternative and conventional, and attempts to bundle together diverse moments of exciting possibilities and frustrating constraints into blunt categories. This critical work is undoubtedly important and reflective of much of contemporary agriculture, however, it is not the whole story. This is a form of strong theory that leaves little room for alternative outcomes or variations and projects a very linear notion of social change (Carolan 2013). The realities of farming are more complex. As Pratt contends:

If we stay within the logic of capitalist production, we will also not grasp what these producers are trying to do, and why in some circumstances they succeed in creating new spaces and keeping them open. Each needs to be analyzed in the first instance in terms of their own objectives and practices (2009: 172).

For example, some authors have pointed towards a split or bifurcation within organic agriculture, with smaller alternative farms on the one hand and larger industrial organic farms on the other. The conventionalization of organics is presented not as all-encompassing but rather creating additional distance and distinction between these two groups (Campbell and Coombes 1998; Buck et al 1999; Tovey 1998). Constance et al's (2008) research, for example, found mixed results in terms of conventionalization of both organic certified and non-certified organic farmers in Texas, disputing the existence of an

overarching trend.

Pratt urges us to be mindful of the political discourse that is informing our analysis of agriculture and farmers. He contends that Guthman's work on the organic industry in California has a “recurring and complex tendency to project the categories of economic action and the rationality of capitalist enterprises back into the analysis of alternative economic forms” (2009: 164). Highlighting the performativity of research, he argues that Guthman's choice to focus her research around the idea of organic had particular consequences, mainly that only those enterprises that used that language and continued to identify as organic were included. So while the label “organic” has become increasingly commodified and bureaucratized, this trajectory was not inevitable, and it does not follow that all those farmers involved in organic agriculture were incorporated into capitalist relationships along with it. There are farmers who purposely avoid using the language of organic, identifying instead with concepts of sustainable agriculture, ecological, biodynamic, holistic farming or direct relationships between producer and consumer. Using the label of organic excludes these farmers from the analysis.

For example, there is a growing group of farmers in the US who refer to themselves as “beyond organic”, and many farmers who specify that they are non-certified organic. While this may seem like a trivial point of semantics, these labels have a significant influence on what kinds of alternatives possibilities are visible.

Beford, attempting to break this cycle in the discussions of alternatives, talks of walking a line between Prozac and denial (2009: 210). She reflects that many critical accounts of the economy leave no room for alternatives to neoliberalism and in her words “left us all fumbling for Prozac” (2009: 210). By contrast, celebratory accounts of

successful localized alternatives can seem like a denial of structural forces or limitations and problematic elements. The key for Bedford is finding a balance between these two extremes. Walking a line between Prozac and denial entails acknowledging both the limitations and possibilities in our research. Indeed, rather than following the path of “conventionalizing” (Buck et al 1997; Guthman 2004), through a dual practice of coping and prefiguring, the farmers in this study walk a similar line between making ends meet and making alternative realities.

This lens of coping and prefiguring provides a bridge to extricate ourselves from seemingly endless arguments about whether alternative forms of agriculture have been co-opted or whether they still retain a transformation potential. The kinds of postcapitalist possibilities that are being imagined and experimented on these farms are both practical and utopic in their orientation. Farming becomes a form of praxis, a daily engagement and negotiation of their position both within and against capitalism. Siltanen et al., exploring the work of feminist organizations and their engagement with the state, see prefiguration as a tool and resource in managing the tension of working both “inside” and “outside” the local state” (2014: 261). They propose an understanding of prefiguration that does not exclude engagement with the state, seeing prefiguration not solely as a means to work outside state institutions but to work from within and engage the state without succumbing to co-optation. The farmers in this study used prefiguration in a parallel manner, to navigate their own tensions and challenges that come from simultaneously existing within capitalist and non-capitalist relationships. In a similar way to how Andrée (2014) understands AFNs as both a response to, and a manifestation of, neoliberalism. Coping and prefiguring capture the ways that these farmers exist both

within and outside of capitalist relations.

### ***Conclusion***

This chapter has made a case for the relevance of PSPE for studying economic diversity and postcapitalist possibilities, and traces its application in the study of food provisioning. This is not to suggest that this is the main trajectory of agro-food studies, nor the only one of interest. However, it highlights a certain line of inquiry that has provided new insights and shown established frameworks in new light. Carolan asserts that those who study the political economy of food find themselves at a fork in the road:

Agro-food scholars have gotten really good at inventorying the furniture of the world and the food in our pantries and at showing how these ‘things’ are artifacts of a material relationality. Yet, while dissolving the metaphysical aura that have shrouded these seemingly timeless terms agro-food research presently seems at a crossroads as to what to do next. It can remain content thinking it is just inventorying and describing. Or it can embrace its radical material relationality and all that comes with it.” (2013: 424)

While I would argue that agro-food scholars face not two but many possible roads (and perhaps trails that meander off the road entirely), I hope this research is a step towards embracing this “radical material relationality” and sheds some light on what kinds of possibilities are germinating within food provisioning.

## **CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGICAL AND DISCURSIVE FRAMINGS**

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first half highlights several key methodological and discursive framings that shape my research process. These points provide overall context to my research and help to situate it within a particular community of practice. I believe these are important to discuss because, as several scholars have highlighted (Pratt 2000; Gibson-Graham 2008; Law 2004), there is often a disconnect between our theoretical perspectives, and the kinds of research strategies and methodologies we employ. As Pratt argues, “old habits of thinking haunt the best intentioned, seemingly progressive research strategies” (2000: 639). These discussions are meant to highlight the dangers of treating research methods as objective tools of scientific inquiry, free of the researcher's own desires, assumptions and prejudices. The second half of this chapter describes the research process itself, explaining how I set out to investigate my research questions, and how those initial intentions shifted and evolved throughout the data collection, analysis and reflection. In effect, these sections are divided between my methodologies and my methods; a distinction that Schwartz-Shea and Yanow argue is important to make:

Methodology commonly refers to the presuppositions concerning ontology-the reality status of the “thing” being studied-and epistemology-its “knowability”... If methodology refers to a *logic* of inquiry, the conduct of the inquiry itself might be thought of in terms of the particular tools-the methods-with and through which the research design and its logic are carried out or enacted (2012:4).

Thus it is important to explain not only what tools have been selected, but the chosen method of application and style of implementation as well.

### ***3.1 My Approach to Research***

The performativity of research (discussed in Chapter Two) signals a significant

shift in how we understand and approach the task of collecting and analyzing data. It encourages us to see the research process through the lens of Actor-Network Theory, where the research project itself is a network of actors and relationships. This includes the research methods and data, as they are actors just as research subjects are, each working to create particular realities over others. Whatmore speaks of data collection as a process of “generating materials”, to highlight that “data, like questions, are produced, not found, and that the activity of producing them is not all vested in the researcher” (2003: 90). Similarly Schartz-Shea and Yanow conceptualize data as co-generated, involving the things and people being researched, as well as the researcher: “data have no prior ontological existence as data outside of the framework of a research project: the research question is what renders objects, acts, and language as evidence- for that specific research question” (2012: 79). Following in the steps of these scholars, I see research as a co-fabrication and co-creation between the researcher and those being researched.

Performativity also suggests an expanded ethical responsibility, highlighting the importance of being open and explicit about the values and perspectives we bring to our research. If research works to enact particular realities, then it can be understood as an ethical practice. As Gibson-Graham insist, “every question about what to study and how to study it becomes an ethical opening; every decision entails profound responsibility. The whole notion of academic ethics is simultaneously enlarged and transformed” (2008: 620). For example, in their research on autonomous geographies, Pickerill and Chatterton self-identify as academic-activists, seeing their project as a way to “reconcile our passions of research and anti-capitalist direct action to promote a broader understanding of and interest in ‘autonomous politics’” (2010: 251). They engage in

research that they write is “empathic and interactive rather than extractive and objective” (2006: 732). Gibson-Graham note that in relation to their methods some have critiqued their apparent lack of objectivity, a criticism they happily accept:

Some have expressed concern that because of our partisan interest in alternative economies, the research design has involved “manipulation” or possible “indoctrination” of research subjects. There is suspicion that our attempt to bring diverse economic practices into visibility and encourage construction of community enterprises has “engineered” the very responses that support our thesis. To this last accusation, we plead guilty. Our research interventions can be seen as a form of ethical political action” (2006: 133).

Similarly, the decision to conduct research on postcapitalist possibilities in food-based livelihoods is in part based in my desire to encourage the proliferation of these possibilities, in farming and beyond. My chosen research methods are tools to both understand postcapitalist possibilities in food-based livelihoods and encourage their development. Rather than trying to bury this fact, I bring it to the forefront and use it as an opportunity for further analysis. If my research sought to answer the question of whether there are such possibilities in existence, then that might pose a problem. However, that is not the objective of my research. My question is not *if* they exist, but *how* and to what end.

A key element of maintaining honesty and transparency in my research practice is a continual process of reflexivity. Pratt describes the rationale for reflexivity as “to specify the partiality of a particular account, both to take responsibility for it and to open space for other ways of knowing.” (2000: 645). According to Bourdieu, reflexivity involves a constant awareness as to how one's own habitus and theoretical location will affect the research process. This approach goes beyond acknowledging one's own identify and positionality, which Kenway and McLoad label “vanity reflexivity” (2004:527) and interrogates the “unthought categories of thought which delimit the

thinkable and predetermine the thought” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 40). In contrast to a dichotomous mode of thinking that pits objective and subjective moments in tension with each other, Bourdieu proposed a relational mode of thinking that examines how particular fields (such as sociology) are unconsciously shaped by their specific histories in order to produce their own intellectual dispositions. As Kenway and McLoad assert

reflexivity for Bourdieu does not refer simply to endless textual and autobiographical referentiality, or to the unconscious dispositions of the individual researcher, but to an examination of the ‘epistemological unconscious’ and the ‘social organisation’ of the discipline (or field) of sociology (2004: 528).

This need for reflexivity connects us to Vahabzadeh (2009), and his critique of ultimate referentiality within sociology. Vahabzadeh argues that since its foundation, sociology has been plagued by ultimate referentiality, where by society is positioned as the realm of pure objectivity as thus the natural starting point of social inquiry. He critiques this privileging of society as the site of truth and reality, and challenges the perspective that the concept society is stable and unchanging. He argues for a new interpretative sociology, where there is a distinction between the real and the actual, recognizing that the actual is just one variation in a host of possible realities and unactualized possibilities.

Many of the proponents of performativity and reflexivity in research utilize participatory research methods. Indeed, in much of the literature there is an implicit, and sometimes explicit, link between progressive research and research that involves its participants in the design and process of the project. However, these methods can pose several challenges for a dissertation project. Ballamingie and Johnson, reflecting on their own PhD work, note some of the logistical and practical challenges of conducting PhD participatory research. For example, developing a history and strong sense of trust may be important to rich and meaningful participation, yet these long term relationships are

not always possible within the time constraints of a PhD (2011:716).

In addition, participatory research may not always be appropriate or desirable depending on the specific context in which you are working. Johnson, for example, had developed a research design that involved participants in all aspects of her project. However, it became clear early on that the community group she was hoping to work with was not interested in that kind of involvement or partnership. Bellamingie and Johnson caution that making use of research methods that are heavily reliant on the willing participation of key informants puts researchers in a vulnerable position which can negatively affect the quality of their doctoral research, not to mention their completion time and ability to publish. Knowing how time-pressed farmers are, I knew that it would be challenging (although not impossible) to secure the involvement of participants beyond an interview or two.

As a result, I felt it was much more realistic and appropriate to pursue an engaged, rather than participatory, form of research. For me the idea of engaged research is a commitment to interacting with a broader community in my research and employing research methods that provide participants with a degree of involvement in the process. The key difference is that participant involvement in the direction and structure of my project is limited to informal mechanisms. I gave room for participants to shape and influence the project but no claims are being made about this project being participatory or action-research based.

### ***3.2 The Research Process***

My research followed an iterative process, proceeding through multiple stages of data collection and reflection. This process involved two sets of interviews conducted

between 2012 and 2014, as well as an auto-ethnographic engagement with my own experiences as a food producer.<sup>23</sup> Srivastava and Hopwood describe iteration as a key component to qualitative research, asserting that

[t]he role of iteration, not as a repetitive mechanical task but as a deeply reflexive process, is key to sparking insight and developing meaning. Reflexive iteration is at the heart of visiting and revisiting the data and connecting them with emerging insights, progressively leading to refined focus and understandings (2009:77)

During and after each phase of research, I was able to take-stock of developing interpretations and review my intended practices. Such an approach meant that what I first set out to do at the beginning of my fieldwork ended up being significantly different than what I actually ended up doing. This interpretive approach to research again highlights the interaction between the data and myself, the researcher: how the process of doing research shaped, and re-shaped, the very questions I was asking and the paths I took to answer them. Scharz-Shea and Yanow connect this process to reflexivity, and suggest that interpretive researchers are as “interested in the frontstage as they are in the backstage” (2012:81). Following an interpretive research design means that the “research, writing and reading should be intertwined” (Scharz-Shea and Yanow 2009:57).

I began with an interest in exploring what I had called autonomous possibilities in a range of food provisioning. Following the first set of interviews, and in part as a result of those conversations, I narrowed my focus to those engaged in food provisioning as a livelihood. During the second set of interviews, I found I had to re-think my understanding and application of autonomous. What emerged in its place was something more mundane yet also more complex and more interesting. While this was perhaps not

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<sup>23</sup>As my research involved human subjects, approval was sought and granted by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board.

the most efficient trajectory to follow, in the end I believe this iterative approach was a strength of my research.

These methods straddle the line between ethnographic case studies and narrative inquiry. This project is in no way a comprehensive sample of farmers interested in postcapitalist or alternative economic possibilities; nor is it a life history of specific farmers. I was not seeking a quantitative assessment of how many farmers might have these interests or practices, or to what degree they were able to incorporate them (100% of the time, only 25% of the time?). The objective was to explore how farmers with these interests and politics are making it work, or not work as the case may be. What struggles, challenges, joys, successes do they encounter in trying to practice and sustain their livelihood? The original intention had been to conduct three formal case studies with so-called strong or critical cases (Flyvbjerg 2001). Upon further reflection I found it much more fruitful to engage with a single more focused case on the commonality of livelihood, in hopes of bringing to light prominent themes and experiences. Walby, reflecting on his research into male sex work, writes that “the point of the project is not to provide an ethnographic account of escort sex, but a narrative account of their working and sex lives” (2009:75). While the subject matter and context are not the same, the approach of my project is similar, in that I construct a narrative of the lives and relationships of these farmers, rather than attempting to provide a full ethnographic account of farmers engaged in non-capitalist activities.

The first research phase involved a series of scoping interviews with key informants involved in the local alternative<sup>24</sup> food economy in the Ottawa and

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<sup>24</sup> I use the term 'alternative' reluctantly, despite its many critiques (including those described in this dissertation) I have failed to come up with a superior concept to capture the diversity of values and practices included in the idea of alternative.

surrounding area, either as producers, consumers or as advocates and community developers. Eight scoping interviews were conducted with ten individuals totalling roughly twelve hours of transcripts (two interviews were done with two individuals at the same time). Interviewees were selected using my personal knowledge of the local food economy and through snowball sampling. The scoping interviews were a mix of structured and semi-structured questions. A more-structured format can be appropriate when looking for a “shopping list of information” (Kirby et al 2006: 142). For example, I asked participants to list examples of alternative or postcapitalist forms of food provisioning, as well as strengths and weaknesses of different models of food provisioning. These structured questions were then followed up with more open-ended questions tailored to their responses (See Appendix I). The interviews took place in a variety of locations based on the participant's preference, their workplace, coffee shops or their homes. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed.

The intention was that the data collected from these interviews would help to inform the direction of the subsequent phase of research. I wanted to identify common themes, issues and questions facing alternative food networks, as well as to identify potential participants for longer interviews. While the specific data from these interviews does not feature prominently in my dissertation, the process of conducting these interviews was highly instructive, and helped to identify the specific interests of my research and focus my research question. In addition, many of the observations made by these interviewees led me down a particular path of inquiry that helped to sharpen the key arguments of this thesis. These conversations helped to clarify what forms of experimentation I was looking for, how to frame the possibilities I encountered and what

parameters I should use to select case study participants. Speaking to individuals involved in community gardening for example made me realize that while I thought there were many intriguing postcapitalist possibilities within these spaces, the reasons why people gardened were quite distinct from those who farmed. This difference made it difficult to include both gardening and farming in the same research. These initial conversations on what constitutes an alternative or postcapitalist form of food provisioning highlighted the importance of unpacking these terms as part of my dissertation, as there was a lot of variation in how people understood these terms.

In the second phase of my research, I conducted in-depth interviews with small-scale organic farmers. In total I conducted 10 interviews involving 14 individuals over a span of 20 hours. Located in Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec, most farms are within an hour of Ottawa, with a couple a bit further away. They are all relatively small farming operations, both in terms of scale of production and number of people involved. They are run by either one or two people, and in one case a three-person co-operative. Some farmers have only been running their own farms for only a year or two, while others have been farming for ten years or more. Six out of the ten farms studied are either vegetable farms, or mixed farms that have vegetables as a significant portion of their production. Additional activities of these farms include laying hens, meat chickens, pigs and sheep. The remaining four are livestock farms with either cows, pigs or sheep, or a combination thereof. Some also produced honey, eggs, wool, herbs and baked goods. All farmed organically and all the livestock farms raised their animals on pasture. Table 2 provides a further outline of each farm included in the study. Within the text farmers are identified by their first name (with their permission) and a number indicating their farm,

as laid out in Table 2, for example Hilary (4).

*Table 2. Interview Farm Profiles*

<b>Farm</b>	<b>Year Started</b>	<b>Distribution</b>	<b>Structure/ Ownership</b>	<b>Labour</b>	<b>Land Tenure</b>
1	2004	Direct Marketing: farmgate	Partnership	Barter, gift	Own
2	2007	Direct Marketing: CSA, Farm store	Sole-Proprietor	Interns, barter, gift	Rent from Public entity
3	2010	Direct Marketing: CSA, farmgate, restaurant	Partnership	Gift	Own
4	2002	Direct Marketing: CSA and farmgate, Farmers' Market	Partnership	Interns, waged labour, barter	Own (previously landshare)
5	2007	Direct Marketing: CSA	Sole-Proprietor	Waged labour, interns, barter	Collective Family Ownership
6	2013	Restaurant	Partnership	Gift, barter, interns	Rent from NGO/Public Entity
7	2012	Direct Marketing: farmgate	Sole-Proprietor	Gift	Lease from private
8	2010	Direct Marketing: CSA Home-Delivery	Sole-Proprietor	Gift	Rent, moving to purchase
9	2012	Direct Marketing CSA and farmgate	Worker Co-operative	Interns, gift	Collective Ownership (Partnership)
10	1980*	Direct Marketing: Farmers' Market and farmgate	Partnership	Gift, barter	Own

\*this farm was first a dairy operation, converting to organics in the early 1980s and switching to organic pasture-raised beef in 1980.

Six of the farms are solely or primarily operated by women, while another two have women involved in the operation. Gender was not something I intended to explore, but in analyzing the data I wondered if this high representation merited further inquiry. In Canadian agriculture as a whole, women represent 27% of all farm operators (Statistics Canada 2011a). While ten farms is too small a sample to make a more general statement about the gender breakdown of organic or otherwise alternative farms, anecdotal evidence from industry associations and media reports suggests a higher number of female farmers in these sectors. Throughout my interviews at these 10 farms, I did not

feel that gender was a significant distinguishing factor in our conversations. I don't believe it was something that influenced their imagining and enacting of postcapitalist possibilities, and it didn't come through as a key factor in how to pursue a collective autonomy. The influence of gender is perhaps more prominent in *who* undertakes these kinds of experimentation in the first place, rather than influencing *how* these alternatives play out. Further research would be needed to substantiate this claim, and there are undoubtedly ways that gender, particularly masculinity, shape economic activities, roles and identities in farming.<sup>25</sup>

The aim of these in-depth interviews was to explore how farmers attempt to put possibilities of postcapitalist food provisioning into practice. I wanted to understand the network of relationships and exchanges that they engage in and how they reconcile the daily challenge of material needs with their politics or values of how the economic could be done differently. Participants were given a list of potential interview questions before hand, although most did not have the chance to read them prior to the interview. These questions served as a general outline or guide, but each interview took its own unique path. Unstructured interviews are useful in that they allow for unanticipated information to come to light (Kirby et al. 2006). Experiential, or descriptive questions were used to encourage participants to share their stories and experiences in a free manner (Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein 1997: 234). Participants also had the opportunity to "ask back", which can create a "richer and more meaningful description" of the experiences of the participants (Kirby et al. 2006: 200). This often happened in relation to my own farming experience, where participants would ask what our experience had been with farmers'

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<sup>25</sup> There has been some initial discussion online in the United States on gender in alternative and sustainable farming from more popular sources. See for example Christian (2015) and Bader (2013).

markets or workshares, for example, or whether we owned or rented our farm. As with the scoping interviews, they were tape recorded and later transcribed.

Most interviews were conducted in the homes of farmers, with the exception of two that were done at a coffee shop. I interviewed many farmers over lunch (and in one case breakfast) so that it would not take too much time out of their day. Interviewing farmers at their homes had the added benefit of being able to see the physical farm, the farm house, the land, the buildings etc, which gave me additional insight into their lives and experiences. For example, one farmer had a flag pole displaying a pirate's flag in front of their house. Another showed me photos of what their farmhouse looked like 100 years ago. Not much about the farmhouse had changed. This setting also created a more intimate environment and made it easier to establish a comfortable rapport.

Rossman and Rallis note that interviews are an excellent method for gaining “rich, detailed data about how people view their worlds” (2012:179). Despite this, they also identify several limitations to interviews. The researcher is relying on the willingness of the participant to share. The degree to which you as an interviewer are able to establish rapport and a relationship of trust with the participant may affect the quality of data collected. The participant may be unwilling or uncomfortable sharing the very information you are hoping to discuss. There is also the chance that the answers may not be interpreted as intended, highlighting the importance of clarification on behalf of the interviewer. I found this happened particularly when discussing examples of capitalism and what might constitute an alternative. Interviewees sometimes equated these concepts with scale and proximity, whereas I was interested in a difference in values or methods of organizing economic relationships.

Because of this, we should see interviews as 'performative collaborations,'<sup>26</sup> an idea proposed by Atkinson and Delamont (2006). They write that “the research interview should be examined analytically as a performative act, through which identities are enacted, actions are justified and recounted events are retrospectively constructed” (2006: 167). They caution against privileging narratives accounts as somehow an entry point into people's more authentic selves. Interview data is shaped by social context, social convention and social interaction (165). As a result these narrative accounts should be “analysed in terms of their rhetorical, persuasive properties, and their functions in constructing particular versions of events, justifications of actions, evaluations of others, and so on.” (2006:167).

Interview participants were identified through snowball sampling, my personal knowledge of local food producers and internet scans. Potential participants had to meet the following criteria:

- engaged in a food-based livelihood that represents a significant portion of their earnings.
- engaged in a diversity of economic activities and relationships, some of which could be considered non-capitalist
- a stated interest in experimenting with different or alternative economic forms other than capitalism

Farmers were selected both for their practice of what could be broadly considered alternative or postcapitalist farming, and their conscious interest in these types of possibilities. These selection methods involved my own personal assessment and judgement of particular farms, something that is difficult to quantify. When trying to identify participants based not only on their actions and professions, but also based on their desires, interests and philosophies, whether they fit the parameters of the study or

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<sup>26</sup> I first encountered this idea in Walby's (2009) discussion of interviews as performative.

not, was not always a clear yes or no answer. It was impossible to avoid making assumptions about farms. It wasn't feasible to contact or fully research every single farm in the area to evaluate whether or not they were a good fit and/or willing to participate. In seeking out interview participants, I did not have a check list of specific values or components farms needed to have to be included. It was a more holistic sense of whether they were interested in, and engaged in some way, with non-capitalist possibilities. All of the farms were small-scale, organic and involved in direct marketing. I shied away from enterprises where I knew they made use of a lot of interns or staff (although not exclusively) or who relied heavily on farmers' markets. This was not necessarily a critique of these practices, but rather, an interest in getting beyond more dominant or widely used strategies farmers use to make ends meet. I felt I better understood how farms who made use of several interns were able to "make it work." I wanted to give room for other options and alternatives to come through. These similarities highlight that despite not having a specific checklist, I clearly had assumptions of where postcapitalist possibilities might lie.

I looked for moments or instances of possibility. In some cases the organizational structure of the farm suggested they might be a good fit, such as a worker-cooperative, or an interesting land tenure arrangement or distribution system. In other cases it was their online presence, conversations I might have had with them, their involvement in certain farming associations or organizations (such as the National Farmers Unions or the Ecological Farmers of Ontario Association), or observed behaviour at a farmers' market or other public setting. For example, one farm that I contacted had been neighbouring vendors with our farm at a farmers' markets. We had had brief conversations about

current events that gave me some insight into their politics and values, and I knew that they farmed organically and raised their cows on pasture. They had a blackboard sign that they put in front of the booth, listing what they had available that week. Following the death of Jack Layton, they wrote at the bottom of their sign “We'll miss you Jack.” Based on those bits and pieces, and the fact that they had decided not to continue selling at farmers' markets, I thought they would be interesting people to talk with about farming.

A willingness to participate in this kind of research was in and of itself an indicator of suitability for the project. While only one farm emailed back to explicitly indicate that the research area “is not a good fit” many others did not respond at all, or replied that they did not have the time. On the whole I contacted upwards of thirty farms. Even though I contacted farmers during the “off-season” (between late fall and early spring), participation in the interview still required a significant amount of time.

I attempted to contact a diversity of farmers, based on who they are and what they do, but there were structural reasons why certain farmers and kinds of farming are over-represented. For example, vegetable farms far outnumber other kinds of farm within the the small-scale organic farming community. This is in part due to the relative ease of getting into vegetable farming compared with other forms of farming that have different barriers to entry. Dairy, for example, not only requires complex infrastructure it also requires a particular scale and level of investment to purchase quota.<sup>27</sup> Other types of farming such as grains or other cash crops require expensive machinery that make it impractical to do on a small-scale and expensive to get into on a large scale (without even

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<sup>27</sup> Quota must also be purchased to produce meat birds above the exemption levels (for example, in Ontario quota must be purchased to produce more than 300 chickens per year in Ontario).

getting into accessing the necessary land for such an operation).

It has also been well documented that those who participate in these type of alternative food networks are overwhelmingly white and middle to upper-class (Guthman 2008b; Levkoe 2011; Alkon and Agyeman 2011). The ethnic make-up of the sample farmers is certainly reflective of this; some disclosed their upbringing as middle-class although this was not something that was explicitly discussed as part of the interviews. Many others referenced support from family members that indicated a particular level of income of their parents and extended family.

### *Experiments in auto-ethnography*

The interview data for this project was complimented by an investigation into my own experiences, both directly as a food producer and as a member of a broader food network. In doing so, this project incorporates elements of auto-ethnography. Ellis et al (2011) describe auto-ethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno).” There are strong links between the performativity of research, reflexivity and auto-ethnography. According to Ellis et al

autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist (2011:np).

Auto-ethnography calls on the researcher to explore and analyze their own experiences through the use of methodological tools and academic literature. In an interview with Ellis et al., Mitch Allen<sup>28</sup> asserts that it is not just a process of telling one's story, although that it is a part of it. What separates it from an episode of a daytime talk-show, for example, is the use of research skills and one's interaction with the academic community

<sup>28</sup> Mitch Allen is an academic publisher, currently the publisher at Left Coast Press, and visiting scholar at Mills College in anthropology.

to reflect, explain and connect your experience to a broader cultural context (2011:np). As Ellis et al (2011) note, auto-ethnography often involves comparisons with others in a similar cultural location through interviews and literature reviews and examining cultural artifacts. In this project I compare and contrast my own experiences to those of my research participants, noting commonalities and variations in both our actions and analysis.

My partner and I operated a small-scale vegetable farm for four years (2010-2014). Our production and distribution practices paralleled many of those being interviewed for this project. We farmed organically and distributed our food through Community Supported Agriculture, as well as farmers' markets, and sales to restaurants and retailers. These experiences gave me innumerable opportunities to observe a diversity of food network actors and relationships, at farmers' markets, CSA pick-ups, restaurant deliveries and my own interactions with customers, members and volunteers. As a result of my involvement in food production, I have also attended many meetings and events, including the Eastern Ontario Local Food Conference, the National Farming Union's national convention, meetings and weekly distributions of the Eastern Ontario Local Food Co-operative, and farmer to farmer training workshops and events. I also had access to listserves of food producers both locally and internationally. There were also informal interactions with farmers that were valuable sources of information and insight. These experiences influenced my analysis of the interview data. I was able to formulate my arguments using the interviews, the academic literature as well as my own stories and personal accounts to construct an analysis that resonated with each of these sources of information. At times the perspectives of those I interviewed later challenged my own

interpretation of a similar event or activities that I myself had experienced; other times my personal accounts were a source of insight that encouraged a particular understanding of these farms that I believe would not have emerged if I was relying solely on the academic literature and theories.

In making use of my own experiences, the aim was to make effective use of my insider-outsider status, rather than trying to minimize it. There is increasing recognition that insider status can bring unique and beneficial qualities to research. An insider is seen as someone who is a member of the group being studied; who shares the same characteristics, roles or experiences as those being researched (Asselin 2003, Dywer and Buckle 2009). This insider role often leads to greater or more rapid trust and openness among research participants, potentially leading to more detailed and in-depth data. At the same time, there are also draw-backs to be mindful of. The researcher must be careful not to confuse or blur their roles as a researcher and a member of the group or community in question. There is also greater chance that a participant may not fully explain something, assuming the researcher already understands due to their insider status. One must also be careful not to project one's own interests or experiences onto the research participant or into the analysis of data. Dywer and Buckle (2009) note that it is rarely a case of a researcher being a strict insider or outsider to the object of their investigation. Instead, they talk of the "space between," and highlight the negotiation between one's insider and outsider status: "holding membership in a group does not denote complete sameness within that group. Likewise, not being a member of a group does not denote complete difference (2009:60).

This insider-outsider status made the interview relationships more complex,

which had both benefits and challenges. Participants did not just see me as an academic researcher, they also saw me as a farmer like them. Yet I wasn't *exactly* like them, because I was also occupying an identity outside of that category. I was both farmer and researcher, insider and outsider, embodying elements of both without fully embracing either. I had prior interactions with many of the farms I contacted and several of those I ended up interviewing. As a result of my personal experiences, conversations and interactions, I had pre-conceived notions about particular farms, and likely some farms had pre-conceived notions about me.

One situation in particular highlighted the blurring of my identity as a researcher and farmer. One farmer I contacted also worked for a food and farming organization and the previous year they had co-ordinated a survey of area farmers. I had started to fill-out that survey but chose not to complete it for various personal reasons. When I emailed this same farmer about participating in an interview, his responded by referencing my failure to complete his survey, and suggested it was perhaps unfair of me to be now requesting his participation. While he ended his email by agreeing to participate, I did not proceed with that particular interview, believing that this previous, although minor, incident would be a distraction to the project and its outcomes. This complication came about as a result of my insider-outsider status, and prevented me from pursuing what could have been an intriguing case.

On the whole my insider status made it easier to establish a rapport with interviewees. Farmers would often follow-up a question I had asked with a question of their own; how did we do “x” on our farm, what had our experiences been etc. For example, during my interview with farm 3, the farmer was explaining a frustration she

felt in having to explain the realities of farming to some customers, and felt like I could appreciate what she was saying because I had likely experienced something similar: “you know, having people understand that they can't call me in August and say, can I get a bushel of peas from you? [laughter] I love that you know exactly what I'm talking about. Peas do not grow in Ontario in August!” Having insider knowledge also helped to critically assess the interview data, to understand the performance within the interview, where participants may say one thing but might practice, or actually believe another. For example, according to Nost (2014), “asking a farmer directly what they think about the prospects of local foods may solicit a rosy response, while paying attention to practices will often paint a different picture” (2014:155)

#### *Data Analysis*

As a result of the iterative approach to my research process, analysis occurred throughout the project rather than solely in one distinct block. A more systematic and thorough coding and analysis did take place following the completion of the interviews. Rossman and Rallis describe data analysis as a process of “sorting, categorizing, grouping, and regrouping the data into piles or chunks that are meaningful” (2012: 263). They suggest a continuous approach to analysis “as the story unfolds,” where one is regularly returning to a conceptual framework and key research questions (2012:64). They also encourage the use of a daily activities log, in addition to field notes, to track what the researcher did, details of any interviews, fieldwork and data analysis. My approach to data analysis drew in part on Grounded Theory approaches, where theoretical insights emerge from the specific data being analyzed, and where data analysis and data collection occur simultaneously (Charmaz 2006). For example, the concept of coping

and prefiguring strategies is both an insight that was drawn from the interview data, and also a lens through which I analyzed and understood the data. This speaks to the complex ways that we both influence our research findings as researchers, all the while being ourselves shaped by them as well.

Coding was completed by hand. I concur with Rossman and Rallis that while software programs are helpful, they are largely data management tools, helping in the mechanics of coding as opposed to the analytical work. Saldana (2009:8) reminds us that regardless of what kind of coding we employ, our own subjectivities, epistemological and ontological commitments and personalities will shape how we code, so that coding is not just an act of labeling or sorting, it is part of the analysis, an act of linking ideas and concepts together. As Charmaz writes, coding “generates the bones of your analysis... [I]ntegration will assemble those bones into a working skeleton” (2006:45). Saldana draws on Abbot's analogy that likens coding to decorating a room, where different arrangements and positions are tried and refined until it seems to fit or look right. I find this a helpful perspective for coding, where codes are puzzle pieces, and analytical memos are clues about how they might fit together, creating different images as they are re-arranged and re-classified.

Throughout my fieldwork I kept a journal to track reflections, observations and questions from the day's activities. For example, when returning home from an interview I would set aside some time to assess how it had gone and what I might want to do differently. Sometimes the entries would have nothing to do with interviews I had conducted, but conversations with friends that triggered a connection to something I had read in the literature, or a question I had been grappling with. One journal entry from

December 2013 focused on an email our farm had received while I was out of town conducting one of my first farmer interviews. My partner and I had recently sent our CSA members an annual report, where we talked about the challenges we faced in finding a farm that we could afford. One couple emailed back and offered to partner with us to purchase a farm. They explained that they did not want regular loan re-payments, they saw this as a way to ensure that we could continue to farm and that they could continue to get vegetables from us. I was surprised and a somewhat overwhelmed by their generosity. I had been feeling rather critical about CSAs in my writing, yet here were two people who, having only been members of our CSA for a year, wanted to make a profound and meaningful contribution to this little farm that we had started. Looking back over that reflection helped me to connect similar kinds of things I had heard from farmers I interviewed to this idea of a community farm, a concept I use in Chapter Six.

As this example illustrated, a key part of my reflexive practice was engaging in auto-ethnography. Having to explore my insider-outsider status, and account for its influence on my research really helped to engrain a reflexive practice throughout my thesis. Once I finished the last of my interviews this was the first place I went to try and establish a sense of the research project as a whole in order to begin the analysis and coding in earnest. These journal also served to jot down practical notes about specific interviews, reflections about how a particular question was perceived, or a follow-up question I wished I had asked and planned to be include in subsequent interviews.

### ***Conclusion***

In this process it is inevitable that some puzzle pieces are left out of the final configuration. As with any research project, there are parts of my conversations with

farmers that are not included in this analysis. Some interviews took a particular turn that others did not, while certain themes did not feature prominently enough in the interviews as a whole to form part of the narrative of this project. In my process of data analysis and subsequent reflection, I followed certain actors over others, charting their connections and relationships to other actors, telling their stories while leaving others silent. The role and relationship with the state is perhaps the most glaring omission. While it did come up to varying degrees in the interviews, it was not something that farmers brought up in articulating the activities, relationships and processes I was seeking to illuminate. This in and of itself is an interesting insight, the fact that the state did not feature prominently as an actor encouraging these types of experimentation and transformation. If anything the state, in this present form, was seen as an obstacle, something to be circumvented and avoided.

The role of formal organizations is another area that is left largely undisturbed. There is mention of the role that farm organizations played in supporting some of these farmers, particularly as new farmers, and in some cases the role that these institutions played in developing a farmer's political views. The influence of these organizations was overshadowed by the importance of informal organization and co-operation amongst farmers, the networks of friends and neighbors that provided advice, technical support and hands-on help.

Finally, in conducting research into a group of activities and individuals that are understood as alternative, it is impossible to avoid the appearance that I am making a comparison between these farmers and some sort of archetype of a normal or conventional farmer. My intention is not to establish a binary between the farmers in my

study and any other group of farmers, particularly since my research did not involve farmers within those more conventional or dominant networks. The aim here is not to use conventional farmers as a reference point, but to de-centre any one category of farmer as the standard unit of analysis to which others must be compared. Instead, I look inward to a specific group of farmers, a particular space and set relationships and values, to understand what makes them tick.

Through these methodologies and methods I seek to capture particular moments within these farmers and their farms; moments of possibility, moments of negotiation, moments of struggle and moments of achievement. This approach to the research process, emphasizing the situated and contextual nature of knowledge, helps me to see how I the researcher, the data, the participants and even the research methods are actors and contributors to the outcome of this project. With this in mind, the next three chapters delve into those moments, and analyze how they can be understood as both coping and prefiguring strategies in the pursuit of a collective autonomy.

## CHAPTER FOUR FARMS OF MANY FACES

This chapter explores postcapitalist possibilities through the lens of the farm. A farm is many things. It is a physical space, a set of social relations and a legally defined economic entity. Farms are most often categorized as for-profit businesses, yet the actions, rationalities and values of those involved suggests a more complex and nuanced characterization. I explore this question through two key relationships within a farm: those of land and labour. These relationships form a network of both human and non-human actors (plants, animals, soil) that enable and constrain different forms of experimentation, both material and discursive. These relationships are also a primary means of coping and prefiguring for farmers. Finding alternative means of accessing land and fulfilling their labour needs helps farmers to make ends meet, while also laying the groundwork for a different kind of enterprise. I interpret this difference as a step towards a collective autonomy, a form of postcapitalist possibility where labour and land are treated not primarily as capital inputs but as key elements and actors of a food system, approached with a desire for mutual aid and reciprocity. Farmers are not always successful in creating these kinds of relationships, but their struggle and negotiation reveal important insights about the potential for diverse postcapitalist possibilities in food provisioning.

### ***4.1 The farm “business”***

For many years there were heated scholarly debates about the manifestation of capitalism within agriculture. Since Kaul Kautsky's (1899) initial posing of the agrarian question, where he probed whether the nature of agricultural production posed any substantive challenge against its integration into capitalism, agro-food scholars have

argued about how, and at what point, farms can be understood as capitalist (see Goodman and Redclift 1985; Fine 1994; Mann and Dickinsmon 1978). Kautsky observed that farming had two important variables that made the process of capitalist integration difficult: the organic nature of farming (its interaction and reliance on the environment) and the ability of farmers to self-exploit (Hetherington 2005). Despite these factors, he concluded that farming would inevitably be subsumed into capitalism. This debate continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but was largely put to rest in the late 1980s as it seemed capitalist colonization had, by then, already taken place.

One dissenting voice in this debate was that of Harriet Friedmann. She makes a distinction between farms based on simple commodity production and capitalist farm enterprises. Focusing specifically on family farms, she contends that they cannot be completely understood as capitalist enterprises; rather they exist both within and outside of capitalist production. According to Friedmann (1986), simple commodity production is still within capitalism but it is different than the production of a capitalist enterprise. Simple commodity production “produces contradictory interests in itself,” and embodies the classes of both labour and owner. In the case of the family farm, its distinctiveness is the inextricable blending of family and enterprise interests (1986: 188). Indeed, several authors have noted the persistence of “non-utilitarian” actions within family farms, actions or activities that are based on values other than economic rationality (Bessant 2006: 53). Friedmann highlights the role of non-capitalist interests in the farming household, including the commitment to a particular way of life, which leads farmers and their families to do things that are “nonsensical from a capitalist point of view” (1986: 188).

A central component of capitalism is the separation of capital and labour, yet in a family farm, farmers (and their families) are simultaneous owners and workers. They are both buyers and sellers of labour. They are unique from other buyers of labour in that they are also labourers, but their unique connection to property opens up diverse livelihood possibilities that other workers do not have.<sup>29</sup> Friedmann argues that even if there is waged labour on a family farm, casual or regular, it is different than wage employment on a capitalist farm enterprise. Any accumulation of surplus value is likely trivial and nearly impossible to disaggregate from family labour. This is not a distinction shared by everyone. Goodman and Redclift (1985) insist that any presence of wage labour indicates that a farm enterprise has become capitalist. In contrast, Friedmann argues that this “reduces the complexity of capitalist societies to a false, simplistic homogeneity” (1988: 188); and assumes that family farms are merely small capitalist farms that have yet to be fully subordinated to capitalism.

For Friedmann all this is not to celebrate family farms or uncritically embrace the ideological claims they make (of non-capitalism). As she writes:

The family is patriarchal. Family enterprise is a battleground over patriarchy where property is immediately at stake. Husbands/fathers who relax patriarchal domination by choice or necessity face real consequences as heads of enterprise. Women and children are caught in a dilemma, in which the struggle for autonomy and equality conflicts with attachment to property (1986: 192).

The point here is that family farms are distinct, not necessarily inherently superior, but different, than a capitalist farm enterprise. I find the debates on the capitalization of agriculture helpful not because they offer a definitive answer on the capitalist nature of agriculture. Such an abstract pronouncement would not even be particularly useful, as

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<sup>29</sup> While the self-employed in general are in a position that combines both owner and worker, farmers' intimate relationship to the land provides a unique set of circumstances that offer an increased level of autonomy and ability to blend household and enterprise economies.

Carolan argues “much of the ‘agrarian question’ literature from the 1980s ignored issues of historical, spatial, and social contingency, leaving us with a single-arrow understanding of the future in its relationship to the past.” (2013:418). Despite the tendency towards strong theorizing, this debate does provide concrete bits and pieces to pay attention to, potential points of opening and challenge to consider in relation to how farmers treat land and labour. Not all the farms interviewed for this project identified as family farms, but they embody many of its characteristics, particularly the blending of different rationalities, and the confluence of worker and owner.

*Being a “Farmer” or a “business owner”*

When my partner and I first started farming, I struggled with the label of business owner. Growing up, the idea of running a business was a very foreign thing to me. It wasn't anything I ever really considered I might do. Both my parents were teachers and most of the adults I knew worked in the public sector or had some sort of professional designation. In university I developed very rigid normative framings of business owners and workers, and I was very clear about which side I was on. So a key evolution for me in starting our farm was being comfortable with the idea of running a business and thus being a business owner. I had to undo that normative framing I had built up around that category. I had to learn to identify forms of businesses that were something other than profit-seeking. I was curious to see how other farmers felt about that label.

Most farmers interviewed approached that element of their identity as a means to an end. Hilary (4) felt comfortable with the idea of being a business owner, but it wasn't something that she ever aspired to. As she explained, “the goal isn't to sell stuff, it's to feed people.” Starting a farm didn't come from a place of entrepreneurship in her mind, it

was just a way of getting from A to B:

that was never, that was not even in my consciousness. It was more that this is what I'm doing, and I was completely political and morally driven, and it was just a matter of how am I going to; I want to make this change, and how am I going to do it? It was not, oh, I want to be an entrepreneur or I'm going to have my own business, that was never even part of my consciousness. I don't think it ever has really been.

Emily (5) made a similar comment and saw being a business owner as an obligatory element of running a farm. It wasn't necessarily something she wanted, or sought out, but it was the most direct way to achieve what she wanted to do:

Ya, I guess I've become more comfortable with the business in general. I didn't really necessarily want to be a business owner, or have that responsibility. I mean, I just wanted to grow my own food and make my life, and do something important in the world. [But], you have to have a framework to do that, to interact, [with] the government basically, so that was the easiest way to get into it. I think there are some farms that operate non-profits and that sort of thing. I think that would be a lot of work I guess, I wouldn't...I wanted to get going ya know, I'm kind of impatient I guess and I wanted to do what I wanted to do and that's why we went with that I guess.

That desire to 'get going' was something that is echoed by other farmers. A couple of farmers reference this in relation to frustration with non-for-profit organizations in food. Hilary (4) mentioned that she was involved in food and education projects but the freedom and practicality of farming was far more appealing: “[there was]...too much red tape! Ya, I just like the freedom of growing bucket loads of peas!” Paul (8) was critical of the assumption that NGOs should be filling particular roles in a food system. He recounted how a particular organization was making plans to establish a food hub where farmers could access a variety of services, including cold storage facilities. His perspective was that those services would be better off organized by farmers themselves, or individuals who are going to approach it as a livelihood and commit to it as such. Paul (8) argued that in many cases those services are already being offered by small-businesses; in the case of cold storage he rents freezer space from a small family-owned

business, a service he is happy to pay them for. To him, this business was a valued actor in his food network, one that he felt he had a mutually beneficial relationship with regardless of its status as a “for-profit” or “non-profit.” These two comments are not necessarily a critique of NGOs but an illustration of the approach taken by many of these farmers in their work, of wanting to do things themselves on their own terms and building direct relationships with others in a similar position, with a similar stake<sup>30</sup>. In the spirit of collective autonomy, the desire is to work with others, to create their own networks and pockets of possibility, not waiting for larger organizations or institutions to change.

#### ***4.2. Relationship to the Land***

It is easy to think of the farmer as the focal point and protagonist of food provisioning. But in many ways it is not the farmer but that which is being farmed that holds the ultimate sway, the soil and the environment that nourishes it. Without decent soil you will be hard pressed to produce much of anything. Different crops (strawberries, corn, micro-greens) and kinds of farming (vegetables, livestock, dairy) each have unique needs that shape what forms of experimentation occur. Vegetables for example are quite heavy feeders, requiring a high level of nutrients in the soil. Pasture lands for animals on the other hand, can be much more diverse. Blueberries require highly acidic soil, and growing carrots in a sandy soil is much easier than in a heavy clay-based soil. From this perspective, a farmer's relationship to the land is not only about who owns and controls the land but involves a whole micro-environment. This includes the land, its topography, soil type and growing potential.

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<sup>30</sup> There were certainly cases of farmers having relationships with NGOs often through the donation of produce or supplying them with food at a reduced rate. This is discussed in Chapter Six.

### *Land Tenure Arrangements*

Historically, land tenure was achieved primarily through inheritance or transfer from one generation to another, a process that can be traced all the way back to the beginning of colonization in many cases. However, as more and more new farmers come from non-farming backgrounds, they are forced to access land through other means. The land tenure arrangements of the farmers I spoke with are quite diverse. Many of them did not access land in a traditional sense of private ownership. This is not necessarily surprising given the rising land values highlighted in the Chapter One.<sup>31</sup> Some chose to access land outside of ownership, while others purchased farms using innovative ownership and lending arrangements. This is part of a broader trend seen across farms in Canada. The 2011 Agriculture Census found that over 10,000 farmers in Canada accessed land through non-monetary land rental arrangements; another 10,000 were involved in share-cropping arrangements and just over 87,000 reported accessing land through lease arrangements. While the majority of farmers still access land through ownership<sup>32</sup>, these alternative arrangements illustrate that farmers are exploring a range of land tenure arrangements (Statistics Canada 2006; 2011a).

*Table 3. Land Tenure Arrangements of Farms Studied*

<b>Own</b>	<b>Lease</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inherited family farm (2)</li><li>• Individual ownership (3)</li><li>• Collective Ownership (1)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Public entity lease (2)</li><li>• Private lease arrangement (2)</li></ul>

<sup>31</sup> While Ontario and Quebec (where the farmers in this study reside) have significant differences in their agricultural land policies, the experience of farmers on the ground in securing land tenure was relatively similar. Farmland has historically been less highly valued in Quebec due in part to farmland protection legislation. However prices appear to be rising, particularly close to the Ontario-Quebec border and urban centres such as Montreal. So while there are differences in the degree of affordability of farmland, these differences were not enough to alter the means of securing land tenure in the cases discussed.

<sup>32</sup> 197,227 farmers in Canada own their farm.

Four of the farms in this study (2, 6, 7 and 8) access land through lease arrangements. Farms 7 and 8 rent from private individuals while the other two, farms 2 and 6 rent from the government and a not-for-profit organization. In the case of farm 8, Paul rented land owned by a group of four siblings. The family of these brothers had previously farmed the land but were looking for a new farmer to use the land in exchange for paying the property taxes<sup>33</sup>. Erin (7) has a similar relationship with her landlord, whose family used to farm the land and now wants to see it continue as a farm. The two other farms (2 and 6) are rented from the National Capital Commission (NCC); one did so at arms-length, renting from the Just Food Start-Up Farm<sup>34</sup> who themselves are tenants of the NCC. During the 1950s and 1960s the National Capital Commission established the Greenbelt, an area of land which at the time encircled much of the city's edge in an attempt to prevent urban sprawl and preserve large amounts of green space in the nation's capital. The Greenbelt consists of forest, wetlands, residential properties and farms. These farms are rented out to farmers and other organizations in multi-year leases.<sup>35</sup>

The remaining six farms have land tenure through ownership. Farm 9 holds tenure through a collective ownership structure. Their farm is structured as a worker co-operative, and the co-operative leases the land from the collective that owns the land. The three members of the worker-cooperative farm make-up three-quarters of the collective.<sup>36</sup> These farmers took a conventional path to land tenure, purchasing the farm using a

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<sup>33</sup> Landowners received a reduction in property taxes on farmland if it is being actively farmed.

<sup>34</sup> The Just Food Start-Up Program is a program designed to help new farmers develop their farm business. Participants may stay for a maximum of three years; each year there is a \$1600 program fee, which includes access to a quarter or half-acre plot, common infrastructure (barn, wash station, greenhouse), a workshop series and staff support.

<sup>35</sup> For more information on the NCC's land expropriation and policies around the Greenbelt see Kelly-Bisson's (2013) MA Thesis.

<sup>36</sup> The fourth member is a partner of one of the farmers

mortgage with a bank, but they did so as a collective unit. As one of the farmers notes, if it were just her and her partner, they would not have been able to afford their farm, it was only by pooling their resources and living collectively that the payments are manageable:

[E]ven though this place wasn't super expensive, it wouldn't have been affordable if it was just Jenna and I, and certainly not if it was just me. And that continues to be the case in the sense that, maybe I could have come up with the down payment on my own, but the monthly payments, the maintenance, that split between four adults instead of two, is a huge difference.

While not a formal example of collective ownership, two other farms exist within a framework of a family farm that mirrors many elements of collective ownership. Farm 5 is CSA farm that is part of a broader multi-generational family farm that houses an organic dairy, their 2 acre vegetable CSA, along with laying hens and meat chickens. Emily's parents purchased the farm from her grandparents, who had also farmed, as they neared retirement. At some point in the future she, her partner and her brother, as the next generation, will purchase the farm from her parents. Bruce and Janet (10) came to own their farm as a result of a similar situation. Their farm has been in Bruce's family for five generations. Following university Bruce returned to the farm in 1965, eventually taking it over from his parents. One of their daughters will soon be moving back to the farm with her own family, continuing the tradition of passing the farm down through generations of the family. While they don't believe their children will run the farm themselves, they hope it will remain in the family and continue to be preserved as a farm. Legally these farms are owned by one generation at a time, but in practice it represents a unique approach to ownership, as though they are holding it in trust for the next generation.

The remaining three farms (1, 3 and 4) were purchased by individual farming units (couples), yet even in these cases there are unique circumstances that shape their ownership. One farm was purchased by a couple with financial support from one set of

parents, so that they were not beholden to conventional mortgage payments. This farmer reflected that their family support was crucial in enabling them to purchase their farm:

if we had a mortgage paying to a bank right now I don't think we'd be able to exist. So we'd have to make some changes... I see that as part of the support, they've helped us out because they believe in what we're doing so much, I don't think that that's an anomaly, I get from a lot of people that parents help them.

In the case of farm (3), it is the irregular shape of the particular property that made it possible for her and her husband to purchase the farm. What was once a typical concession farm lot had been carved up to sell-off individual lots, making it a bit of a nuisance to get from one side of the property to the other. This also made it less 'desirable' from a market-value perspective, as the future potential for severing off lots is minimal. While this makes it a bit annoying from a practical perspective, for example Katie and her husband had to build their sheep barn and pasture quite a ways from where the house is located, its shape has little effect on its ability to grow and produce food. A third farm was purchased by a farming couple who came to farming much later in life, after selling their house in the suburbs as their children were leaving the nest. Due to the sale of their previous home, they do not have a mortgage at all.

Paul (8), who previously leased land, is now in the process of moving to a farm that he and his partner had recently purchased. They arranged their purchase with a private investor as opposed to a conventional mortgage. According to Paul, this investor is knowledgeable about, and supportive of, agricultural endeavours and has set up an arrangement that takes into consideration the many start-up costs of establishing a new farm, in addition to payments on the actual property. When my partner and I were looking to purchase a farm, it was these additional start-up costs that were one more added expense that made buying a farm out of reach. While these costs paled in

comparison to the actual purchase price of a farm, they were a financial burden we had to bear completely ourselves. They didn't feel manageable, particularly when our expected income from the farm was relatively meagre. Having a lender that understands this and is willing to structure the purchase of land accordingly is an important coping mechanism to make purchasing a farm more feasible. At the same time, these relationships expose the multiple values that influence these relationships, of which financial gain is only one of many.

### *Landlord and Tenant Relationships*

For those who rent land there is quite a range of relationships between landowners and tenant. Some are based on a strong degree of trust. As a testament to the relationship they have with their landlord, Erin (7) and her partner don't have a formal lease. Instead they have what Erin describes as a long term agreement, a situation she felt quite comfortable with. As she reflects: “definitely trust is big. He trusts us to make decisions to build things, we talk to him before we do anything, but if we say we want to do this, he just says do it...trust is strong both ways, and its critical for this relationship.” As a result of this Erin and her partner feel they have an incentive to invest in the land and improve it, despite the fact that they do not own it. They trust their landlord and they are supportive of his efforts to keep the property as a farm; “he's definitely committed to this” stated Erin. It is still her long term plan to purchase a farm in the next ten years or so, but at this point in their lives, having secure tenancy and proximity to the city are more important than ownership. Both Erin (7) and Paul (8) are responsible for improvements to the land and infrastructure to varying degrees, but they feel comfortable investing in their farm because of their landlord's commitment to protecting the land as a

farm.

In the case of privately leased lands, rent is not based on the market value of the property, but on the cost of keeping the property as a farm, as opposed to selling it or developing it. One could argue that these types of leasing arrangements are actually a benefit for landowners, allowing them to qualify for tax breaks. We could understand these arrangements as a holding pattern until the owners are able to re-zone the property for development, fetching a healthy return. Indeed, there is a farmer just down the road from our farm who leases several hundred acres directly from developers. Part of the arrangement he has with them is to plough up fields that they have slated for development. They ask him to do this to prevent any birds from nesting on any vegetation that might grow in the fields, which would restrict their ability to begin.<sup>37</sup> In that case it does feel as though the owners are merely biding their time. However, that narrative does not quite fit with the tenant relationships of these farmers, the story is not as simple. Farmers in this study genuinely feel that their landlords had a commitment to the land outside of financial return. In a sense both relationships were based on shared values between farmer and landlord, and displayed co-operative elements that are unusual in a typical tenant-landlord relationship. By basing the exchange on the social value of the land and the associated financial costs, as opposed to economic value as determined by real estate markets, they created a leasing arrangement that defied a capitalist logic.

By contrast, the public lease agreements do not have the same degree of intimacy or trust. Particularly in the case of the National Capital Commission, tenant farmers are in a somewhat precarious situation. David (2) manages a 100 acre farm on the Ottawa

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<sup>37</sup> The City of Ottawa prevents the “clearing of vegetation” from April 15 to July 31 unless a biologist has confirmed no nesting birds are present; keeping a field bare prevents this from happening.

River owned by the NCC. He had an initial five year lease that expired several years ago and he is still waiting to be contacted by the NCC to enter into a new arrangement. He is now ostensibly renting month-to-month, which is quite an unusual position for a farm to be in. He joked that he was not even sure who to contact at the NCC, as the property management company contracted by the NCC had changed since he first signed his lease, as had the NCC staff in charge of leasing agricultural properties. While David didn't feel particularly concerned that the NCC might evict him, and he thought it was very unlikely that the NCC would seek to sell or develop that particular property, the nature of his relationship with the NCC influenced what work he did to the farm's buildings and how he thought about the farm long term. According to David, the NCC takes little interest in their agricultural properties:

The NCC has always been absent. No they don't care what happens here, or at least they don't express any sort of care, they don't come here, they don't talk to me, they don't write me, they don't. I don't even know how to get in touch with them, I don't know who might be overseeing this property, what department it might be called, I don't know if there's any history on this property, background information on where things might be.

Compared to the private leasing arrangements, his relationship with his landlord is much more tenuous and much less collaborative.

There is also a high degree of bureaucratization to these relationships, which can inhibit both the strength of the relationships and the success of farmers. Sarah (6), farms at the Just Food Start-Up Farm and explained that “we're renting land from Just Food and they're renting the farm from the NCC so it's a multi-layer rental process, so we can't do anything until Just Food approves it and sometimes until the NCC approves it. So it can be a really long process.” Last season, for example, they had a very late start to the season because they were only given access to their plot at the end of May. In a typical

season the first round of seeding will be done as soon as the ground can be worked, usually in early May. While three or four weeks may not seem significant, in the life cycle of a carrot or greens, it can mean a significant difference in when you are able to harvest (and sell) your first crops.

After a yearlong unsuccessful search for a farm property, my partner and I now rent from the NCC as well. While we have a twenty-five year lease, the agreement gives the NCC the power to re-possess the property for their own purposes with one year's notice. The lease also requires that we seek permission from the NCC to conduct many routine farm tasks, including erecting a greenhouse or any other structure, removing or adding fencing, or changing the landscaping (a purposely vague term) in any way. In addition, the lease contains seemingly contradictory statements, requiring tenants to “keep the area around each outbuildings clear of brush” (Article 2.2) while at the same time assuring that “no living tree shall be cut down, knowingly damaged or removed from the Farm without the prior consent, in writing, of the Landlord” (Article 11).<sup>38</sup>

At a meeting for potential new farm tenants, the NCC Property Management and Leasing Manager explained that the NCC is obligated to charge “market value” for their farm properties. In addition to requiring leasing farmers to be responsible for much of the day-to-day maintenance of the farmhouse, and all maintenance of any farm infrastructure, the NCC now requires its tenant farmers to insure the properties on their behalf. As one staff person from the NCC explained to me “they're the government, they don't insure their properties.” The NCC's vision for the Greenbelt, as described in its 2013 Master Plan, certainly implies a long-term commitment to its existence, stating that “[t]he

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<sup>38</sup> These articles are contained both in our specific lease, and in the standard agricultural lease provided to prospective tenants from the NCC.

Greenbelt will forever protect natural systems, agriculture and opportunities for outdoor recreation and education that will inspire Canadians and contribute to the sustainability and quality of life in Canada's Capital Region" (NCC 2013). Yet its actions at times appear at odds with this statement, and suggest a more profit-oriented logic.

In the mid-1990s the NCC found itself in a bitter dispute with one of its former agricultural tenants. In 1994, the NCC chose not to renew a lease with the Woodburns, forcing them to leave the farm. However, this was not any tenant. The Woodburns were the previous owner of this very farm. They had been forced to sell their farm to the NCC as part of the creation of the Greenbelt. Following the sale, the family was able to lease the farm back from the NCC until a re-classification of the farm led the NCC to declare a section of it "surplus" and no longer a useful inclusion in the Greenbelt. Once vacant, the NCC successfully petitioned to have it re-zoned for commercial use in 1997 and subsequently sold it for \$6,702,000. This piece of property was purchased from the Woodburns for \$110,000 in 1963; even factoring in the rate of inflation since then, the NCC obtained a hefty profit (Ottawa Citizen 1997). The Woodburns fought the sale, and while they were unsuccessful, the Federal Court Judge had some choice words for the intentions of the National Capital Commission:

I would close by saying that I am not unsympathetic to the situation in which the Woodburns find themselves...Considering the fact that the Greenbelt was conceived as a "buffer zone" against encroaching urban sprawl, the steps taken by the National Capital Commission to declare the land surplus and to obtain a rezoning of the land from institutional government to highway commercial seem more consistent with accommodation of urban sprawl, rather than resistance to the erosion of green areas. When one considers this, in combination with the fact that the sale of the land generated a profit for the National Capital Commission of \$6.7 million dollars, one cannot help but question the motivation of the defendant in declaring the land surplus, rezoning the land and selling it. Accordingly, although the conclusion in law is inevitable, one cannot help but feel considerable sympathy for the Woodburns (Woodburn Estate v. National Capital Commission (T.D.), [2001] 1 F.C. 305).

This is not the first time the NCC has sold land from the Greenbelt, and while those properties represent a small minority of the Greenbelt, they are representative of a shift in NCC policy and in its relationship with the federal government towards cost recovery and self-financing<sup>39</sup>. The NCC's interest in receiving market value for its rental properties is contrasted with the private land owners' pursuit of cost recovery, as well as pursuing other non-economic goals such as the preservation of farmland, or a sense of nostalgia over family history. This discussion highlights two important considerations: the intentions of the property owner and the way the property is valued. These are not solely important considerations for landlords, but for those who are making use of the land themselves. Whether tenant or owner, a farmer's intentionality towards their land, how they see the land and value it, will have strong bearing on what kinds of possibilities they envision and enact through their land tenure and farm enterprise as a whole.

### *Valuing the land*

Land tenure is complicated by the fact that, for most farmers, your farm is also your home. All but two of the farmers I spoke with resided on their farms, making it nearly impossible to distinguish where exactly the household ended and the enterprise began. In part because of this, it can be hard to get past the sense of security and control that comes from private ownership, regardless of whether your intentions are for stewardship or investment, or more likely, a combination of both. Because farming is not a hobby but a livelihood for these individuals, the ability to cope with current realities and structures is more urgent than other forms of experimentation that are not tied directly to one's income. Despite this, the land tenure arrangements of these farms have both coping and

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<sup>39</sup> For example, any new acquisitions to the Greenbelt must be financed internally within the NCC; the most likely candidate for financing is the sale of other lands within the Greenbelt.

prefiguring qualities. Particularly for those using collective forms of ownership, this decision allows them to access farmland they wouldn't otherwise be able to afford. In addition to affordability, the ethic behind these ownerships models is also important.

Leased land tenure can often be seen as a temporary coping mechanism, a first step towards purchasing a farm. That said, not everyone saw alternatives to private ownership as temporary. For David, one of the other NCC farm tenants, purchasing property is not in his future plans. Buying a farm is not a viable option financially, certainly not the kind of farm he is able to rent, but he also worries about how the drive for ownership contributes to the continued commodification and eventual development of farmland.

[T]he main attraction, as you say, is that I'm on a multi-billion dollar property that I could not afford in my wildest dreams...in Ottawa, on a farm....by the river, okay!...I'm not obsessed with owning a farm, [the disappearance of farmland] is a big reason why I'm not, where I'm okay with renting. Lots of farmers can't get that out of their mind, they have to own a farm, be home-owners and buy it, doesn't matter what you do with it.

My partner and I initially felt very strongly about private ownership. We felt it was the only way of guaranteeing secure tenure, something we needed to make investing in the soil and outbuildings worthwhile. Having spent the first few years on rented land, never being sure if we would be there the following year, I was certainly eager to have some degree of long-term stability. However, in the end we decided that other values were more important than ownership. Having what we felt was a good quality of life, without the stress of a large mortgage and feeling as though we had put everything on the line for the farm, outweighed the desire to 'own' our farm. We still wanted secure land tenure but not at any cost. For us, the decision to rent from the NCC was in large-part a coping mechanism, but it also holds a prefigurative quality, illustrating one way to protect farmland as a public good. Despite my frustrations with the NCC, these are values that I

hold very dear.

Janet (10), having farmed with her husband Bruce for over 40 years, feels very strongly about young farmers limiting their debt. She said that she always advises those starting out: “don't get into debt. Try and figure out a way to get what you need without getting into debt.” Having lived through the skyrocketing interest rates of the early 80s, when as Janet says, their “biggest money was out in those days,” she and Bruce remember how quickly things can change and how difficult it can be to have that debt looming over your heads.

How farmers talk about and relate to their land suggests a different kind of relationship and valuation of property than what is espoused under capitalism. Bruce (10) for example, in describing their farm, explains that he and Janet had 150 acres that they are “looking after.” There is a very intimate and strong connection between the farmers and the land they farm, seeing the land not as a capital investment but as a sort of sanctuary, holding a very important place in their lives. Hilary (4) sees her farm as a source of nourishment; not just biological, but spiritual and emotional:

the farm has always been a good nurturing venue for me to process stuff. I find that it has been for a lot of people coming through, that I've had some gals, some friends who have taken a pause on life, quit their jobs and come and worked for a season, just to work through some stuff. Just that focus of okay we're going to do...Its nurturing. And so that has evolved. My respect for the work in that sense, and I've just gotten deeper. I think I've gotten a lot more spiritual over the years.

Other farmers spoke similarly about their relationship to their land. One farmer sees the food she produces as anchoring her in a biological, natural cycle: “I feel sad when I butcher a chicken because I've taken a life but I also feel good about the fact that that animal was respected for what it is, for its true social capacities, physical capacities, its ability to interact with the land.” Several farmers expressed an openness about their farm

that is non-proprietary. They spoke about their farm property as a place where multiple people could take on different projects or enterprises, rather than seeing their enterprise and the farm as one and the same.

Having lived on her farm most of her life, Emily (5) has developed a deep attachment to the land she and her partner now live and farm on:

Every day and every year I love more and more this land, that we live on. I can't really even explain it but it just it grows and grows often time; the relationship with the land. Having grown up here, I just love being here, I don't know, it's really hard to explain, but there's just a connection that's stronger and stronger that keeps me here as well.

She talks about how her family relates to their land, and how she feels family farms in general approach their land:

This land is not, there's no desire by anyone to sell it as real estate. We don't value land, I think that's something interesting with family farms, I think families in farming tend to see it as, this isn't something we're going to sell later for a profit, ya know, this is our land, and we live here and plan to make our lives here and there's a big difference between that and speculation on land. To live somewhere for a short time, thinking you're going to sell. As a family farm we don't really think that way. We just want our family to be able to farm if they want to. So there's no desire from anyone to try and sell this land as real estate and make money.

For Emily, this way of valuing land represents a step outside of capitalism, valuing the farm for what it can provide to their family and broader community, rather than a form of capital or investment to produce a future return. For those who own their farm, or have a desire for private ownership, the appeal of ownership is based in a desire to control what happens on that land and how it is managed. Eby explained her decision to purchase a farm (in this case collectively) is driven by a desire for both a sense of security and a sense of responsibility:

I felt that was important to me in terms of long-term stewardship and also good investment of my own personal resources. I was not so interested in investing in stocks for example. Not at all. And investing in land felt like a great way to have some sort of financial security but more importantly have a connection to a location where I see it as a responsibility me personally.

Ownership is about doing something beneficial for herself in a practical sense, but also about doing something beneficial for the land. Here Eby articulates a strategy of both coping and prefiguring. Purchasing a farm collective allowed her to cope with the reality of needing to save money (for retirement for example), but it was also prefigurative in that it created a collective living and working environment where multiple families shared their time and resources in mutual aid of one another.

Indeed, many of the farmers emphasize striving to make their relationship with the land mutually beneficial, trying to repair damage done by neglect or conventional farming practice, and to improve the soil structure, fertility and biodiversity. The way Katie (3) describes her approach to her land displays a strong prefigurative practice:

one thing that I am still a little utopic about is I'm trying to recoup our land, it was cash-cropped, so many nutrients and everything taken out of it and I'm trying to use the animals to do the work of the land, to put fertility back into it. And have it be more productive and more healthy land than when I started. It already is healthier than when we started, but I can walk the fence line, and I can see at the fence line and the soil is this high, but you go six inches in where it's been ploughed every year and its half a foot down. That's soil that's lost, that's going to take hundreds of years to get back, but I can start. That's my utopian kind of thing. *I can't do everything but I can do a little bit for the piece of land that I have, I can work on that.*

This last comment really encapsulates the sense of responsibility that many of these farmers felt for their land, and it is an example of an autonomous politics. They understand that their actions may not change things on a large-scale, but they believe there is value in undertaking a project to make a radical change in their local context.

This shift is visible not only in the environmental values the farmers in this study express, but in how they believe farmland should be treated. Nearly all the farmers I spoke to identify the continued and expanding commodification of farmland as a primary obstacle to enacting postcapitalist possibilities. Changing how agricultural land is accessed and valued in society was repeated again and again in the interviews, both with

farmers and in the scoping interviews. When I asked Janet (10) what she thought the biggest challenge was, as soon as the question was out of my mouth, she said “land, land!” David (2) was emphatic in his belief that our current treatment of farmland was destructive:

farms cannot be treated as capital property the way they are, for this to function. That's the root of the problem, and in many sense, they're real estate. Prices have nothing to do with value, their real value, and the stewardship of it...Farms have to be taken out of the privately traded realm, as fast as possible. Like this is urgent. They're disappearing and the ones that are there are completely inaccessible to people who want to farm.

Hilary (4) reflected that even if farmers are able to scrape together enough money to buy a farm, this purchase often forces you to change the way you farm. All of a sudden there is a large mortgage to pay, putting pressure on the farm business to earn a certain amount of revenue; all of which is incredibly stressful. Attempting to avoid this purchase all together also has challenges, as David (2) learned. Without a mortgage he has no equity or assets built up, something that makes financial institutions uneasy about giving him a business loan: “People like Farm Credit Canada and banks don't give a shit about a lease, so they won't give me financing anyways. “Do you have anything to mortgage? No. Then, you have nothing, have fun with your credit card.” And that is precisely what David is doing, financing his yearly farm costs with his credit card.

This is not to say that farmers who see their land as a form of capital or future investment (often their only source of retirement savings) do not still treat their land with respect and would prefer to see their farm continue as a farm. The aim here is not to develop a binary of good and bad farmers, a stark contrast of capitalist and postcapitalist farmers. The intent is to illustrate what kinds of postcapitalist experimentation are taking place, in this case around land tenure and to highlight what I see as a particular kind of

farm and farmer that are trying to live with a common set of values and goals. By seeing land as a valued actor and participant in their farm rather than something to be acted upon, these farmers articulate a different kind of relationship to land, where respect and protection of natural resources is a collective and collaborative project. In doing so they prefigure a world where humans have a relationship with land based perhaps not in ownership but in stewardship.

#### ***4.2. Labour Relationships***

Land forms the building block of any food provisioning, but getting nature to follow a specific production plan, not to mention getting that food out of said soil, takes a lot of work. Farming can be very labour intensive, yet few of these farmers relied on formal waged labour.<sup>40</sup> Two had at one point hired staff, and only one currently has employees. Instead most farmers engage in a series of gift and barter labour relationships, including volunteers, workshares interns and networks of mutual aid with neighbouring farmers and friends. The labour needs of a farm depend greatly on what type of farm it is. This was highlighted through the interviews, as those farms who primarily grew mixed vegetables have a high need for additional labour, while those who farm primarily livestock are able to get away with the occasional help from friends or neighbours. For several farmers the farm labour is handled primarily by the farmer themselves, usually with the part-time labour of their partner or spouse. For the livestock farms in particular, there isn't really a need for regular additional help on the farm.

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<sup>40</sup> Statistics Canada reports that roughly one third of all Canadian farms have employees (2011a)

*Table 4. Typology of Labour Relationships on Farms Studied*

	<b>Gift</b>	<b>Barter</b>	<b>Cash/Waged</b>
Formal	Volunteers CSA member work days	Workshares Organized Trades Un-paid interns	Employees Paid Interns
Informal	Neighbour help Family help	One-off Trades Woofers	

Labour on Canadian farms has taken many different forms, but it has never been an easy or particularly rewarding job. As Butovsky and Smith describe:

Agricultural work in Ontario tends to be low-paying and relatively dangerous, and the historic discrimination against agricultural workers in law makes it difficult to win improvements. The importation of migrant "guest workers" from Mexico and the Caribbean serves to depress wages and complicates union organizing by dividing workers along linguistic, racial, and national lines, as well on the basis of citizenship (2007: 77).

While many think of the Seasonal Agricultural Worker program as the beginning of a significance shift in agricultural labour (and a recent one at that), Canada has a long history of casual and precarious agricultural workers, from both domestic and immigrant sources.

The Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) has been in effect since 1966; supposedly to address the chronic shortage of cheap labour in agriculture. Agriculture work has long been precarious, gruelling and low-paid. Prior to the SAWP, the state intervened in other ways to provide a steady supply of low wage workers for Canadian farms. This included a farm place scheme during the Depression where unemployed men were sent to work on farms (Berton 2001), forced labour of interned Japanese Canadians during WW2, and war veterans from Poland and other European countries looking to come to Canada. Indeed, this was how my grandfather emigrated to Canada. Following WW2 he came to Canada and worked on farms in Ontario. After 7

years he returned to Italy to bring my grandmother and my mother to Canada, having gained the 'right' to citizenship and sponsorship of his family.

According to Parr (1985), these “rural hierarchies” can be traced all the way to the first waves of European colonization and settlement. Despite the popular narrative of “independent yeomen” clearing the land alongside their neighbours to create Canada's first farms, “in each successive generation from settlement phase onward, rural wage labourers have been essential to the functioning of [Ontario]'s persistent and unmistakably hierarchical agricultural system” (1985: 91-92). These “rural hierarchies” persist today with the ever growing presence of migrant workers, and help shape the labour context in which these farms operate. Low wage or precarious labour is not excluded from the small-scale or organic farming community; quite the opposite. As Maxey (2006) notes, these forms of labour are alive and well in so-called alternative or sustainable agriculture.

### *Waged Labour*

Emily (5) is the only farmer who regularly engages in paid labour relationships, having two full time and two-three part time staff. In the beginning she had workshares and internships, but over the years she switched to staff. For her, the transition from workshares and interns to staff was a practical one. It had become increasingly difficult to find people willing and able to commit to the weekly work exchange, in part because of simple things like transportation, and the fact that another farm closer to town (with better transportation options) also offered workshares. She also feels, as several other farmers do, that it is difficult to sustain an intern relationship where you are both living and working together.

Diane (1), in talking about their decision to remain at a particular size instead of scaling up, explained that for them having hired labour just didn't fit with the labour requirements of their farm: “this is not a 9-5 job... if the fence breaks, the pigs get out, or a calf didn't come up with the herd and you gotta go down and get her. Or the water breaks down, there's always something, so that's enough! So, and you can't hire anyone to do that.” For some, it was also a question of cost, not being able to afford to hire someone. Several farmers see many benefits of a waged labour exchange, but they just did not have the money to do so. One farmer stated that even using the Canadian Government Grant program that subsidizes wages, she felt that it was too complicated and too difficult to manage. She also expressed a sentiment echoed by other farmers, that people are not interested in working on farms. Most employment advertisements for farm work offer minimum wage and require employees to work between 40-60 hours a week<sup>41</sup>. Often located in regions with no public transit, and with an expectation of hard physical labour, it is perhaps not surprising that farm work is not the first choice for many. Interestingly enough, no farmer seems to have trouble accessing other forms of labour, including volunteer and internships.

### *Gift labour*

For small-scale organic farms, unpaid labour has become quite common. Several of the farmers mentioned the presence of friends, family or CSA members who gave their time. Those farms with CSAs often organize works days for their members, though most farmers feel these days are less about actually getting work done, and more about building relationships and encouraging their members to engage with their farm. One farmer who farms in a relatively urban area spoke of how one of their volunteers just

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<sup>41</sup> Based on an analysis of employment ads in the Ottawa and surrounding area.

happened to be walking by one day while they were in the field and struck up a conversation. This individual went on to become a regular contributor to their farm. These gift relationships are generally informal without any agreed upon exchange, although people are sometimes sent home with surplus vegetables as a thank you for their time. With free or gift labour, expectations are usually quite low, so as Hilary (4) remarks, getting anything done is “delightful.” Nevertheless, several farmers also reflected that volunteers or other 'free' forms of labour can have other costs and downsides that make them both ineffective and unreliable. Recalling an incident on the farm where a visitor lost a fingertip after putting it in the moving part of a machine, Janet (10) stated that “if we're having help its either family or someone who knows the operation.”

#### *Barter Relationships*

Farmers also rely on different barter relationships. Some are formalized into regular arrangements, while others are one-off trades for particular tasks or use of equipment. Participating in such a barter, specifically a workshare, was my first real experience and introduction to farming. One morning every week I would bike and take a ferry to Wolfe Island to work on a local farm in exchange for a vegetable share. Sometimes we would weed, other times we would harvest and organize the shares. I remember mostly not having confidence in what I was doing (“Is this a weed or a carrot??”), but it was a great entry point, and sparked an interest in growing my own food, and eventually food for others (for a more detail discussion of workshares, see Wilson 2012). Formal workshares are not that common among the farmers I interviewed. Only one other farm currently uses workshare relationships and another farm had

previously had workshares. Other farms did have experience with woofers,<sup>42</sup> workstays or informal barterers that are similar in nature, although not as formalized or long-term.

David (2) spoke about two woofers in particular who spent some time with him on his farm, and impressed him with their approach to learning and farming:

I had a wooper come, he's in his 30s, 36, total change of career, he was super cool and was really good. He'd done a couple farms already and reading and reading and you know one of the keen ones. He and his partner want to start a little farm in the next couple years and do a little restaurant with it, they got savings, taking his time, so what he'll be almost forty? He's going to be super solid. Like from day one, or at least eventually. It's good.

Farmers frequently mentioned the importance of barter or gift labour from neighbours. These relationships represent an important way to get access to equipment or skills that the farmer might not possess. These barter relationships are not always a strict exchange, but follow the trajectory of gift economies where there is a general social contract established between friends or neighbours to help each other out when need be. David (2) spoke about the benefits of bartering with individuals for specific skills, as opposed to volunteers or individuals who are just generally interested in farming:

I have friends that are really qualified in other things and they help me for things. Like my buddy, he's got his own chainsaw, tools and everything, and he just pulls up and ya, wicked, we need to fix that, and he's like yes, "zchuuuu" [chain saw noise], and I got to go do something and it's still happening and I pay him in veggies, meat and things like that, but I try to make it like a real value, not just coming to help out, but...

A: A genuine exchange?

Ya, and then I feel like I can count on those people a little bit more, and call them up, and they can make the effort and there's an exchange relationship there, and that works really well.

Formal and informal barterers, as well as gifted labour were the main ways that we accessed additional labour on our farm. We had formalized workshare relationships, where individuals worked on the farm one morning a week in exchange for a weekly

<sup>42</sup> Woofers refers to individuals who participate in WWOOF exchanges (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms).

share. There was also a network of family members, neighbours and friends who would help us out with specific tasks or skilled jobs. This network was particularly valuable to us as new farmers. Like many of the farmers interviewed, these individuals had access to equipment we could not afford, and a wealth of experience built up over decades of farming and living in the country. While they didn't necessarily understand our desire to farm in the way that we did, they were incredibly supportive and helpful. David (1) also relies on informal relationships for labour and support. He explained one key relationship with their neighbours, that was informal and yet crucial for his operation:

[J] is about 24 now but he's been coming here for 7 years, so he started young, but he knew everything, he could handle cattle. Him and his father can handle cattle, they work in the sales barn, we had an issue one day with a bull, he just drove his truck right to the barn, backed it to a corner of the fence and got the bull on the truck. They're just amazing, nobody got hurt. He can calf straight, he helps a lot. We pay him, nominally. But it's also a friend.

There was another young man David and Diane had met through a riding stable that had a strong farming background and the necessary equipment, but didn't have a farm. He became a big help to them, and in exchange he is able to board his horses on their farm. David said he was the one who really taught him about farming, taught him about haying, how to build and repair fences etc. In these situations the lines between friendship, worker, gift are blurred, there is simply a shared understanding of helping each other out. Despite the informality of these arrangements, David is clear that they are crucial to the survival of the farm: “we'd have to quit without them...he has specific things that he helps us with, but we couldn't survive without them.”

### *Internships*

Internships have become an increasingly popular, but also controversial, both in agriculture and throughout many industries. Small-scale organic agriculture in particular

has developed quite a reliance on internships to meet their labour needs. In the context of very slim profit margins and high labour demands, it is not surprising that farmers would turn to internships, particularly when there is a ready supply of young people interested in interning, and a societal acceptance that does not exist in other contexts (say in a fast food business for example). Most of the farms I interviewed did not make use of interns as extensively as many organic or small-scale farms, but several of them did have interns, or had had them in the past. They are such a dominant element of the labour landscape in small-scale organic agriculture that I feel it is important to include them in the analysis, even though not every farm currently participates in this type of labour exchange.

In Ontario, for a labour relationship to legally be an unpaid internship, there are quite specific restrictions. Outside of engaging in an internship as part of an educational program, the following conditions must be met:

- The training is similar to that which is given in a vocational school.
- The training is for the benefit of the intern. You receive some benefit from the training, such as new knowledge or skills.
- The employer derives little, if any, benefit from the activity of the intern while he or she is being trained.
- Your training doesn't take someone else's job.
- Your employer isn't promising you a job at the end of your training.
- You have been told that you will not be paid for your time.

(Ontario Ministry of Labour 2011)

Based on my own experience talking with other farmers (outside of this study) and interns in the area, and an analysis of the internships posting in the Ottawa and surrounding area by farmers, many internships fall short of these requirements. At the same time, it is also unfair to strictly label these relationships as unpaid. Even if interns are not receiving a payment, the vast majority receive room and board (or partial board) in exchange for their labour, as well as hands on-learning. In practice, internships exist under a variety of conditions and the economic nature of the relationship varies

considerably. It is important not to paint all internships with the same brush, as they are not just one particular thing.

For starters, there is great variation in cash payment – some positions offer several hundred dollars, others offer none. There is also great variation in terms of the kinds of accommodations offered, as well as the learning and skill development opportunities provided. In the case of farm 9, several of their interns have been students from the nearby agricultural college. These were unpaid internships but they were a part of their school program, and they were provided room and board. Another farm offers \$200 a week plus room and board, which is quite generous relative to other farms. Based on an analysis of other internship postings in the Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec area<sup>43</sup> most interns are offered a stipend, anywhere between \$50 a week and \$500 a week; although most are between \$100-\$200. This generally includes room and board, but in some cases interns are responsible for some of their food or had to pay for their accommodation. They are expected to work between 40-60 hours a week, doing a variety of field tasks, harvesting and selling at farmers' markets. In return, interns are promised a variety of informal and formal training and education on farm management and production. Only two internship postings include vacation time (unpaid), and one provided for two sick days and WSIB coverage.

There can be a great degree of vulnerability for the intern in these relationships. Sarah (6) spoke of the uncomfortable power dynamic inherent in internships, where the farmer is at once your employer, your landlord and your grocery store:

we often think of internships as a much more collaborative and collegial working environment, somehow not as stark as a worker/manager relationship,

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<sup>43</sup> Listings were collected between Dec-March 2014, from two websites that are commonly used to post farm positions: Goodwork.ca and justfood.ca

where the hierarchies between worker and owner/manager are somehow obscured...being an intern was mostly hard, I could handle the work, it was that power dynamic was really uncomfortable and difficult... the challenge with interning in my experience at least is that your employer, whose not actually paying you to do work on their farm, but nonetheless your employer, is also your landlord, your grocery store, so in a lot of ways they have an enormous amount of power over you which is really really, there's nothing fair or just about it...

Sarah recalled how she had to leave her first internship early because she developed carpal tunnel syndrome due to the harsh repetitive tasks, resulting in the need for surgery. As an intern she had no access to WSIB nor any form of paid leave that an employee [might] have access to. This is not solely the fault of the farmers, but also of government structures that make it next to impossible to access employee-benefits in non-monetary labour relationships, or any part-time labour.

Internships are generally not a clear cut material exchange; there is the intangible element of knowledge and learning, which muddy the waters of calculation. Several of the farmers interviewed felt like the internship relationship is not a fair exchange for them. In particular some felt the expectations of what an internship was have shifted in recent years. For Hilary (4), even though there is a cash expense to hiring staff, there is also a cost to internships that does not always make it a fair deal from her perspective. She reflected that in light of their growing popularity, she feels pressure to provide interns with a particular experience that negatively affects the amount of work they accomplished.

Most farmers you talk to (including those in this study) will have an 'intern story', some incident where their intern made a significant error on a task that the farmer thought was straightforward, leading to more work for the farmer, or losing a particular crop. The internship relationship is also very intimate; living and working together was not an ideal

situation for many of the farmers interviewed. A couple of farmers talked about the expectations of people coming on to the farm and the time it took to train and teach interns. As one farmer commented:

[M]y big complaint with interns is that they have no experience, so it's just a constant teaching, and burning out of teaching the same thing, sixty billion times, every year. And then you're halfway through the season and you think, okay we've gone through this, and then you start thinking, oh ya, we've gone [over this]...ohhh no, we haven't. Okay, go, cancel, everybody out of the field, no no [pitch]forks out.. “but we already did half the row” ...“shit” [laughter] Ya know? So, ya, I needed a break of that.

Here we see a benefit of a more formal and concrete employment relationship. With internships or bartering, the relationship can get murky when there isn't a clear outline of what exactly is being exchanged, or when what is being exchange is intangible and difficult to quantify.

#### *A Fair Trade? Valuing labour outside of wage relationships*

Whether labour is being exchanged for cash, bartered goods or knowledge, there was much discussion about what a fair exchange would be. From a capitalist perspective, determining the value afforded to labour is quite clear: workers are paid a wage based on their labour time. There are legal minimums which establish a floor for those wages, although most agricultural workers are exempt<sup>44</sup>, and beyond that it is assumed to be a negotiation between worker and owner. As soon as you step outside of the capitalist framework and logic, determining values becomes quite confusing. Do you mimic a capitalist system, assigning a monetary wage to a particular amount of hours and transferring that to the dollar amount of the share? Or do you use a more holistic assessment based on available resources and collectively produced surplus? One

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<sup>44</sup> In Ontario the Ministry of Labour distinguishes between farm employees and harvesters. Farm employees are not subject to the minimum wage, workers employed strictly as harvesters are. For more information see [http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/es/pubs/factsheets/fs\\_agri.php#farmworkers](http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/es/pubs/factsheets/fs_agri.php#farmworkers)

challenge to understanding the labour relationships of many of these farms is that they just don't fit a traditional (i.e. capitalist) employment relationship. As David and Diane (1) noted earlier in this section, much of the work that goes into a farm does not model a typical employment relationship. While some work on farms, particularly vegetables farms, fits more easily into a capitalist understanding of a labour relationship, even on these farms, much of the work defies the conceptual boundaries we have become accustomed to applying.

Emily (5) spoke of the struggle she faces in being able to properly compensate those who work for her, recognizing that their position and relationship to the farm is different than hers:

It's a struggle to pay people enough so that they feel like they can continue doing it in the future. And that's a sacrifice that I make, you know, I feel like I make a good living, but if I compare myself to other people, I don't make... I'm poor! For me, it's plenty of money and I'm really happy but I think, it's a struggle to find people who want to work for me and only get paid a certain amount. Because it's another thing, I have a lot of freedom as being the owner of the business, and not working for somebody else. I have a lot more freedom and flexibility to determine my own destiny and, so I think people, it's a struggle to find people in general and feel like I can pay them enough so they can continue doing this year after year.

For Emily, it is one thing for her to make a decision to live a particular way, but she doesn't feel comfortable imposing that standard on her employees. She wants to be able to provide them with a decent wage based on a more mainstream understanding of what that should be. Emily recognizes that as the owner, she is able to partake in benefits from the farm that those working on it are not; she has a wider array of coping mechanisms at her disposal. This also speaks to the sustainability of labour in these types of exchanges or possibilities; because of the nature of internships, and the typically low wages of agriculture jobs, it is difficult to retain workers for multiple years over the long term.

Hilary (4) highlighted this challenge in relation to workshare labour. If she

assigns a value based on labour time, at minimum wage (roughly eleven dollars an hour) workshares would work off a half share in only four weeks, which didn't quite seem fair to her. So she decided the workshare exchange would be one day a week; half the season for a half share, and the full season for a full share. This calculation was admittedly a bit arbitrary, but it highlights the challenge of assigning value outside of a wage-based model. In our experimentations with workshare relationships, we tried to arrive at an equation based mostly on their labour time. Yet even this had its complications. Workshare members didn't always treat their time at the farm as 'work' in a capitalist sense. This isn't necessarily bad, but it suggests the need for an alternative ways of valuing that exchange.

These informal or bated labour relationships often involve a sharing of surplus value created by the farm. For example, the surplus value created by workshare members is partially shared amongst the CSA, as opposed to being accumulated and distributed solely amongst the farm owners. I remember one time that two of our workshare members were picking peas, and they mistakenly picked mostly peas that were just a bit too young. This meant that the shares that week, including the ones workshares received, would be quite low on peas. In addition, there would not be many ripe peas the following week. By contrast, there were other times that workshare members were highly effective at harvesting a crop, resulting in a generous supply of that vegetable for the week. In both those situations, workshare members shared in the surplus value they created, or in some cases, the lack of it.

Farm 9 has had several different internship relationships. Heather, whose farm has experimented with different labour relationships, highlights the challenge of

compensating their labour fairly: “it's hard to pay them, and yet their work here is very valuable and deserves compensation, but I mean, I think that it feels fair to them to work for room and board, and various other rewards, CSA baskets and other types of things.”

Heather makes an important distinction, explaining that in the case of volunteers and interns, they don't include that labour as a factor in their production plan or forecasted output. That might seem like a technicality but I think it is an important distinction. As

Heather says:

we don't plan on growing more because we have that extra labour, we say, well, it'll take some time to train them in, some time to get them resources, and hopefully because we have them around, we can work less or do things, go to conferences or farm visits, or have an extra bit of free time, rather than, oh now we can grow more.

The intent in this case is not to use interns to increase production and presumably accumulate additional surplus value from their labour. It would be a different scenario if intern labour were factored into production benchmarks, or if interns were used to staff markets for example, a situation where the farm would be able to generate increased revenues because of that labour.

The appropriation of surplus value highlights an important distinction in how labour is valued. Carlsson and Manning (2010) employ Harvie's<sup>45</sup> discussion of Marx's productive and unproductive labour to distinguish between different ways of understanding labour. Harvie, drawing on Marx, describes productive labour as labour that produces surplus value and perpetuates the separation between labour and capital, while unproductive labour is work done for practical purposes based on “localized social needs” (Carlsson and Manning 2010: 927). Unproductive labour is labour that a worker decides to engage in for themselves, because they believe it is worth doing, it has a value

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<sup>45</sup> David Harvie, not to be confused with David Harvey

other than the value assigned by capital. From the perspective of capital, there is little value in growing food, and certainly no value in farming on a small-scale or limiting yourself to your immediate community. In general farm work is not something that is highly valued in society. And yet, growing food is a central component of our ability to survive, and from different perspectives is indeed very valuable. David (2) made an observation that people often think that farm work is physically hard, but that it isn't "difficult or complicated," assuming that anyone could do it. He's noticed that CSA members will offer to volunteer their time to work on the farm, but are much less willing to volunteer their own skills to the farm (as an accountant for example); seeing their skilled labour as much more highly valued than his skilled labour as a farmer:

nobody will tell you that a farmer's life is easy, to the contrary, they will say it's hard, because we've been indoctrinated that a farmer's life is hard. But it'sss weird how when it comes to farm-*ing*, everybody thinks farming is really friggin' easy, that everybody can do it and its just a matter of "oh, I'll help you!" Oh okay, have you done this before? "Oh no..." Remind me again how that's going to be help?

The farmers in this study certainly see their labour as something they engage in for themselves, for values other than those of capital, but as the earlier comment from Emily (5) illustrates, it is more difficult to expect that from volunteers, interns or employees, and harder still to establish labour relationships that reflect that value. These farmers struggle to find a balance between needing extra labour and wanting to establish a fair exchange, all while being keenly aware of how hard they work and how little they are remunerated. Just having to think about those issues is an important first step in unlearning capitalism and the system of values that comes with it. Among these farmers there is a continual negotiation and re-evaluation to determine what that right balance was.

Non-cash or limited cash exchanges can be a significant coping mechanism for farmers to make it work. As Hilary (4) says, “it's not much skin off our noses” to offer room and board, whereas cash can be much harder to come by. Internships and other non-cash exchanges have indeed become very popular, but it is difficult to tell if that popularity is driven by farmers or those seeking out farm internships or volunteer opportunities. As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, for many farms internship labour relationships have become an important coping strategy to stay afloat. With limited cash resources, farmers look to other available resources, such as housing, food and knowledge to leverage and exchange. While internships bring many positive elements to interns, and many interns may be happy to work in exchange for room and board or a modest honorarium, it is hard to overlook their role in creating surplus value, value that is accumulated and incorporated into an enterprise that they often have no stake in.

There is also the question of who is able to participate in these different labour relationships. Much like the Alternative Food Networks as a whole, it is limited to a particular set of people who can afford it and have the mobility to engage in it. For example, most internship postings indicate that pets and children are not welcome. When our farm hired workshares, a common barrier was transportation. We received many applications expressing an interest in participating in such an exchange from individuals who did not have access to a car and since there wasn't public transportation to our farm, this was a requirement. Workshares require a flexible weekly schedule, while internships require a seasonal availability, both of which may be difficult to arrange with other commitments and obligations. Room and board as an exchange for labour is only

feasible if you have a flexible living situation. Particularly if you have children or other dependants (who are generally not welcome), these arrangements are difficult to put in place.

On the other hand, these alternative forms of labour, whether it be internship, barter or gift labour, have the potential to challenge the restrictive and hierarchical nature of the employee and employer relationship, to prefigure a labour relationship of teacher and student, mentor and trainee, of friend and equal. The degree to which these labour relationships are also a prefiguring strategy largely depends on the individual relationship established and the intentions of both parties: how the labour contributes to the farm enterprise, how each person approaches the relationship and what they seek to get out of. Such an approach does not automatically exclude a particular category of labour relationship, rather the focus is on the particular dynamics of that relationship, identifying points of interest that might suggest an element of postcapitalist possibilities, or a potential area of concern. While I am quite critical of internships, that does not mean I am wholeheartedly rejecting them as a labour relationships with post-capitalist possibility. I have concerns about the way internship relationships are being practiced based on my own interactions and observations in the food networks that I have participated in. I raise these concerns as points of consideration, which to me suggest that there are other forms of labour relationships that offer more promising possibilities in the long run.

Labour relationships are perhaps one of the weaker areas in terms of prefiguring a collective autonomy. Farmers often brought up ideas or an interest in more co-operative and collaborative arrangements, as opposed to hierarchical labour relationships, yet some

struggled to put these more collective proposals into practice. David (2) spoke of the potential benefit if farmers teamed up and pooled their labour. In contrast to interns or volunteers, working with other skilled, experienced farmers is a “whole other ballgame.” He sees a lot of possibility there, yet he also acknowledges the difficulties of putting it into practice. Following a failed partnership with another farmer several years ago, he is not sure if it is possible to build a farming partnership that is not also a personal or life partnership. I was recently at a networking event for young farmers, and as part of the introductions each attendee was asked to explain why they were there and whether they were looking for, or offering, a farm-related opportunity. Practically every third or fourth person who spoke said they were looking to start a collective farm project of some sort. These were predominantly individuals new to farming who had perhaps worked or interned on farms but were not owners or managers of a farm enterprise. This was not the first time I've heard people new to farming express an interest in a co-operative or collective endeavour (indeed I was one of them when we first starting farming!). I think there can be a certain romanticization of both farming and collective forms of organization that has to be reconciled with, again the day-to-day negotiations of earning a living and running a farm, or any other enterprise. This is not to take away from these models, quite the opposite, but suggests that these kinds of relationships and structures are not necessarily easy to establish or maintain, and may not be appropriate in every situation.

Despite these challenges, there are indications of other possibilities beginning to emerge. When I interviewed Hilary (4) she introduced to me Erin, a young farmer who is living and working with her on their farm. Erin lives in her own yurt and shares the

living areas of the farmhouse with Hilary and her partner. The nature of their relationships is more of a partnership than an internship. Erin contributes some labour to the farm's enterprises, but also takes time to explore her own projects on the farm, in Hilary's words to earn "a little autonomous cash." Another farmer has developed a partnership with another farmer down the road, to jointly run a CSA. Katie's (3) time is increasingly being taken up by her sheep, and the neighbouring farm does not have the same member base that Katie's farm had established, so they decided to team up and run a CSA together. In the case of farm 9, they had started off as a three person co-operative, but they are looking for new members to join the farm. Heather explained they didn't like the idea of having a divide between co-op members-owners and employees. She said they want to work towards "new co-op members not employees."

These labour arrangements, while still developing, represent a promising evolution away from hierarchical power dynamics to a more collective endeavour of mutual aid. While mutual aid is usually invoked in relation to volunteer labour, White argues that it can exist in situations of both paid and unpaid, that paid mutual aid exists "where money and gifts are exchanged between individuals for work undertaken, but which are absent from commodified rationales" (2010: 468). The relationships enacted by some of these farmers take important steps towards a kind of labour relationship that is mutually-beneficial and respects and values each party equally.

### ***Conclusion***

These farms suggest that an enterprise can be many things, and can have multiple rationalities. As Sarah (6) reflected, their farm business is capitalist in some sense, but it is also a process of experimentation that is building towards something beyond

capitalism:

We're definitely part of that system, but we're also, at the same time, trying to figure out a way to do something differently in that system. I think that's one of the ways that prefigurative practice is an important way to look at it. We're trying to build little examples of better ways to do things within this system, and trying to push those forward and make them bigger and better.

These farms exist in defiance of the capitalist categories of 'for profit' and 'not-for profit,' creating a livelihood that blends together multiple activities, relationships and rationalities. The presence of a collective autonomy isn't altogether clear at this stage in the analysis. It is by taking these observations and building on them in the subsequent chapters that a collective process of disengagement and re-imagination becomes apparent. In some cases a collective autonomy is visible, for example through particular labour relationships that sought to create a different valuation and form of compensating labour, or a desire to treat land not as a property but an active partner in a shared project. The examples that more clearly prefigure a collective autonomy are those that create a different structure and a different set of values. Farm 9, jointly owned by the three members of the farm cooperative, is an excellent example of this. The ownership structure is an active practice for these three women; seeing collective organizing as a tool to put their ethics into practice, as opposed to seeing the structure as an end in itself. Other farmers work within more traditional relationships of land ownership and labour, but sought to imbue them with different values and rationalities.

The land tenure relationship and the labour relationships highlighted in this chapter seek to construct a scenario that is mutually beneficial, instead of extracting profit or surplus value from one party to another. In doing, so they challenge common elements of a typical capitalist enterprise. This is because these farms do not strictly act as a business. They exist as a hybrid of different economic rationales and identities –

enterprise, household and community. They illustrate possibilities beyond private property ownership, through forms of collective ownership, non-owning land tenure and through a different ethic of ownership that emphasizes stewardship, not real estate.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **BECOMING 'OTHER' SUBJECTS AND DESIRING 'OTHER' FUTURES**

This chapter adopts the lens of the farmer. It explores how farmers see themselves, value their work and relate to their communities. In addition to values related to their farm as an enterprise, many farmers express core values relating to what they prioritize and how they live their lives. While not always specifically geared towards their farm business, these values have important consequences for how and why they farm. Postcapitalist possibilities are not restricted to relationships between people through enterprises and organizations, they are also found within people, through the values they hold and the subject positions they embody. Alongside coping and prefiguring through particular material relations, farmers enact these strategies through their sense of self and articulation of values. Shifting how they see themselves and identify themselves is an important way for farmers to negotiate their realities and 'make it work'.

Gibson-Graham describe a process of becoming as a key element of imagining and enacting postcapitalist possibilities. It is not just a matter of organizing our economic relationships in a different manner, these possibilities require a different set of subjects capable of enacting and desiring them (2006: xxiii). From a poststructuralist political economy perspective, subjects are not static, they can shift overtime and across different situations. People have the potential to enact different subject positions through the different relationships in which they participate, and through their position within those relationships. Chris Weedon, an early writer on feminism and poststructuralism writes that subjectivity is “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and notions of an individual, one's sense of oneself and way of understanding one's relation to the world” (1987: 32-33). Gibson-Graham (2006), drawing on Butler, see subjection as a continual process of

making and remaking that is never quite complete, thereby leaving open the possibilities for new subjects. Similarly, Larner and LeHeron's work on economic globalization argues for an embodied approach that includes how subject positions respond to economic and political shifts, becoming new identities and adopting new behaviours:

[a]s established identities are confronted by a changing political-economic world, simultaneous changes may arise from the fracturing of these identities, the appearance of new subject positions, and the constrained enrolment of subjects into new behaviours and ways of being (2002:757).

In exploring diverse economies, Gibson-Graham write that they are concerned with “[e]xactly how subjects “become” and more specifically how they may shift and create new identities for themselves despite the seemingly hegemonic power of dominant discourses and governmental practices” (2006:24).

Subject positions are a key form of experimentation, as capitalism not only structures many of our economic relationships, it also shapes who we are and what we value. The values and sense of self that these farmers have developed signals an important departure from the subject positions offered up under capitalism. A few of the farmers themselves identified the importance of values and intentions, suggesting that these can be key ways of distinguishing between possibility and co-optation. As one farmer said, in talking about what a utopian food system might look like to her:

[T]he only way I can really answer that question is with an emphasis on the values rather than the practices. Because I have a pretty strong belief that practices that we think are going to be amazing and ideal, once we get there, we're going to find flaws, and we're going to have to change them and be more critical about what we're doing.

Much like the material relationships of the farm, the subjectivities and values of these farmers are enacted as both coping and prefiguring strategies; finding ways to make the material difficulties of their livelihood more manageable, while creating desires and priorities outside of consumption and a continual drive for growth.

The discussions in this chapter are meant to show the deep interconnectedness of discourse and physical matter, to highlight how one's sense of self and identity *shape and are shaped* by our material relationships and experimentations. Material feminists express a concern that perhaps we have lost sight of that interconnection, and that in our excitement over the role of language and culture we have left the material out in the cold. Alaimo and Hekman see material feminism as a project of understanding “the relationship between discourse and matter [in a way] that does not privilege the former to the exclusion of the latter” (2009:6). According to Barah we are at a place where “language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter” (2009:120). These scholars provide me with an important reminder: to ground my analysis of subjectivities and a process of becoming in the material world of these farmers, linking the experimentation that occurs within the farmer to the experimentations that are enacted within the farm and their wider food network.

### ***5.1. Becoming a Farmer***

Being a farmer is an interesting identity to hold. It can mean many different things, as there are many different kinds, and forms, of farming. The identity of a farmer is one that is often imbued with extreme characteristics and essentialized by mainstream discourses. They are presented as both saviours and enemies of the environment. Conventional farmers are often vilified as destroying the environment with their use of chemicals and GMO-seeds, while urban farming is exalted as the path to a green future. At other times they are portrayed as helpless victims in the face of corporate domination and the inevitable disappearance of farmland and their way of life. A report by the

National Farmers Union for example writes that “[f]armers are losing control. Agribusiness is colonizing agriculture” (2005:13). In the face of these dominant subject-defining discourses, I wanted to know how farmers see themselves, how they have constructed their identities as both as farmers and individuals, and how their values and perspective on the world have developed.

For these farmers, the decision to become a farmer was often part of a broader process of becoming; shedding old careers, priorities, values and aspirations, and building new ones. A broad shift took place that related not only to their livelihood but how they saw themselves and their relationship to their community. Even those who grew up on a farm didn't necessarily come to farming directly. Most left the farm to go to university and only later came back to farming. All but two of the interviewees have a particular story of how that process started, a particular moment that sparked or seeded something in them. In these stories there are common themes of disenchantment with society, and a desire to disengage and build alternative possibilities.

For Katie (3), it was both an emotional and practical decision, based on memories of her childhood and also a desire to have more control over her life financially:

Ya, I grew up sort of right on my grandparent's farm basically and never really thought about it when I left home to go to university. And then I started getting back into going to farmers' markets, caring more about where my food came from again, tasting those awesome carrots that tasted like my grandmothers carrots used to taste, instead of that cardboard chemical crap at the grocery store. And then the 2008 economic crap hit the fan and all that stuff, my husband and I started talking about wanting to have more security in our lives, more food security, stuff like that. And that was when we decided, well, go big or go home!

Emily (5), who grew up on her family's dairy farm, had a similar story to Katie's. It was only when she left the farm and headed to university that she found herself thinking about building a life on that land:

Well, I grew up here and growing up I didn't really think I would be a farmer, I didn't really wanna be on the farm that much. I was always happy to head off to school or do things in Kingston, have a life off the farm, and I imagined that I'd go off to University and have some sort of professional career in a small, large, I don't know, city basically. And then it was only when I went away that I started to miss the way that I had grown up.

When Emily first returned to her family's farm, she did not immediately think of farming as her livelihood. Initially she was interested in homesteading-type activities, growing food for herself and her partner while they both had others jobs. However, it quickly became clear that she wanted to develop that side of herself and have it feature more prominently in her life.

I think before we started [farm 5] we thought about just homesteading and doing stuff on the farm, but it being small-scale. And we did do that for a couple years, but I always had to be working some other job, and it didn't feel good to be between the farm and somewhere else. It started to make a lot more sense for me to do it on a larger scale so that I could be a farmer. I think at first I wasn't totally comfortable saying I was a farmer and now I'm completely comfortable identifying as a farmer. And it's funny too, because I grew up on a farm, in a farm family, but I never would have really called myself a farmer, you know? So it was only after I started the business that I came to identify that way.

Making farming her livelihood allowed Emily to take on the identity of a farmer, something that she hadn't been comfortable doing before, even though she was part of a family farm and had been producing food.

Hilary's (4) process of becoming started in university, after switching her major from Journalism to Environmental Studies because in her words "I wanted to change the world and they wanted you to conform!" There, she was exposed to food policy issues, food politics and the idea of CSAs. She recalled a specific moment where she was in the process of moving and had all of her books packed in produce boxes from the grocery store where she worked:

I looked at all my books packed, and they were all in produce boxes and none of them were from Canada. And that was a first step, and this was unfortunately in November, so that was the first step of me saying, you know what? I'm not going to eat anything from Argentina anymore! Or, you know,

learning about all the ways, all the exploitation, all the expropriation, like, forget it! So I ate a lot of winter squash and cheese that winter. But, ya, so that was step one.

After apprenticing on two farms in the US, which had pioneered Community Supported Agriculture, she returned to the Ottawa area to start her own farm. Once she got into it, there was no question of whether growing food was a hobby or her livelihood. She was hooked and felt strongly about making a living off of farming: “I was pretty determined that you have to be able to make a living off food...you have to be able to focus on it, or you never will. Farms can become a liability pretty fast. Ya, so, that's a personal opinion I hold pretty strongly.” It quickly became a key piece of Hilary's identity, as it did for many of the sample farmers. Even after experiencing a difficult year where she felt she needed to rethink how she was farming, Hilary never considered not farming or participating in agriculture in some way: “I've never, I never contemplated not farming, I can't imagine what I would do. Ya, I don't know that there's anything, aside from helping people farm, and encouraging people, I don't know what else I could do! I love it.”

Perhaps the most significant transformation occurred with David and Diane (1). Growing up, David lived in what he called a “Leave it to Beaver” kind of household. Even as an adult he wasn't exactly the type of person you would peg as wanting to farm. As David recalls, some of his long-time friends were quite surprised at his transformation: “I didn't even like to cut the grass when we had a lawn. They're like – I can't believe he's doing this!” Diane agreed, remembering that “David never fixed anything. I'd either get one of my neighbours to help me or I'd do the upkeep around the house. I'd do the outside windows or if I couldn't do it, I hired somebody else to do it. And now, oh my god, the things we do!” David was quite candid about their lack of agricultural knowledge and the little thought given to the food they ate when they lived in

the suburbs. He recalls that initially, his interest in raising pastured-beef was not environmental, but because he didn't like the expense of purchasing corn feed:

organic wasn't even in my vocabulary, we ate regular, conventional food, we didn't know the stuff we were eating was probably killing us, slowly. And I said, there's no way I'm going to buy corn to feed them, we have all this grass! But that was the stupidity of the decision-making at the time, it turned out it was a good idea!

Becoming farmers was a conscious decision by David and Diane to change their lives and their lifestyles. It was not the strongest financial decision they could have made, but it had other important advantages:

We had set up a plan for retirement and it certainly didn't involve 53, kids still in university. But we decided to forgo that. My blood pressure was high, I wasn't having any fun, I was overweight. At the end of the day I would pound back 6 beers and then get up and do it again. It just wasn't a lifestyle that was sustainable.

Farming was also a chance for David to feel like he was doing something positive in the world. When he and Diane first bought their farm David was still working in his previous career in the IT sector, but he was feeling more and more dissatisfied with the kind of work he was doing and the morals surrounding it, particularly with his most recent employer. As he reflects: “at least at Nortel I was making phones, innocuous, I'm not hurting society, I just didn't feel building bombs was my thing.” David and Diane talked about how becoming farmers and moving to a farm changed not only themselves as individuals, but their relationship as a couple. Diane described the farm as a “good adventure” for them. She recalled how when David was working at Nortel, he was working and traveling a lot, and was very stressed, while she and the kids were off doing a million things in different directions. Moving to the farm really brought them closer together.

The farming journey for Heather, Eby and Jenna (9) began when they were university students in Montreal. Heather was the first to catch the farming bug.

Following an internship with a worker co-operative farm, Heather knew she wanted to farm collectively, she was just looking for the right people to do it with. Eby, who was finishing up a degree in Environmental Studies at the agricultural campus of McGill, and Jenna, who grew up in Alberta and previously worked in the forestry industry, were both intrigued by the idea. Eby joked that “We all jumped on Heather’s ship!... It was a good looking boat and we said we’re jumping in!” For Jenna, it wasn't until she was exposed to a different model of farming that she saw herself as someone who might want to farm:

I had relatives who farmed, [but] this was farming in a different scale. I had gardened, I had a small greenhouse and garden in Alberta, I grew a lot of food that way, and I enjoyed that, but I never saw the possibilities of it being employment, until I started seeing these smaller CSA farms, and being really attracted to them. I had met Eby and she was talking to Heather and people about starting a farm, so I was interested in being on the farm, and then when I thought of myself being on the farm, it made sense to be part of the farm. I had become disenchanted in academia, especially in the environment under the conservative government. So I decided that that would be a good change... Now I farm full time and have more and more responsibilities on the farm every year.

For these three farmers, the process of becoming was collective. They didn't just become farmers as individuals, they became farmers as members of a collective farm.

Bruce (10) grew up on the farm he and Janet now farm. At the time, he said that it was pretty much expected that he would return to run the farm. For Bruce and Janet, the process of becoming didn't necessarily start with becoming farmers, but in deciding to become a particular kind of farmer. In the 1980s they made, what could have been, a risky financial decision to farm organically. After running a conventional dairy for many years, they became concerned about the use of chemicals around their kids. Following an encounter with a friend of theirs who was an avid organic supporter, they made the switch. Since then they have transitioned from dairy to beef, and as Janet said “we never thought of going back, so we never did.”

Paul (8), like many of the other farmers who grew up on a farm, left the farm to

go to university. He studied engineering and eventually worked overseas in international development, often on agriculture-related projects. He found himself working with farmers who were struggling to shift from a state-organized agricultural system to a market-based one. While he was ostensibly helping farmers cope with this new reality, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was also complicit in a process of encouraging a more corporate and capitalist agricultural sector. He decided to return to Canada and worked within the NGO sector here, but again felt frustrated at the lack of accountability and connection to the people on whose behalf they were supposedly working. So he decided to become a farmer, taking great value in earning his own livelihood and advocating for farmers as a farmer himself:

I farm because it's a dignified livelihood. I'm fully in control over my own income and..well not fully, I'm weather dependent and if people loose their jobs in Ottawa then I will also suffer from it. But I'm independent and I'm able to be a free thinker and a free-speaker, without that having any economic implications on my ability to make a livelihood. And that's important.

Erin's process of becoming was more gradual and implicit than many of the other farmers. It was never a question of whether Erin (7) would start a farm, just when and what it would look like. After moving to a farm just outside the city, she and her partner started as homesteaders, with chickens and a garden. When Erin went on maternity leave she took it as an opportunity to develop a business plan for a farm. Erin's story highlights an important point of consideration: these processes of becoming do not exist in isolation, they are enable and constrained by other, often material and structural forces. While she had always wanted to farm, maternity leave provided the time to explore and develop an alternative livelihood and way of life.

Becoming a farmer was much less of a deliberate action for David (2). A self-described “middle class suburban white dude” he grew up enjoying the outdoors and

working with tools, but farming did not really enter into his mind. After dropping out of university, he became interested in environmentalism and growing food. He completed a Horticulture Degree at college, but that was not quite what he was looking for. He travelled to Vancouver Island to apprentice on a farm and found it was a much better fit. He returned to Ottawa and enrolled in an intensive workshop on starting a CSA. There, he met a woman who leased an NCC farm and was looking for someone to share the land. Much like Hilary, his interest in farming started from a moral and political stance; and much like Erin, this process of becoming was enabled by external forces. Connecting with this particular woman, who had land to share, led to his eventual tenancy of the entire farm, starting with a vegetable CSA and leading eventually to a mixed farm of vegetables, chickens and beef.

#### *An honourable livelihood*

The decision to farm is both personal and political. It is fulfilling, something these farmers genuinely enjoy, but it is also something that fits with their ethics and morals. Becoming a farmer was a chance to explore their values and politics in a very grounded, experiential way. One farmer said that she was attracted to the idea of farming in part because she felt it could make a tangible difference in the world: “I always think that you can make results if you can still touch stuff.” For Sarah (6) having been an intern for several years before starting her own enterprise, the key distinction between interning and running her own farm was having control over her own labour and breaking out of the power dynamic she experienced as an intern. There was also a real sense of pleasure in getting to see things through to completion: “There's also a sense of joy you get from producing something from start to finish. From making the decision that turns

out to be a good decision, or learning from that bad decision.” She framed farming as a “really interesting kind of battleground for sustainability and actually doing what you believe in.” Prior to farming Sarah had completed her Masters degree in which her thesis looked at prefigurative politics within anarchist theory, and she explicitly saw farming in that vein:

The idea of looking at the world right now and saying food situation sucks pretty hard, but there is such thing as a better way to do it, and how do we get from here to there? How can we figure out how to get from this crappy situation to what we want to see? And even if we don't know some of the elements that it contains, we know we want to work towards that, so that eventually we can replace or make irrelevant the current situation, and have a better system that works for more people...I'd like to see my role in farming as trying to figure out better ways to do food, enacting examples or experiments that are, I guess, exemplifying, or living, or experimenting with some better way, and learning from those mistakes and then trying again.

Katie (3), echoing the sentiments of many others, reflected that farming and social change are linked because eating is such a personal and political act: “when people take the time to think about their food, it's one thing that can really galvanize people to get involved with social change. When you threaten someone's food, its a big deal – the personal really does become political at that point.” Talking about her farming methods with customers is also a segue into talking about other broader issues that affect agriculture:

when I can talk to people about this is why I farm and this is the studies that I've read that say how long pesticides stay in the soil, and why I'm spending so much time in the labour, moving the animals to have them bring the fertility back to the soil. And they're like, oh well that's great! And then I can segue that into well by the way, there's this GM Alfalfa...

For Katie, farming has made her a more political actor. The first protest she attended was against the development and potential introduction of genetically modified Alfalfa seed.

Erin (7) had a more practical answer, explaining that “I grew up on a farm...so I wanted that to be my life...I love working with the animals...I like working outside, I like

being my own boss. When I sell that pork, that's my work, that's my product, so there's some pride in that as well.” Bruce (10) spoke specifically about farming organically, explaining that his enjoyment of farming stems in part from the sense that he is doing something different. “I think that's what keeps a lot of organic farmers going, it's fun to be different,” but it was also as Janet said, “because we believe in it philosophically.”

When I asked David (2) why he farms, he gave a simple answer: “It's the one thing...the one thing...So many different issues are wrapped into agriculture..it's good darma.” He explained his desire to farm both by what it brings to his life, but also by what it does not. He felt it was one of few options for earning a living where he could productively contribute to his community, doing the kind of work he enjoyed, without feeling like he had compromised his ethics, or that he was engaging in the exploitation of others. Running a farm provided an opportunity to insulate himself, to a certain degree, from elements of the world with which he disagreed: “[I'm] a little bit turned off by the world, enjoying my little bubble here, trying to make the best of it and make it work and make it sustainable.”

Farming as a form of political praxis is not expressed to the same degree by all farmers. There are indeed differences in the kinds of politics espoused, or the degree to which they prioritize certain values over others. For example, Erin (7) does not seem to perceive her actions in the same political sense as some of the other farmers, such as farmers from farms 4, 6 or 9. This is not a critique, rather an acknowledgement of difference and diversity within the sample farmers. There is also a distinction between an anti-capitalist ethic or politic, and an non-capitalist practice. Not all anti-capitalists are in fact non-capitalist in their practice, and not all non-capitalists are anti-capitalist in their

thinking. In the case of the sample farmers, not all express an anti-capitalist ethos per se, though many are involved in non-capitalist activities.

### *A Collective Sense of Self*

A key part of this process of becoming is the development of a collective sense of self. By that I mean constructing one's identity not strictly as an individual but as a member of a broader community, or to use the words of Gibson-Graham, striving to “be-in-common” with others (2006:86). This means learning to be interdependent and to negotiate one's well-being, needs, and desires alongside those of others. In reference to Gibson-Graham, Trauger and Passidomo write that “[b]eing in common is achieved through the interdependence of a variety of economic subjects, and accomplished via the conscious and deliberate re/negotiation of foundational economic ideas and practices” (2011:285). Being-in-common means embracing the relationality of one's food system

These farmers describe their reasons for farming as a labour of love, but also as a labour of love of others. When asked why they farm, and why they continue despite the challenges they face, their answers speak of contributing to their communities and the beneficial role they play in meeting other people's needs. They feel it is important to do something, as one farmer put it, that is honourable. Emily (farm 5), in explaining why she farmed, reflects that “I guess I wanted to do something that I felt was..I thought was [an] important role to provide for other people. I wanted to feel like I had a concrete purpose in people's lives.” Sarah (6) connects the process of growing food to growing community and building relationships:

That's the only reason I'm doing this, its not because I, I don't know, I don't love being soaking wet for 8 hours, but I really love food...I like to see people happy by what we've done. There's a sense of satisfaction, a sense of having done something important when you know you're feeding this person standing in front of you and when they're really happy about what you're producing. It

has a lot to do with building community.

In these cases, their identity as a farmer is inextricably tied to the relationships and connections they built with those who eat their food and the surrounding community.

David (1) recalled how for the first couple of years they went to the farmers' market there was so much hype and excitement around grass-fed beef that there were line-ups of people waiting to purchase their beef. The joy he took from this was not about the money, but the social status, feeling rewarded socially for what they were doing. David would tell customers their story, that he had quit his job in IT and that they had somewhat impulsively bought a farm. People really connected with it because it was what many of them dreamed about but had never done. He went on to say several times that despite their growing success it is the reaction from their customers that really provides that fulfillment that was missing from their previous life.

But like, it wasn't really the money, or the balancing of the books, it was all this gratitude and people just appreciated what we were doing, Nobody appreciated that the phone systems at [company] worked well! Mostly they just called when they didn't and said what the hell are you guys doing? Fix this! [laughter] This is the total opposite, people were interested in what we were doing, they appreciated what we were doing.

This shift towards a collective sense of self represents an important disjuncture from capitalist subjectivities. Levkoe advocates for the development of collective subjectivities as a key component of transformative food politics, where individual identities are tied up in the well-being and identities of others (2011: 690). Transitioning to collective subjectivities is significant as it challenges the neoliberal project of individualism and focuses on consumer subjects. Collective subjectivities maintain “a sensitivity to difference and the identification of common interests and collective benefits” (2011: 691). Through a collective subjectivity, one's identity and sense of self is

tied up in the identities and well-being of others. Building collective subjectivities is an idea that is also taken up in Whittman's discussion of agrarian citizenship. She talks of developing a collective conscious as a key part of agrarian citizenship, observing that the MST<sup>46</sup> in Brazil emphasized a “collective nature of individual transformation” where personal evolution was seen as part of a broader political awakening and political engagement (2009:128).

It is this collective sense of self which encouraged many of the farmers to pursue or support collective land tenure arrangements, collective distribution models (such as CSAs) and more collective working relations (discussed in Chapters 3 and 5). There is also a practical, coping element to constructing a collective sense of self, namely that these farmers relied on a broader collective of individuals in very concrete ways in order to continue farming. These networks of mutual aid are vital for the viability of these farmers, and are facilitated by the development of collective subjectivities. This collective sense of self has also led them to find value in the role that their labour plays in other people's lives instead of the value, or lack thereof, it receives from the conventional food system.

## ***5.2. Living With Little***

This collective sense of self and process of becoming is connected to a series of values that can be understood as non-capitalist, or working towards postcapitalist possibilities. Chief among them is a rejection of consumerism and conventional understandings of wealth and well-being. Going into this project, I thought that perhaps one of the distinctive qualities of different forms of farming and relating to one another was the potential for farmers to earn a (more) decent wage. I knew that in our own

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<sup>46</sup> The Landless Workers Movement, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra

experience this had not been the case, but I thought, I hoped, that this was part of the learning curve, that with time perhaps the numbers would balance out more easily. Speaking to the sample it became clear that this is not the case. Of all the farmers I interviewed, none earned what could be considered a living wage and most are not earning the minimum wage<sup>47</sup>. One farmer joked that her income isn't "in waving distance of minimum wage." As detailed in the Chapter 1, this is a difficult reality for many farmers. Paying oneself a lower wage, commonly referred to as self-exploitation, is a primary coping mechanism for many to stay afloat. The ability of farmers to self-exploit was seen by some scholars as a key point of consideration in the Agrarian Question debates (whether agriculture would increasingly evolve into capitalist relations of production). While that debate has all but subsided in the face of a highly corporatized and industrialized food system, the practice of self-exploitation remains an important survival strategy for many farmers.

In research conducted by Maxey (2006) with six small-scale farms in Canada and the UK, self-exploitation was rampant: "in every case study those running the operations were the ones who worked the hardest, yet calculated as an hourly rate few of the case studies generated economic activity at the minimum wage" (238). Maxey found that of the farmers in Canada, most farmers would be classified as "working poor," earning less than \$15,000 a year. He observes that farmers cope with this by reducing their living costs and adopting a frugal lifestyle, curbing consumption, and buying second hand.

Using the term self-exploitation implies it is a bad thing, but as Pratt (2009) notes, that is not always the whole story. Understanding the situation as exploitation imposes a

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<sup>47</sup> Depending on the source and the geographical location, a living wage is estimated to be between 15-17\$/hour (see Living Wage Canada; City of Ottawa Living Wage Policy).

capitalist logic on these activities, which doesn't necessarily reflect how farmers experience that reality. Galt (2013) for example, notes that many of the CSA farmers he surveyed did not think of it as exploitation, rather, they saw farming in terms of what it provided them: a place to live, good food, autonomy, community etc. There were multiple rationalities that shaped how farmers saw their work:

When CSA farmers engage in self-exploitation, it is a “both/and” situation at the interface between different rationalities: one both fulfills one’s (potentially noncapitalist) goals and does not receive appropriate economic return on one’s activities from the exchange, as dictated by the broader political economy (2013: 247)

Despite how farmers might perceive the situation, Galt concludes that self-exploitation is still occurring. At the same time, “self exploitation is not all that is occurring” (2013:347).

The experiences of the farmers in this study no doubt includes self-exploitation. But as Galt and Pratt have suggested, it is not the whole story. It is true that most of the farmers I spoke with were not completely satisfied with their current income and they did want to be fairly compensated for their work. As one farmer exclaimed “I don't want to live in poverty quite frankly!” Through the adoption of a set of values and modified expectations, they found a way to be content with their quality of life without feeling the need to earn significantly more than they were currently earning. A familiar refrain from farmers is that they “didn't need a lot of money;” that what they understand to be “enough” is significantly different than what the average person might expect. In describing what a decent living or living wage would look like to them, farmers identify things like being able to pay the rent or mortgage (if they have one), saving a bit for retirement, being able to travel to see family, and having good healthy food. It is very important to have an income and to get to a place where they are financially sustainable,

but to them this often means just breaking even.

Farmers did not talk about assigning a particular value to their labour in terms of hours worked or a desired abstract salary. Instead they spoke of needing to earn enough to cover their costs, and create a particular way of life. Bruce and Janet (10) explained that they never had a specific number in mind that they had to meet. For them money is a “tool” rather than an end in itself. As Janet reflects “we find that people who have money seem to need more of it. I didn't want to get into that kind of space in my head.” Janet recalled a family, who purchased beef from them, driving up to the farm in a BMW SUV wearing what she considered to be expensive attire. She questioned:

what's going on in their heads that they think they need that fabulous car and those fabulous clothes, and the best car seats I've ever seen in my life...but then I was brought up frugally, so I live frugally, if there's an inexpensive way to do something and still just as safe and and fun then I would do it the inexpensive way, I wouldn't think I had to splash money around. So we never really had that mindset. And Bruce grew up on a farm, you never get that..

Janet argued that it is important to know what you needed to sustain yourself, but equally important is knowing what is enough:

sustainable would be nice. To not have to have money would be nice, but people don't seem to get that there's a stop point! You can say, oh I have enough! I can go along like this for a while. I have enough. Enough is not a word that you hear very often anymore. We certainly have enough. We've got this beautiful home... we have enough...we don't have tons...

She suggests that, for farming to work as a livelihood, one has to have an approach to life that is “slow and steady..If you're envious of other people's lifestyle then this wouldn't be the one to pick because you'll be constantly envious.” Speaking of Hilary and her husband (4), Janet admired their sense of fulfillment with how they lived their life. She saw them as an example of knowing what enough is:

I think of Hilary and [N], and they're so pleased with you know, they go down to the river and throw a frisbee for the dog, and they express that in terms of how much they enjoy it and I think isn't that wonderful, that there are people that that

truly is what they enjoy doing. Yes, they like to go on holiday and yes do fly here and there but they're careful about how they arrange that and all those things. I just think its wonderful that people can have that attitude.

Hilary's (4) notion of a decent living came from a similar place to that of as Janet. She asserted that “we're more about balance than about making money. We just need to make enough money to get away with what we want to do. Right? That's essentially our priority.” At the moment they are living a bit closer to the edge than she would have liked. For example, they were hoping to be able to pay their annual farm insurance bill that winter in cash, but it was looking like that would have to go on credit.

Emily describes a very simple, but satisfying existence as a decent standing of living:

In terms of financial, its just for me, you know, making enough so that I can feel like everything I need is provided for me. I don't wanna feel like its you know, difficult to make ends meet, but I think I have a very, I would say, simple life, and I'm able to travel and visit friends in the off-season and we built a house and all of these things, so if all that is cared for, I'm happy.

Eby (9) explained that while their farming co-operative wants to increase their wages, hoping to earn minimum wage this coming season, they do not feel they need, or want, a more middle-class income:

We also all live pretty simply, we don't necessarily have huge desires, we don't have desires to make \$30,000 and we certainly don't have desires to make \$30,000 or \$40,000 per person. We don't necessarily have the need or desire to make tons of money, and we certainly don't have that desire if it means we have to work really hard. I mean we work hard, don't get me wrong, we're farmers, we work damn hard, but its gotta be sustainable for our bodies and minds, and working all the time, and not feeling like you can make ends meet, is not sustainable. It's really not.

Eby noted that she had been on other farms where the farmers were willing to work 70 hours a week if it meant earning more money. In contrast, at her farm she and her co-farmers value balance and the ability to have a life outside of the farm. Having what they consider to be a better quality of life is more important than earning an extra \$5-10,000.

They created a household structure that supports this value, sharing the farmhouse and related expenses between both couples. For Eby and her co-farmers a decent living is not just about income, it is a holistic understanding of experiencing a certain quality of life.

There is a conscious choice to, in the words of Hilary (4) to “live with little,” as part of an overall ethic of sustainability and social justice. Hilary's desired standard of living is explicitly connected to her critique of overconsumption and its ecological consequences:

We have to live with little. If we want India to have a little more than we have to live with less...Right now I just feel like we're at such a peak of having stuff...I think it'll be more inviting in like 10 years to farm and feel like you're not way down here and everyone else is “do-do-dodo” up here. I'm hopeful.

Building on Hilary's point, David and Diane (1) make a stark contrast between their previous lives living in the suburbs and their lifestyle now:

David: [When] we lived in the suburbs and I don't mean to stereotype things, but a lot of the wives, what are you doing today? Oh we're going shopping, shopping was an activity, [a] recreational activity. You didn't really think of it in those terms, we didn't think it was bad or good, it wasn't a value judgement, it was just what you did. If I was off on the weekend, what would we do? We'd take the kids to sports, and then go shopping! And we don't really do that [anymore].

Diane: People spend their money on different things. I have girlfriends who have diamonds and diamonds, and the latest clothes, all that kind of stuff. I'd rather have horses. I'd rather have a farrier bill than a dry-cleaning bill. And I get more out of that, I sit on my porch and I watch that horse.

Erin (7) made a similar distinction, believing that when living in the city there is a much stronger urge, and need, to spend money on leisure and personal consumption: “Every time you step out of the house you're going to be spending money on something.” Living on their farm, going for a walk in the bush was a source of entertainment. Erin takes pleasure in her work, undermining the stark boundaries that often lie between our paid labour and leisure time.

I like this work. I don't feel the need to have a snowmobile, an Atv, go on vacation. I like staying at home, fortunately for me, that works well with farming

because if I really liked to go on vacation and travel or if I really liked to have a fancy car or that kind of thing, it would be a little bit hard. Lucky for me, I'm suited to this type of profession! [laughter]

This becomes complicated however, as the personal situation of each farmer is unique. An income that is sustainable for one farmer may not be sustainable for another. This was highlighted in the interviews, as two farmers are in various stages of semi-retirement with savings already established and as such do not require the same level of income as do the other younger farmers. Two other farmers have young children, while the rest do not. In addition, returning to a point made in Chapter 4, the blurred lines between enterprise and household make it more complicated to talk about a specific salary or wage. For example, covering the costs of the farm might include the mortgage or rent of the farm property as whole, including the farm house. So the income that one would need after costs (what we would typically describe as profit from a capitalist perspective) might not include housing.

As an example, David and Diane came to farming later in life, as a second career, so they aren't reliant on the farm for an income in the same way that other younger farmers might be, and they don't have the same expenses because they came to farming with a decent amount of savings. David recognizes that while the wage he earns might be enough for them, it troubles him that the average farmers would not be able to make it work: "It's not a living wage, it's a second career for us so I don't have to get there. But I really am interested in it, in how I can change things, I don't know if I can. So, but it doesn't have to be. The kids that were in here yesterday, they obviously, they don't live like we do." The "kids" were several young grass-fed beef farmers from the region who had attended a meeting at David and Diane's the previous day.

On the whole these farmers have seemingly chosen to prioritize values of balance

and sustainability over material wealth and commodified pleasures. As farmers they are able to lessen their living costs in part through the production of their own food and in some cases heating fuel (wood), but it is primarily this shift in values that closed the gap between what they are earning and what they feel is sustainable. They take pleasure in their surrounding environment as opposed to having an income that allows them to purchase items of pleasure or leisure. Farmers talked about the benefits they received from the land, they spoke of their farm as a sanctuary, not just their place of work, but an environment that gave them almost a spiritual nourishment.

Again, we can understand this shift towards living with little as both a coping strategy and a prefiguring one. In some ways it is a reaction to the structural constraints put on farmers, that the income they can earn from producing meat and vegetables is limited within their chosen methods of farming. As a result, they are forced to be creative in how they meet their basic needs. They have little discretionary spending even if they wanted to, but it is more than that. Johnston talks about the need to develop post-consumer needs and pleasures, “creating desires beyond the realm of market-driven commodity production” that are not based on human or ecological exploitation (2008: 102). This is not simply a practice of denying and restricting one's desires. It is about the creation of alternative forms of leisure, and alternative means of meeting one's needs (Johnston 2008). These farmers have re-conceptualized what a good life looks like, altering their perceptions, their needs and desires to exist outside of market-based consumption. In doing so, farmers are able to make their livelihood work.

### ***5.3. Against Growth***

A further insight is best expressed as the absence or rejection of a core capitalist

tenet: the value of growth and expansion. The obsession with growth and expansion underpins much of our economic activity, a point highlighted in Chapter 1. Even within the local food movement and the organic sector, there are countless examples of people expanding, getting bigger, hiring more staff (or in many cases unpaid interns), attending more markets etc. Scaling-up and expanding are often synonymous with success; those that are getting bigger are the ones who are doing it right. For example, simple economies of scale would suggest that moving from a 50 share CSA to an 150 CSA would be financially beneficial and would lead to an increase in profit. Yet, the farmers I spoke to hadn't taken that path, and some went so far as to criticize other farmers who had.

This rejection of common scaling-up strategies is based partly in their ethic of living with little, but it is also a recognition of the social and physical costs of an emphasis on growth. For some farmers it is a question of balance. Several spoke of the importance and value of having balance in their lives; that farming can be so all-encompassing it is important to carve out time for themselves and for other interests. The idea of scaling-up has never really appealed to Hilary (4). She has played around with the number of CSA shares the farm offers and has settled with 50-60 shares as the number she needed and was comfortable with. She is not convinced that increasing CSA shares would actually lead to a higher income. In addition, the organizational headache of having more members does not seem worth it. She also doesn't like the idea of being a manager of people, she wants to be out working in the fields, not dealing with issues one step-removed.

David and Diane (1) experienced first hand the physical and emotional cost of scaling-up. At their peak they were raising 60 head of cattle and attending two farmers'

markets while still doing direct sales from the farm. Financially it was making sense, at times they were selling an entire cow at one market, or \$2500 worth of meat. However, Diane developed an injury from the repetitive movements involved in packing and organizing the freezer for market, and constantly opening and closing it during the market day. It got to the point where she basically couldn't use her arm. David said they would come home exhausted from the market, only to repeat everything the next day, as well as care for their animals and plan the next slaughter, delivery and pickup of the animals throughout the week. With the markets becoming more competitive as more meat producers started to attend, it all just became too much.

Instead of scaling-up and perhaps hiring staff to run to their farmers' market stall (as many larger vendors do), they scaled back and shifted marketing models. They began selling exclusively from the farm, and making, as David says, the farm experience part of the exchange. While David readily admits that they consciously create a particular environment and image of a farm that speaks to people's romantic and nostalgic image of a farm, it is also clear that they genuinely believe this environment is enriching to their customers and they get immense satisfaction from interacting with people on the farm.

Many farmers chose to diversify rather than scale-up. In the Metcalfe Foundation's (2010) research into new farmers and alternative markets they distinguish between economies of scale and economies of scope. They found that rather than scaling-up, many farmers instead build diversified farms, expanding the range of products they exchanged with the same consumer base. Of the farmers I interviewed, almost all had taken this path of economies of scope to deepen their relationships with their existing consumers or members. For example Hilary (4) started with vegetables, but now

produces pork, honey and eggs. In Katie's (3) case, she started with vegetables, but sheep have now become a significant part of the farm. Eby (9) describes their philosophy as extending their relationships with their members, rather than increasing the number of consumers with whom they have relationships.

We're very interested in developing deeper relationships with the people that buy our food, to diversify what we offer to the same people. So the idea isn't that we'd ever become a 300 CSA basket CSA, this summer we'll be 85, and... that feels like a good size and so to think of all our other production as geared towards that size. You know, so if our CSA customers want to buy some meat? Okay, well lets sell them some meat...we know you guys like to can, if you want to buy your canning tomatoes from us, order them here... You can buy an egg share with us, you can buy a cookie share. The idea is that we want them to buy everything from us that we produce, and someday hopefully we can produce everything!

These economies of scope also exist on the production side of things. One of the beef farmers (8) had recently purchased a farm and needed to increase his income as a result of new costs. The most obvious choice would have been to to expand their herd size and increase their customer base. However, they decided instead to raise their own stockers, allowing them to reduce their costs, thereby gaining a higher income with the same number of CSA members. This was another way of increasing their economies of scope rather than scale, by increasing the scope of activities they engaged in on-farm. Many linked their desire to stay a particular size with living with little and the level of income they felt they needed. As Erin explains: "I don't want to get too big, I don't need this to be a huge profit for us...I want to earn a good income for myself but I don't want to get super big." Here the value of living with little works in tandem with a rejection of growth.

I was talking with Bruce and Janet (10) about the role of government in agriculture, something they are not in favour of. This is not due to an anti-government stance (although this sentiment is strongly held amongst some farmers). Their perspective

is based in a critique of their encouragement of growth. As Janet explains:

I'm always leery about the government getting involved in anything – I'm not anti-government at all, I'm very pro-government, I think the programs this government is getting rid of is scary; they're dismantling our democracy. But I find when they get involved; for instance the government's involved in farming, its all a big conventional party. It's nothing to do with organic, we have one guy in the office in guelph who comes from the conventional community, but is now quite versed, he's doing a good job, but the mindset is still the same, “bigger is better” and all those things. So when government gets involved it has to be a scale, as soon as there's a scale, anything that we think would be appropriate is below that scale. We're not interested in the economies of scale, what they talk about.

According to Janet, that 'bigger is better' mentality is also pushed by banks, something that David (2) also lamented. He felt that unless you are of a certain scale and cash-flow, banks, including the government's own Farm Credit Canada, are just not interested in talking to you. Janet recalled a presentation where the speaker was explaining to young famers what they would need in order to get into the dairy business. She was appalled at the level of debt these farmers were being encouraged to take on.

It was a million five or something like that. You would saddle your children with that kind of debt? You would deliberately saddle your children with that kind of debt? No! You could not do that! So that's my worry, about the government being involved, there's always economies of scale.

There is a certain unease within the academic literature in assuming a correlation between a particular size or scale and certain values of social embeddedness or “alternativeness” (Hinchins 2000; Allen 2010; Marsden et al 2000). However, a critique of growth is not synonymous with a celebration of the local or even small-scale. What it does is challenges the pursuit of growth as an end in itself, the assumption that economies of scale will always work in your favour. It is not about “staying small” but prioritizing other values and employing different measurements of success.

#### ***5.4. Evolving Values***

These values, while weaving a common thread between the diverse experiences of

these farmers, are not static and unchanging. They evolve and shift based on different contexts. For some, particularly those who have been farming for many years, there was an evolution in how they related to, and defined, their ethics or values. This is somewhat similar to the process that Hetherington (2005) describes as “waking up.” Coming into farming, some had more abstract ideals and intellectual positions about how the world should be. Having to engage with, and work through, those questions on a daily basis shifted how some farmers talked about those ideas. They expressed their values more practically and less philosophically, grounded in the nuts and bolts of running a farm. For Emily (5), who has been farming since 2007, questions of being anti-capitalist or not have evolved to more grounded practical questions of sustainability and fairness. It is not necessarily that her politics or actions have changed, but the way she approaches her evaluation and implementation of them has:

Well, I think I thought about that at the beginning, which is why I went with the CSA model and why we use the more, whole package price, rather than valuing each individual item...when I started out, that was really important to me. I came from an anti-capitalist scene and wanted to carry that forward in what I was doing. I don't think about it as much now. I think about it in terms of – am I able to pay my employees enough? Do I have what I need, for myself? Are we farming in a sustainable way? So I don't know, I don't really think about anti-capitalist or post-capitalist thing too much. I think CSA works in capitalism and it could work in a post-capitalist society as well. It's adaptable.

Hilary (4) felt as though her values have evolved since she started farming ten years ago, becoming “more complicated” in part because they started from a more abstract or intellectual interest:

[My values have] gotten more complicated, because my motivation at first was theoretical and intellectual, in that sense of just wanting, being attracted to a system that is touchable, it's a group of people getting together, face to face, so that's where it started from. And it's just evolved as I've gotten deeper in; personal evolution, my own self, and my personal stuff, has evolved as well... I'm still quite political, that hasn't changed. I just keep adding things on. And more questions come up, about societal bigger things, and ya, nothing that's been watered down, if anything it's gotten stronger, and other little roots being put down that are part of the whole picture.

She doesn't see this evolution as weakening her politics, quite the contrary. Farming has been an entry point for her to engage with a broader range of social and environmental issues in a more direct way.

David (2) seemed at times discouraged by the current state of alternative models in agriculture. However, this didn't mean he had given up on the idea of postcapitalist possibilities. As Pratt reminds us in his analysis of organic agriculture, the co-optation of a particular model or concept does not mean those invoking the model have also been co-opted. This farmer has retained his political identity and critique of the capitalist food system, but has shifted his focus to other areas of farming as potential sites of possibility.

#### *Tension between values and livelihood*

There are certainly tensions between earning a living and living one's politics. Often times there are tensions in relation to implementing environmental values. Eby (9) recalled a situation last season when their agronomist recommended they spray copper. It was something that both the agronomist and the farmers agreed was not generally a good thing<sup>48</sup>, but it was a very wet year and they risked losing their tomato crop. So despite their misgivings, they sprayed copper, largely because they did not feel comfortable telling their CSA there wouldn't be any tomatoes that year. This is despite the fact that this situation is precisely what the CSA is designed for (an issue that is explored in Chapter Six). Eby reflects that it was not just a trade-off between their livelihoods and their ethical commitments, there was also the question of fulfilling your commitments to other people: “it's not just a trade-off between ecological choices and production, but it's also ecological choices and actually feeding people.”

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<sup>48</sup> While spraying copper is approved under the Canadian Organic Standards, it can also be very toxic and its use is debated by many within the organic community.

Emily (5) offers two examples that highlighted a similar tension. The first was a problem with a racoon who was eating their snow peas and tomatoes. They eventually decided to trap and kill the racoon:

we could say, oh well we have CSA, ya know, we could consider racoons part of our environment and not do anything about it. But in the end we trapped and killed the racoon, I think, because, we wanted, sugar snap peas are something that people really value and we wanted to be able to provide that for people. I think what really got to me was when they got into the tomatoes, tomatoes are like "oh my god!" the anticipation for them, right?

If it had been just Emily and her partner, they might have come to the same conclusion, or they might not have. But, in the context of running a farm, and particularly a CSA farm, you are thinking about the desires and interests of others, and what responsibility you feel you have to them and to your agreed-upon exchange. Emily's second example was in regards to the kinds of seeds that she purchased. Initially she only sourced open-pollinated seeds, based in a belief that they were the best for the environment. She later decided to shift to hybrid varieties in most cases because their performance was so much better, making them more financially sustainable than the open-pollinated varieties. Here her need to cope outweighed her desire to prefigure. While Emily perhaps envisioned a world where all food is grown using open-pollinated seeds, allowing everyone to easily save their own seed and thus have direct control over their own food production, she was not, at present, able to bring that possibility into practice. The fact that farming is her livelihood shaped how and what she could prefigure.

Sarah's (6) negotiation of values and livelihood had more to do with issues of affordability and the fact that her friends and members of her community could not afford to shop at the store to which they sold their produce. For her, the tension was between what was fair to her, in terms of earning a living, and fair to consumers in terms of having

affordable access to food. Sarah felt very strongly about farming as a means to put “their values into practice.” She saw food and farming as an opening to make connections to issues of equity and social justice in food that are often ignored. Yet, she struggled with how to make time for those connections while in the throws of the farming season. She referenced an event that our farm organized the previous year, a fundraising dinner in support of the migrant justice organization Justicia, as an example of how to highlight those connections:

I had been really inspired by that Veggie Underground event you guys put on last year, where you had Justicia come in. It was so amazing because it was a great example of how you can bring farming together with the social justice, just making those connections between all the issues that people don't talk about. Like you can value fair trade, but you get your tomatoes from places that don't even pay their workers sustainable wages. How is that, I don't know? I have a hard time with all those politics, so seeing an event that brings all those issues together is really really inspiring. We wanted to do a similar even with our farm, a neat harvest festival or feast that would involve some sort of way to bring our community's attention to those issues, and we just got so bogged down with work, we just couldn't find the time, I don't know how you guys were able to pull it together, but we really hope, maybe next year we can even organize it over the winter so that it comes together easily in the spring. But that was a really big inspiration for what we were trying to do this summer, and didn't quite succeed.

Hearing Sarah say that was very validating for me. Leading up to the fundraising event that Sarah is talking about, my partner and I had a lot of conversations around those same topics. When we first envisioned doing a fundraising dinner for Justicia, we imagined that it would be a collaborative event with our CSA members. Despite our enthusiasm, it quickly became clear that while some of our members were supportive of the cause they were not interested, or did not have the time, to participate in organizing such an event. In the end several members did bake dishes for the dinner, and several attended, but it was a difficult realization that our members did not have the same passion for prioritizing some of the values we thought were important. Without this shared sense

of values it was difficult to justify putting farm resources to such an event in the future.

David (3) recounted a situation where he felt his values were in tension with his consumers' values. He had been debating whether or not to continue raising meat birds, as he doesn't feel completely at ease doing so, from an ethical standpoint. When he mentioned this to a few of his customers, their reactions were to ask if he knew of other farms with meat birds, rather than to engage with his ethical concerns. Knowing that those other farmers probably also sold vegetables, David was concerned about the longer term implications of that decision. This year I noticed that he is once again raising meat birds.

Paul (8) recently posted on their blog about a dilemma they were facing. After purchasing a herd of cattle, one cow was not doing very well. After consulting with their vet, they were advised that the best course of action would be to cull her from the herd. Normally when a cow gets to be of a certain age, or is not complete healthy, they are sold at auction, and used for a variety of purposes, mainly different meat products. This was not an action they wanted to take, Paul explained, because they could not guarantee the treatment of the cow during that process. They felt they had a social-contract with their animals, where they would be treated with care throughout their life. At the same time, they did not feel they had the resources to care for animals that were not productive for the farm, and risked putting themselves in a difficult situation should she die out in pasture.<sup>49</sup> Their solution was to share the situation with their members and customers in hopes that someone would be willing to purchase the meat from this older cow, should they bring it to their own butcher, or have other suggestions of what to do. Here they

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<sup>49</sup> Adult cows weight several thousand pounds, making it a big job to remove a dead animal from the fields or barns unexpectedly.

were torn between their ethic of treating their animals in a particular way and the need to be financially sustainable as a farm enterprise. They have yet to post an update on what they ended up doing.

Interestingly, one farmer felt that her values and livelihood were not in tension. Quite the opposite, she felt they helped to sustain her livelihood. Erin (7) had watched her family's farm go through the BSE crisis. All of a sudden their pasture-raised cows were worth nothing. As she recalled, based on their market value, it would have been cheaper for her uncle to just kill their entire herd. She sees a tension between selling to the market and earning a living, whereas her farming methods and distribution model insulate her from those market volatilities. It was the application of her values that provides this buffer:

my environmental and social goals allow me to have a model of agriculture that will ensure that I have an income...If I were selling on the market, or trying to get big, there's just so much risk..I'd be so into debt, there'd be so many risks, one small mistake, one bad year, that would be enough to sink me. And that is a reality.

For Erin, staying small and having those environmental and social values are a coping strategy in and of themselves, allowing her to be profitable and sustainable.

### *Shifting Discourses of meaning*

Sometimes it is not the farmers' engagement with their values that evolves, but the meaning behind some of those values within broader society that shifts. We often talk about commodification in terms of farmland and food products, but the ideas that underpin different kinds of farming are also becoming commodified. Commodification affects not only farmland, it also lays claim to the very values and ideas behind farming practices. The trajectory of “organic” from a movement to a commercialized product is a cautionary tale for those of us interested in supporting and strengthening postcapitalist

possibilities in food systems. The rise of state-sanctioned third party certification regimes has been one of the most significant changes to alternative forms of agriculture in recent decades, and has had a considerable effect on postcapitalist experimentation.

This may seem counter-intuitive as some of the ideas behind organic challenge particular elements of capitalist production. Organic has certainly become a popular concept and a galvanizing issue for many involved in food-based social movements. The global market for organic products was just under \$63 billion US in 2011 with 37.2 million hectares of agricultural land in certified organic production and just under 2 million certified organic producers. In Canada, organic food and beverage sales were just under \$3 billion in 2012, 40% of which were fruit and vegetables (COTA 2013).<sup>50</sup> The Canadian Organic Trade Association states that while overall Canadian farms have been disappearing, organic farms are on the rise (COTA “The National Organic Market” 2013). Statistics Canada data shows that between 2001 and 2011 there was a 66.5% increase in the number of certified organic farms.<sup>51</sup>

In Canada, the legal definition of organic is based upon seven key principles that form the basis of the Canadian Organic Standards:

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<sup>50</sup> The 2011 Agriculture Census reported 3,713 certified organic farms, 774 of which are located in Ontario. Nationally 2% of farms are organic, and in Ontario that number is slightly lower at 1.5% (Statistics Canada 2011a).

<sup>51</sup> The vast majority of that growth, however, occurred between 2001 and 2006. Since 2006 the growth in organic farmers has slowed considerably, with less than 200 new organic farms in that period.

1. Protect the environment, minimize soil degradation and erosion, decrease pollution, optimize biological productivity and promote a sound state of health.
2. Maintain long-term soil fertility by optimizing conditions for biological activity within the soil.
3. Maintain biological diversity within the system.
4. Recycle materials and resources to the greatest extent possible within the enterprise.
5. Provide attentive care that promotes the health and meets the behavioural needs of livestock.
6. Prepare organic products, emphasizing careful processing, and handling methods in order to maintain the organic integrity and vital qualities of the products at all stages of production
7. Rely on renewable resources in locally organized agricultural systems.

(Government of Canada 2011).

However, “organic” is not just a technical term, it is a social and political idea that is based on a history, and a movement that has shifted over time. As Guthman writes

in truth, it is impossible to divine a singular argument and meaning for organic agriculture...there has always been a tension between those who see organic agriculture as simply a more ecologically benign approach to farming and those who seek a radical alternative to a hegemonic food system (2004: 3).

Since 2009, the term organic has been legislated by the Canadian government and its use tied to a third party certification regime. While third party certification systems have existed for decades, and indeed is something many organic farmers worked to create, the legislating of organic puts new force and authority behind certification, making it a de facto requirement rather than a choice<sup>52</sup>. Hetherington refers to organic certification as a double-edged sword, arguing that “in the name of giving the consumer a guarantee, it institutionalized and bureaucratized a movement that, in some incarnations, had decried precisely the institutionality and bureaucracy of the conventional system” (2005: 23). He continues that the certification process “commodified its promises and allures and evacuated [it] of much of its political underpinings” (2005: 24). Similarly, Pratt notes that while the regulatory scheme was perhaps intended to protect and expand a particular set of farming practices, it ended up transforming those practices, and turning the idea of

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<sup>52</sup> The federal law technically only requires farmers using the term organic to be certified if they are involved in inter-provincial or inter-national trade. However a growing number of provinces are introducing legislation to close that loop hole, and the public discourse around organic has drastically shifted towards a pro-certification perspective.

organic into a commodity (Pratt 2009: 157). With a shift in focus from process to inputs, organic certification “makes organic agriculture safe for capitalism” (Guthman 1998:150).

The push for certification has also had the effect of excluding a group of farmers from the agricultural landscape. In 2001, Statistics Canada began collecting data on the number of organic farmers in Canada, at first including only certified organic farms. In 2006 they distinguished between certified, non-certified and transitional organic farms. This had the effect of exponentially increasing the number of farms included in the category of organic. Then in 2011, following the creation of the National Organic Standards, the data collection shifted so that certified or transitional organic were the only organic farms counted. How Statistics Canada defined organic and collected data first made 11937 farms visible as part of the organic farming community, and then subsequently erased them.<sup>53</sup>

*Table 5. Certified and Non-Certified Organic Farms in Canada 2001-2011.*

	<b>2001</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2011</b>
<b>Certified Organic</b>	2230	3555	3713
<b>Transitional</b>	N/a	640	543
<b>Non-certified</b>	N/a	<b>11937</b>	N/a

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Agriculture 2006, 2011

As Figure 1 shows, the table created by Statistics Canada in 2011 has no mention of the over 10,000 farms that self-identify as non-certified organic. This example highlights the argument made by Pratt (2009) (discussed in the Chapter One), that the mobilization of particular discourses and conceptual framings can have the effect of shaping what kinds of possibilities are visible and perhaps even possible.

<sup>53</sup> Given that there was only a 1.8% increase in the number of certified organic farms between 2006 and 2011 the majority of these farms did not become certified.

Figure 1. Statistics Canada classification of Organic Farms.

**Table 11**  
**Number of organic operations, Canada, 2001 to 2011**

Census of Agriculture	Total certified and/or transitional operations*	Certified organic operations	Transitional organic operations	Certified organic as a percent of total operations
2011	4,120	3,713	543	1.8
2006	3,898	3,555	640	1.5
2001	..	2,230	..	0.9

\* Farm operations may report both certified and transitional statuses; therefore the total does not equal the sum of the parts.

(Statistics Canada 2011a)

Indeed most of the farmers interviewed in this project would not be included in this count based on the categories used. Of the ten, all practice organic agriculture, yet only two are certified organic. Interestingly, while organic is often a prominent qualifier of an alternative food network, when asked to describe their key farming values and identities, farmers did not use the language of “organic.” They spoke of caring for the land, rebuilding the soil and respecting the life of their animals and the broader ecosystem. Others emphasize reducing carbon emissions as a key guiding principle. Those with livestock spoke of raising animals on pasture as an important production method. One farmer is certified biodynamic and believes that framework provides a much more holistic and substantive approach to farming than organic certification. In general, the ideas behind organic agriculture certainly came through in the interviews with farmers, but “organic” as a label is not necessarily a key part of their identify as farmers.

Emily (5) , for example, summarizes her values as “wanting to do good in the world and wanting to do good for the land and people in my community.” Hilary (4) describes her approach to farming as holistic. This means valuing her actions in terms of the health and sustainability of the farm while making it work financially: “our goal is for the farm to feed itself as much as it can, and to be economically sustainable, so we can stay

here...and balance.” For Hilary, this holistic approach goes beyond the farm business to their life as a whole. Having balance between the farm and other things in her life is important as she values having time and energy for other pursuits and interests including other projects around the farm, and engaging with her broader community.

In talking about values, Hilary (4) was wary as to how postcapitalist possibilities can be incorporated and co-opted into capitalism. She describes this as a natural inclination within capitalism to take an idea or practice, such as food sovereignty, and commercialize it, water it down to something that can be consumed and used to generate profits:

There's just such an effort, or a natural flow, lets just take this movement and take financial advantage of it, by some, and fit it – there's a real natural pull to just make it another – oh the ozone layer, recycling, natural toilet paper or something like that. It's a feel good commercial thing to do, when I don't think it's about a commercial thing to do. Oh well, we have, because capitalism is all about getting people to keep spending, so we're just reinventing the wheel in different ways for packaging, and then go throw out the old one and buy a new one! And money, money, we're making more!

Certification follows a similar process, creating a commodity or a brand, that must be protected and expanded. For example, Organic Voices, an organic industry organization in the United States recently created a satirical video on the many meanings of the word “natural.” The message to consumers is that these claims cannot be trusted, and only independent certification regimes, such as organic can provide a guarantee for consumers<sup>54</sup>.

We can see similar processes happening within other forms of alternative agriculture. Savour Ottawa, a partnership between Just Food Ottawa, the city of Ottawa and Ottawa Tourism, promotes local food from the Ottawa area and seeks to build relationships between local farmers and retailers and restaurants. They've created a

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<sup>54</sup> To see the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AftZshnP8fs>

branded logo and advertisement campaign to promote their role as a guarantor of local produce, with the tag line: “how to tell if it's from a local farm.” According to the Savour Ottawa website:

The Savour Ottawa brand provides you with instant recognition for local agricultural products. When you see the Savour Ottawa logo at farmer's markets, butcheries, retail grocery stores and more, *you can feel assured that each product or establishment with the logo has undergone a verification process to ensure that they are using local food in their products, or are a local producer.*<sup>55</sup>

Under the guise of supporting direct relationships and alternative marketing channels, Savour Ottawa has in fact positioned itself as a broker and gatekeeper between producers and consumers. In doing so, it shifts the conversation from the idea or value of local and direct exchange relationships, to a particular representation of that value, embodied in the Savour Ottawa logo. Much like organic certification, branded local food campaigns transform an idea into a commodity, something that can be purchased, sold and consumed.

Campaigns like these commodify the values and social relations of a particular kind of farming, and this is a key way in which alternatives become incorporated or enrolled into capitalist economic networks. It is not just a matter of assigning a particular idea an economic value, but viewing that idea predominantly from the perspective of exchange value and potential accumulation, a practice that in my mind greatly narrows the scope of future possibilities. One of the farmers talked about a similar shift amongst CSAs, towards a more flexible and commodified relationship. She recently noticed a trend of CSAs offering more share options, different pick-up options and the ability to credit shares should members go out of town on vacation. She now felt pressure to

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<sup>55</sup> This compelling assurance does not mention that in the case of retailers, the requirement is actually that they use a minimum of 15% of locally produced goods; so chances are that what you consume is in fact not made from local food.

provide this same flexibility and choice to remain desirable in the eyes of current and potential members. One of the larger CSAs in the area marketed itself one Spring as the “only” CSA to offer its members a “delivery hold” option whereby they would credit their account for a missed share. Such language works to pit CSA farms against one another, rather than working collectively to increase the number of consumers joining CSAs in general. It also emphasizes the exchange value of a CSA share, by comparing its value against the CSAs being offered by other farmers, as opposed to assigning value based on the costs specific to the production and the exchange with members. This is not to say that competition in and of itself is problematic or necessarily capitalist. However, I think what Hilary is speaking to here is a shift in discourse, a shift in how these values and ideas are mobilized, and prioritized, and for what ends.

### ***Conclusion***

Through a complex process of becoming that brings forth new values and a collective sense of self, the sample farmers enact subjectivities that not only imagine but desire a diverse set of possibilities outside of capitalism. These possibilities point towards a collective autonomy by attempting to be “in common” not only with other people in their food network, but with the animals, plants and overall environment of that network. The particular possibilities are in a state of constant evolution, as farmers define and engage with their values in different ways, and as the meaning behind those values themselves shift and transform.

These alternative values and sense of self are as much a coping mechanism as they are prefigurative. During one interview I was explaining that my partner and I had recently applied for a longterm lease with the NCC for one of their Greenbelt farms. The

farmer I was speaking to, Hilary (4), was surprised because from her perspective the rates being charged by the NCC were far too expensive. In fact she knew of a young farmer who had looked at the same property and concluded that he would not be able to run a sustainable farm business at that cost. By contrast, any non-farmer that I've spoken to about the property and the rent we pay has the opposite reaction. They all think it's a steal<sup>56</sup>. These divergent perspectives reminded me that this desire for, and contentment with, a different standard of living and priorities can be a requirement, a necessity, for these kinds of farms to survive. Without it, the expectations of those involved might be impossible to meet.

It is the multiplicity of values that makes the perspectives of these farmers unique. Janet and Bruce, by far the most seasoned farmers of the interview sample, used an analogy about logging to explain the importance of basing your values in daily practice. Janet thought that those protesting logging don't always think about the truck driver or the forestry worker and their livelihoods. Rather than seeing nature and the environment as something outside of ourselves that needs to be kept pristine and separate, Janet and Bruce advocate for an environmentalism based in lived experience, of living with and within nature. For them this is not about watering-down your values, but finding ways to enact them in a holistic way that accounts for other needs and values. This comment really highlights the kind of grounded politics or praxis that many of these farmers articulate. As Galt argues, the reasons why we do things are not, and should not be thought of as, one or the other: “rationalities cannot, and should not, be conceptualized as

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<sup>56</sup>In many ways Hilary was right; the farm we now rent is relatively small (7 acres, not all of which are tillable) and the rent we pay, in addition to having to pay for property insurance and property tax increases is closer to what housing costs would be in a downtown urban environment, as opposed to a rural one where most farms would be located.

singular” (2013: 361). As opposed to one core sentiment, they are a complex web of emotions, desires, values and needs. Speaking of AFNs in Australia, Andrée observes that farmers have different rationalities for experimenting with different economic models:

Some farmers participate in them as a form of resistance to the dominant food system, which they may see as not supporting their aims around ecological sustainability, allowing for the production of high-quality food, or respecting animal welfare. Others participate simply because these networks present new economic opportunities at a time when they have been squeezed out of traditional commodity production through intense competition” (2014: 145).

While here Andrée suggests that different farmers have different rationalities, I argue that, in this study, one farmer may have multiple rationalities for engaging in a particular practice or activity, grounded in a need to cope and a desire to prefigure. While not identical in their ethics or political orientation, in their own way each farmer is working to bring their own possibilities and alternatives into being, all the while keeping their heads above water.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CULTIVATING FOOD NETWORKS OF COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY**

One thing that came out strongly in nearly every interview is that these farms do not, and could not, survive on their own. By that I do not mean that they are subsidized by some outside party, but that their participation in a strong food network or community is vital to their success and viability. This means building relationships with other actors such as consumers, but also others farmers, retailers and suppliers. Farmers also highlight the role that friends, family, neighbors, and broader community members play in their ability to do what they do. I use the language of a network, instead of a chain, to invoke a more fluid and multi-connected representation of these relationships as suggested by Actor Network Theory. It serves as a reminder that these networks are not identically reproduced in every local food landscape, but are contingent on the specific context and moment in which they are produced.<sup>57</sup>

As discussed in Chapter Two, the idea of a family farm has played a prominent role historically in Canadian agriculture, as well as being seen as a potential site of resistance to capitalism. The experiences of the farms in this study suggest that perhaps instead of, or in addition to family farms, community farms are becoming a significant entity in building and enacting diverse food economies. The social and material relationships created by these community farms form a food network that operates outside elements of the dominant capitalist food system, enacting in its place a politics of collective autonomy. In these networks, we see relationships between producers and consumers built around defetishization and decommodification, and we see relationships between friends and neighbours based in mutual aid and collaboration. These different

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<sup>57</sup> See Arce and Marsden 1995; Jackson et al. 2006 and Whatmore and Thorne 1997 for further discussion on the difference between network and chain.

actors work together collectively, to build a food network that is autonomous from the values and practices common to capitalism. This is of course not all that we see, as farmers struggle with how to negotiate these values with other needs of their enterprise, as well as the values and desires of other actors in their food network, not to mention the influence of outside forces and structures. This chapter explores these issues through an examination of the various producer-consumer relationships farmers are enrolled in, as well as other supply relationships. From farmers' markets, to CSAs and farm gate sales, farmers make use of different models based on different values and desired outcomes, once again reflecting the need to cope and the desire to prefigure.

### ***6.1. Exchange and Distribution Relationships***

One of the most important relationships a farm will have is with those who consume the food they grow. All the farms interviewed utilize forms of direct marketing to distribute their products. These include CSA relationships, farmgate sales, farmers' markets and restaurant/retailer relationships. Direct relationships between consumers and producers have become somewhat of a hallmark of alternative food networks, but as Erin (7) notes, it is more of a return to methods of distribution from previous generations than an entirely new distribution concept: “its unique but it’s not unique. That's how agriculture started. Yes, we went through a period of about 40 years where we're ridiculously distanced from producer to consumer..it’s not new, I think we're just coming back to that.”

#### *Community Supported Agriculture<sup>58</sup> and Farmgate*

Since their inception in North America in the 1980s<sup>59</sup>, CSAs (Community Shared

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<sup>58</sup> Depending on the location, CSAs are also described as Community Shared Agriculture. Community Supported Agriculture appears to largely be a Canadian variation.

<sup>59</sup> Most histories of CSAs trace their development to Europe or Japan, however Natasha Bowens argues in

Agriculture) have emerged as a popular means of exchange between producer and consumers. In the United States, rough estimates are that there are approximately 6500 CSA farms in operation (McFadden nd). While there is no comparable data available for Canada, the Ontario CSA Farm Directory lists 1264 CSA farms in Ontario. That number is likely exaggerated, as farms that no longer run a CSA are rarely removed from the directory, and there does not appear to be any sort of verification or updating process.<sup>60</sup> Regardless, it provides a rough guide as to the number of farms engaged in this type of relationship with consumers. The longest running CSA in the Ottawa region, Elm Tree Farm, started in 1997, but most CSAs in the region are between five to ten years old.

The central idea of the CSA model is that farmer and consumer share in the risks and rewards of the harvest. Consumers purchase a share of the harvest at the beginning of the season and in exchange they receive a weekly share of produce from the farm. If the tomato crop is good that year, everyone receives an abundance of tomatoes. On the other hand, if the tomatoes are hit by blight, everyone has to make do with a limited amount. The farmer benefits by having access to capital at the start of the season and by having a guaranteed level of income. While this is the idea behind CSAs, they vary considerably in practice. The idea of a 'CSA farm' has largely shifted to 'farms that have a CSA.' Many operate more like a weekly food box delivery, rather than a shared investment in food production. They can range from a small twenty person membership to several thousand members and have expanded from the original vegetable CSA to include eggs, meats, milk and other food products. Some now operate as a partnership

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her upcoming book *The Color of Food* (2015) that black farmers in the US were pioneering a CSA-type model of farming long before that.

<sup>60</sup> Of the 199 CSAs that are listed in the Ottawa and surrounding areas (Renfrew, Lanark, Leeds and Grenville, Prescott-Russell, and Stormont Dundas-Glengary) I've identified roughly a dozen that are no longer in operation.

between several different farms, with some offering a diverse array of products throughout the year. One farmer, Hilary (4), refers to CSAs as a social experiment, which I think is a helpful way to conceptualize them. It is a relationship that is constantly evolving and shifting and a relationship that can differ across farms.

Half of the farms interviewed operate a CSA. All the farms in this study with CSAs, save one, are done in conjunction with other distribution channels. Even the CSA exclusive farm sold plants in the spring to a wider customer base and occasionally sold winter greens to a nearby retail store. All but one are vegetable CSAs, the other is a beef CSA. One of the vegetable CSAs also sells egg shares.

Farmers' experiences with the CSA model are mixed, but generally quite positive. For the most part, their CSA represents an important difference compared to other distribution options. Their decision to sell through a CSA is largely based on a commitment to the ideas it espoused, particularly that of sharing the risks within a food community and having people more involved in their food. The farmers want people to understand what goes into farming. At the same time a CSA allows a stable and predictable income. Emily (5) recalled that her initial interest in starting a CSA was based on the injustice she saw farmers facing in more conventional channels:

When we started out, I felt pretty strongly about the CSA model. I really liked the idea of people sharing the risk and people actually being a little more involved in their food. I thought, its not fair that farmers are struggling on their own, and having grown up in the more industrial model of food, seeing how kind of lonely it is and stuff. I felt there was an injustice. I thought this was really important, more people connected to and understand better what some of the struggles are of food production and some of the joys as well.

Another farmer emphasized the support they received from their CSA members as a key reason for having a CSA:

I'm really passionate about community supported agriculture, and how powerful it

is, and the community aspect of it... we'd crumble without the community. What we lack financially is totally made up for by people who just believe in what we're doing or who we're friends with, and we just help each other out, that sort of thing.

For others, organizing their distribution through a CSA is less about a political or ethical conviction and more of a practical decision. Katie (3) for example said that for her, the benefit of a CSA is a steady income. Others mentioned that it provides a buffer to the market valuation of vegetables, which doesn't always reflect the cost to grow those items under certain production methods.

Hilary describes her CSA as “a relation between the people growing the food and the people eating the food, and the land upon which its being grown. It's intimate, that's a word I would use to describe [it].” That intimate relationship is a longterm relationship, which can be understood as customer loyalty, but it is deeper than that. As Hilary recounted: “We've had terrible years and people haven't even batted an eye, and they've come back. We have people that have been with us for 11 years, we have people that have been with us for six, for eight.” However, Hilary also noted that this intimacy is perhaps started to shift, to erode as the CSA model (or a version of the model) becomes more widespread:

CSAs have gotten kinda popular, its in Chatelaine, and without that depth, that intimate relationship has sort of washed away, as mainstream stuff does, you want the little short four word definition. So I see a lot more turn over, not just with us but with other people I know that run CSAs, there was a lot more turnover of people shopping around, oh well I'm going to go over to this farm for this year. And I hear a lot of people talking about their memberships, that their memberships are falling.

For example, Hilary noticed that her members are not quite as involved as they used to be, and she has more turnover between seasons. Other farmers, by contrast, feel there has been a consistent engagement from their members. Eby still felt very positive and invigorated by her farm's CSA relationships. When I spoke to her, she and her other co-

farmers were in the midst of planning a visioning meeting with their members as a way to deepen that relationship and bring them into the decisions making bit more, to talk about their goals and priorities as members. While their CSA has only been operating for three years, another farmer who has been operating a CSA for nearly ten years felt similarly satisfied with the commitment of their members.

In a few cases, the realities of the CSA differed in tangible ways from hopes of how a food community might be created. One farmer who felt particularly disenchanted with how the values of a CSA operated in practice commented that he no longer saw it as selling shares; he sold weekly food boxes.

I don't know, I sell boxes, I don't sell shares, fuck that. ... No no no, that bubble burst a long time ago. Geez, 2007, my first CSA. Oh ya, we're going to have volunteer hours and volunteer roles, and we're going to have core groups and activities. No. I don't do that no more!

David (2) felt that his relationship with his members never reached the kind of involvement he had hoped for. Yet despite this sense of frustration, the CSA and farmgate sales remains, in his words, the “bread and butter” of the farm. Given the options out there, most farmers believed a CSA is the best option both practically and as a reflection of their values.

For those selling meat, farmgate sales are the most common form of distribution. In these relationships, consumers come to the farm, often on a pre-arranged day, to pick-up their meat, and often purchase in large quantities. Many farmers describe the relationship with these customers in similar terms to CSA members, having established a sustained intimate relationship over time. In these scenarios, the exchange itself is quite straightforward, but the form the meat takes and the choice that consumers have, is interesting. At a grocery store or even at a farmers' market, the consumer can purchase

whatever individual cuts they prefer. If all they want to eat is steak, they can do that; if all they want are ribs, that's fine too. In the case of these direct sales of meat, consumers usually purchase a portion of an animal, a half or quarter cow for example, a whole or half pig or a whole chicken. This is a notable distinction because customers receive a variety of cuts, reflecting the various parts of the animal, as opposed to purchasing particular cuts that they might prefer. Farm 4 for example, lists the cuts and estimated amounts consumers are likely to receive from a half pig:

- 10 lbs. sausage or 2 shoulder roasts or 20 lbs. ground pork
- 10 x 2/pack loin chops
- 10 x 1 lb. bacon
- 1 butt roast
- 15 lbs. ham (cut into 2-3 lb., 4-5 lb., 10 lb. as you like)
- 1 package ribs
- hocks and jowels
- lard

Consumer choice is limited, as they are forced to contend with the natural physiological diversity of the animal they are consuming. As David (1) said “sometimes we have to explain to people. Like, I want all sausage and all ham, [well] animals don't really work that way...we have to sell the whole thing.” In this way, these relationships mirror those of the CSA relationship as it reminds consumers that there is a third party to their relationship, nature. This is another instance where the food being grown has agency within the food network, influencing what kinds of distribution methods work over others.

David's farm (2) has developed quite a substantial farm store, as an alternative to attending markets. As a primarily CSA farm, the on-farm store provides an important second outlet for their produce, as well as a venue to sell their eggs and meat products.

For David it isn't so much that other distribution methods do not work for him, but that the benefits of an on-farm store are hard to ignore: “no more market fees, no more tables, no more standing there all day, no more driving off to restaurants, coordinating with people, I'm just gonna take my veggies out of the cooler and put them on a table and hang out! Yes!” He said he initially relied on an honour system for consumers to pay for the items they wanted. While he never had any problems with people not paying, David said he found that having that interaction between consumer and producer significantly increased their sales.

#### *Farmers' Markets and Restaurants*

While the CSA and farmgate sales are the main ways these farmers interacted with consumers, many of them have secondary outlets such as attending a farmers' market or selling to restaurants. For most, this is a supplemental activity, as Hilary put it, an “overflow venue.” Farmers' markets have exploded in both big cities and small towns in the past five to ten years, making them a popular venue for small farms in particular. In 2008, Farmers Markets Canada reported that farmers' markets had an economic impact of just over \$3 billion (Farmers Markets Canada, 2009). Farmers Market Ontario lists 171 farmers' markets in the province. In the Ottawa area, there are approximately twenty farmers' markets, including one exclusively for organic products. Most are located in the downtown core, but there is also a growing number in rural areas as well. Some farmers' markets sell both locally produced items as well as additional items brought in from other parts of the province, or in some cases throughout Canada or North America. Most markets allow only products that have been produced in a particular geographical area.

For Hilary (4), attending the market has a practical purpose, but it is also about

supporting an institution she believes is important for the community. While she would make more money selling at one of the large downtown markets, that isn't her primary motivation:

When we started going to the market it was just to support the market, because it was dying badly and so our first day I made \$60 dollars, and that was kinda what you made the first year. But we stuck with it because we felt it had potential and the history, its always been a big thing. So it wasn't a sales motivation at all, but now, last year I doubled what I anticipated making. So ya, it's really, I made \$6000 from the market, which for me, casual Saturday mornings, it's fine. I mean, people make \$1000 in a day down at Brewer Park, but that's too stressful!

Janet (10), who incidentally shares a market stall with Hilary at the Almonte farmers' market, echoes Hilary's sentiment. Going to the market accounts for 1/6<sup>th</sup> of their overall income, but it is as much about having fun and meeting people as it is about selling her product. Unlike many farmers who travel long distances to access large farmers' markets in large urban areas where they can maximize their earnings, Hilary and Janet choose to attend the much smaller market in their own community.

The only vegetable farm that does not operate a CSA has a different interesting exchange relationship. Farm 6 developed a relationship with a local food shop whereby the shop agrees to purchase (within reason) everything that they grow in the summer, providing a guaranteed market for their produce. This is a really important relationship because it insulates them from the unpredictability of market-based exchanges. As Sarah notes:

One of the most precarious things I've noticed about farming is that if you're taking your product to market there's no guarantee that you're going to leave without it. You could bring a full truck to market and leave with all the food just brought and spent hours and hours harvesting and cleaning and packing.

The guarantee and security of income is an important element of building a sustainable farm for Sarah and her farming partner. Having experienced first hand the frustration and

fickle-ness of farmers' markets, or even restaurants where orders ebb and flow, I could appreciate the desirability of this model. However, it did have its downsides. There was a limit to how much of a particular product the shop could actually take. For example, the food shop “hit their greens limit” so for next year the farm is working on establishing a better balance of products and quantities. They are also exploring other distribution mechanisms for surplus. The other downside is that since this food shop was making a season-long commitment to this new farm, and perhaps in part because they were a new farm, there was an expectation of lower prices, something that was frustrating to Sarah. To make matters even more complicated, Sarah's farming partner works at this food shop, so Sarah's farming partner is both an employee and a supplier.

Ploeg et al.'s (2012) conceptualization of nested markets is similar to the kinds of economic exchanges being discussed here. Ploeg et al. trace the development of what they call “newly emerging, nested markets” which, they propose, are markets that are characterized by the following: clear price differential, a distribution of value with increased benefits to the farmer, a different infrastructure, a different location of transactions in time and space and a different governance pattern (2012: 140). These nested markets are strongly embedded in a normative framework, often relating to a particular understanding of quality or sense of solidarity. They are generally based within a local or regional network and usually have some sort of support or involvement of the state (2012:139).

The concept of nested markets, unfortunately, continues to project a dichotomous analysis, creating a binary between what they call main markets and these new nested markets. In doing so, they articulate a conceptual framework that is unnecessarily broad,

potentially categorizing quite different forms of exchange into the same camp. As outlined in Chapter Four, this is one of the key and re-occurring challenges I see within agro-food studies today. While Ploeg et al are themselves critical of the AFN literature for creating a dichotomy of good and bad products, they seem to suggest that the problem lies in the normative framing around the binary, rather than the binary itself. For them, the solution was to offer an approach that did not have such a pronounced normative grounding. However, I find the dichotomous thinking a more pressing concern. A normative framing can be quite useful so long as it does not attempt to reach too far and explain too much. Rather than distinguishing between nested and main markets, a more useful approach would be to give more attention to what exactly those markets are embedded in: what kinds of values, principles or practices play out in different locales and contexts?

#### *Exchanging more than just food*

These exchange and distribution relationships represent a strong example of coping and prefiguring. As illustrated in the rationales given by farmers, they are both about getting a reliable and fair price for their products and about building a different kind of food system. The choice of direct marketing is a practical and a political decision. For many, it is the only way they thought they could earn a living. As Erin (9) explains, “it’s the only way that we could possibly make an income. With the amount of livestock we have, if we didn’t sell directly to consumers, it would just be too risky...its a necessity.” Direct marketing provides farmers with more power to set their own prices, or as one farmer referred to it, a chance to get “off the treadmill.”

This does not mean that all farmers necessarily enjoy all that is involved in direct

distribution. As one farmer exclaims: “I don't like facebook!..I don't really like writing blog entries, but that's how you direct market. I don't like doing that, I'd rather be doing work on the farm.” Janet (10) reflected that while the indirect forms of selling are completely impersonal, you generally know exactly where your products are going beforehand, something that does not necessarily happen with direct marketing. She describes direct marketing as fun, but also a lot of work, believing that “anything to do with direct selling you have to work harder” to earn the same income. There are also additional elements of education and people management that farmers have to take on. Janet also talked about the challenge of getting some of their consumers to understand the realities of farmers, which becomes all the more important if those consumers are coming onto your farm. While most of their relationships with customers were great, she recounts a few instances when she wanted to remind people “this is a farm, this is not a grocery store, this is a farm.”

Beyond providing a means of coping, these exchange and distribution relationships are also prefigurative, structuring these relationships around a different set of values and priorities. Ploeg et al, drawing on Shanin (1973), provide a helpful reminder that there are multiple meanings of the word market. On the one hand, a market can be a market place, a physical and social place where people exchange goods. On the other hand, a market can also be understood through market relations which create an “institutionalized system of organising the economy by a more or less free interplay of supply, demand and prices of goods” Shanin 1973:73 as quoted in Ploeg et al 2012:141). Thus, it is not the fact that there is an exchange that is inherently exploitative or suspect. What matters is the particular social relations within which that exchange takes place.

Along with multiple meanings of market, another word that has multiple applications is that of value. I use the term value in two distinct ways throughout this thesis. The first refers to the political and ethical commitments of the farmers in this study, as explored in Chapter Five. The second, related meaning is used in this chapter, to reference the assessment or appraisal given to a particular object or exchange, such as a monetary value, or use versus exchange value. In a sense, both applications invoke the same core meaning, speaking to the nature of our relationship to particular things, what place they hold in our lives and what priority we afford them. As with many of the themes of this thesis, the concept of value has both a material and cultural manifestation.

One key value that often comes up in discussions of alternative exchange practices is decommodification. Decommodification is generally understood as it is defined by Esping-Andersen. According to Esping-Anderson, it is the ability to live without market interaction, or as he puts it “the degree to which individuals, or families, can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation” (1990: 37). We can trace the roots of this discussion all the way back to Aristotle, who made a distinction between production for use (sustenance) and production for making money (accumulation) (Sayer 2004). According to Marx, the distinguishing quality of a commodity is that it is produced for someone else and exchanged for something of equal value (Nost 2014). Clark, in his exploration of what he calls decommodification practices in the punk community, describes decommodification as a process of stripping commodities of their “alienating qualities” (2004: 413).

Through the process of commodification, the value of an object becomes determined solely through its relationship of exchange. It is not that commodities no long

have any use value, most do, but that their use value is far overshadowed by their exchange value. Exchange value is a quantitative assessment that is applied to exchange relationships at an abstract level. When you buy a bag of apples at the grocery store, the price of those apples is not influenced by the fact that it is you buying those apples, nor is it determined by the individual that produced or harvested those apples. Henderson, paraphrasing Marx, writes that commodities “need to appear devoid of the social relationships through which they come into being in the first place” (2004: 489). The actual social relations that produced the product are divorced from the product itself. So a commodity is both something that is exchanged, and something whose value is primarily determined through that exchange.

Use value by contrast is often embedded in a specific exchange relationship. It is a qualitative assessment of value that shifts depending on the significance and meaning to different users. It will hold different value for different people, based on what the producer put into it and what the consumer gets out of it (Sayer 2003). This results in a significant cultural shift in normative values. As Sayer writes, “by elevating exchange value over use value, questions of what is good give way to the question of what can be sold at a profit” (2003: 343). The value of the commodity lies not in whether it is good or bad, useful or not, but in whether it can be sold at a profit. Decommodification moves from assigning value to a specific object, and instead assigns a value to a particular relationship based on what it brings to both parties as a whole.

Decommodification is often applied quite liberally to a variety of situations without a clear definition. For example, Mares and Pena argue that “decommodification and relocalization of food systems are two critical elements of any truly just and

sustainable agriculture and food policy” (2011: 216) Yet nowhere in their chapter do they outline what they mean by decommodification. There is a conceptual slippage between decommodification and defetishization that often occurs in the literature on AFNs and alternative economies in general. Fridell for instance, writing about fair trade coffee networks states that commodification is “a process wherein commodities appear to be without connection to the workers who actually produced them” (2007:82). Here Fridell conflates commodification with commodity fetishism. Objects whose social relations of production are “known” may still be treated as commodities. Defetishization is about making the social relations of production visible, undoing the work of commodity fetishism, a process in which “participants in commodity production and exchange experience and come to understand their social relations as relations between the products of their labor - relations between things, rather than relations between people” (Hudson and Hudson 2003: 413).

Hinrich (2003) makes a useful distinction between food networks that provide an *alternative market* and those that provide an *alternative to the market*. At the core of this distinction is the treatment of food as a commodity. Alternative markets, such as farmers' markets and food co-ops, may embed the exchange with additional social and environmental considerations but it continues to treat food as a commodity. Alternatives to the market seek to de-commodify food, developing relationships beyond those built on market-rationality. A process of defetishization may lead us to a form of embedded market relationship. This is not to say that defetishization is not a value that should be pursued, but that it is important to acknowledge the difference between it and decommodification.

Different kinds of exchanges prefigure different kinds of possibilities based on different values or principles. Prefiguring exchange relationships based on defetishization will be distinct from those based in decommodification. Both of these values are present in the exchange relationships of the farmers in this study. While both have the potential to create a collective autonomy, I find decommodification a more promising value to pursue because it establishes a more defined separation from capitalist exchanges (market-based interactions based on exchange value). An exploration of each helps to expose what kinds of possibilities are currently being enacted, and what possibilities might be germinating in the near future.

*Defetishization: Making the relations of production visible*

The exchange relationships of these farmers most often resembles alternative markets, based on defetishization rather than decommodification. Many farmers articulate an affinity for decommodification, yet they also relied on some of the market mechanisms of defetishization. In the case of farmers' markets and farmgate sales the alternative possibilities being created were based on creating an economic relationship that was closer and more intimate, without reshaping the actual nature of those economic exchanges. In these situations food is embedded in a set of social relationships that seek to create a more equitable and transparent exchange, but it is still primarily assessed on its exchange value. Some scholars have, rightly, critiqued the very project of 'lifting the veil,' questioning the validity of pursuing a so-called objective reality of production relations. For example, the analysis here shows only the perspective of farmers, and the elements of production that they feel are important to make visible. Taking the perspective of different actors in these relationships might elucidate different realities.

As a result, defetishization should be thought of as more of a process, or orientation, than a final state that can be achieved.

There were both formal and informal strategies to try and share the realities of food production with consumers, in order to have a more honest transaction. Paul (8) believes that transparency is an important element of his CSA. At the end of every year he provides his financial statements for all to see, outlining what was spent on different aspects of the farm, as well as his salary. Emily (5) does a similar thing, providing her CSA members with an end of year report that includes the financial records from that season. Other farmers talked about having conversations with their members or consumers to try and explain the financial realities they were facing and the rationale for particular practices. For example, Hilary (4) describes how the strength of her relationship with her members helps bridge tensions between the affordability of food and the financial sustainability of farmer:

[it] comes back to the community part. We don't have a problem talking with our people about how the price of pork has to go up 50 cents a pound. And its hard for some folks, but we can sit down and talk about it, and although they'll say, this is really uncomfortable, I get it, thank you for talking with me.

Eby (9) makes a similar observation, explaining that having that transparency can shift people's perspectives of what food should cost:

I think we're very conscious of that, of making our products accessible, while still paying ourselves a living wage, and that's where we're kind of really interested in having a deeper relationship with partners. We feel like when people know the real costs of producing food are, then its not shocking to them that they're paying \$6.50 a dozen for eggs, oh my god, we should pay you 8 dollars a dozen! But we recognize that when there's a lot of understanding there.

Producers and consumers are often pitted against each other as opposing actors on either end of the exchange. Instead, through these direct exchange relationships, the farmers in this study show signs of bridging that divide, by giving consumers an insider view of

their realities.

Several farmers also talked about the importance of understanding the cost of production for their farm, as a precursor to this transparency. Rather than basing the value of a particular crop on what other farmers charge (at the farmers' market for example) or the potential exchange value, they figured out what it actually costs to produce a particular crop. For example, one farmer explained that they had calculated that on average they should be getting \$500 per 100 ft bed. This may sound like a simple concept, but it is something that not all farmers do, particularly new farmers. Janet (10) shared that she often thinks that young farmers are charging too little for their food, because they haven't yet figured out the exact cost to them of growing those particular things. On the other hand, some of the farmers interviewed are critical of other farms that they believe are charging as much as they can for particular items, regardless of the cost of production. As one farmer explains:

everyone runs their farm differently and some..I hear prices that astound me that some people charge for stuff, I think how can it cost \$5 for a pint of cherry tomatoes, really? That's fleecing. Ya, and so, you know, I think that we have a responsibility for figuring out our actual cost of production, so that when someone says, why does it cost this much, you can say, well blah blah blah. Its not just oh well farming costs a lot of money, no tell me exactly why \$5 a pint because, to me, we charge \$3 a pint, that's the cost of production.

Assigning value derived from the cost of production as opposed to exchange value represents an important step towards defetishization and perhaps future decommodification. In addition, without an understanding of the cost of production, there is no potential to even consider how to distribute any surplus (to the farmer, other workers, consumers, the community). This matter is an important element of Gibson-Graham's approach to assessing postcapitalist possibilities.

*CSAs: a decommodified exchange?*

While not as prevalent, we can also see elements of decommodification being enacted in the activities of the sample farms. For Esping-Anderson (1990) the potential for decommodification lies within the state. Individuals are able to retreat from market exchanges through rights and services afforded to them by the government. Following this popular conceptualization of decommodification, there are only two possible arenas of exchange; the state (decommodified) and the market (commodified). In the case of food networks, decommodification can be understood as something that can be created in a third arena free of both state and market control. Decommodification was most strongly visible in the CSA relationships, which de-emphasize the exchange value of individual units of food. This isn't surprising as the academic literature often presents CSAs as having the potential to build a different kind of exchange. Kloppenburg et al (1996), who first applied the concept of moral economies to food networks, saw promise and potential for a different basis of exchange in the CSA relationship, writing that "CSA represents a concrete example of the real possibility of establishing economic exchanges conditioned by such things as pleasure, friendship, aesthetics, affection, loyalty, justice and reciprocity in addition to the factors of cost (not price) and quality" (1996: 37). Cooley and Lass echoed this sentiment, believing the CSA interaction led participants to "re-evaluate their community, their food system, and their role." (1997: 228). By exchanging a share rather than particular food products, the CSA relationship offers the potential for food to acquire a different value, monetary or otherwise.

For example, being a CSA-only farm allowed Emily (5) to set her share prices more directly based on the overall costs of the farm, establishing a "whole package price,

rather than valuing each individual item.” They also priced their shares on a sliding scale, allowing people to pay within a range based on their means. Similarly, farm 9 has several subsidized shares that were available to members who self-identified as lower-income. Over the years, our farm provided different forms of subsidized shares. What made most sense to us was to present members with a sliding scale, indicating that if some members were able to pay on the higher end, other members would then be able to pay the lower end of the scale. While we were sometimes surprised by who did and did not request to pay a lower amount for their share, overall, it balanced out.

We can also see this shift towards decommodification by looking at particular crops within a CSA. Take potatoes for example. They have a relatively low exchange value; at the moment, you can find a ten pound bag of potatoes at the grocery store for \$1.99. For a small organic producer growing potatoes can be quite time consuming and costly. They must be hilled and protected against the destructive Colorado Potato beetle, they are labour-intensive to harvest, and they must be cleaned and cured before sale (not to mention the relatively high cost of certified organic seed potatoes). Yet they are a desirable item for many consumers. In the context of a CSA, farmers can continue to grow potatoes, a crop that their members may desire from a “use value” perspective, and assign it a monetary amount that reflects its cost of production within the overall CSA share cost, rather than accepting its meagre market-based exchange value. The CSA structure insulates farmers from market prices that devalue certain items because of highly mechanized production methods of large industrialized farms. One farmer highlighted this exact point in discussing their CSA:

Right, they're expecting potatoes. Ya, sure, generally I found the CSA to be to my advantage in that situation, because I decide the value of the crop and they don't have a word to say about it, they already bought it! Right? So I don't sell

alot of potatoes at \$3 for a huge ass bag, I sell them at \$4 a quart. That's expensive potatoes. Potatoes, that was a good example, because ya, we can't grow them, its not going to happen. So, ya, this year I reduced alot of the potatoes, took a break on the potatoes, ya and then some crops I avoid. But generally I do a pretty good job cause I assign a high value to those crops and because ya, people have not been resistant. This year people have been saying this is the best year yet.

By taking away the monopoly of exchange value, you allow other considerations to come through. Thinking back on our own CSA, there were many instances where, having taken food out of a weekly commodity exchange, people interacted with the food in their shares based on use value rather than exchange value. When cleaning and packing the vegetables for our CSA, I'd often keep a bag or bin of seconds that we'd take home for ourselves. One morning I was cleaning carrots and had set aside a bunch of seconds. I accidentally put the bunch of seconds in the bin with the other carrot bunches for the CSA pickup. Realizing my mistake half way through the pickup later that afternoon, after someone had already taken the bunch, I deduced which members had likely taken the bunch and sent them an apologetic email. They responded that they had indeed taken the bunch of carrot seconds, but explained that they had purposely taken that bunch because they liked their funny shapes. From an exchange value, these carrots would not be as valuable as the others<sup>61</sup>, yet that was not the most important factor in the decision of these two members.

### *Treading Lightly*

Despite an overall strong belief in the CSA model, some farmers expressed hesitation about taking the CSA relationship to its full potential. Many recounted situations where they had resisted exposing consumers to the fluctuations of the 'risk and reward' concept, believing that there is a limit to what their members would tolerate, and

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<sup>61</sup> Loblaw's for example recently announced plans for a line of vegetable seconds to be sold at a reduced price.

a limit to what they are willing to provide. In the case of meat, Paul (8) struggles with how to fully incorporate the CSA principles when his customers are expecting a particular amount of beef. This pushed him towards more of a subscription model in place of a true share of the harvest. While CSA members purchased a share, the share carried with it a specific amount of meat the member expected to receive. If Paul is under his expected total weight, he purchases beef from another farmer. Similarly if he is over, he will sell that surplus rather than give members a larger share. Galt (2004) observes in his own research that farmers often undervalue the produce in their shares, or give additional produce, out of a sense of obligation to provide their members with a full basket (359).

A CSA relationship can also be a very stressful one for farmers, particularly when they are starting out. Emily reflects that although politically she was very committed to the CSA model from day one, it took some time to get comfortable with the sense of responsibility she was taking on.

What if something really does go horribly wrong and people have put all this money into it? That's a lot of pressure for farmers, so that was a struggle for me at first. I think in the last couple years I've become less, or better able to manage the stress. I'm more confident in my own abilities to provide for people. And also just feeling a little more; you know, this is good food and I work hard, and no one has any reason to complain. Every year it's been an amazing harvest for people, I don't think there's been any year that people haven't got good value, so ya, just building that case for myself, that I can do this.

Katie made a similar comment in relation to her growing sheep operation. While she ran a CSA for her vegetables, she sells her lamb through farmgate sales, explaining that she doesn't want the pressure or hassle if she can't produce the exact amount of meat she anticipated she would need.

During one summer plagued by drought, we had some difficult conversations

around what to do with our beets and carrots, which were growing much slower than normal due to the dry conditions. These two items were staples at our farmers' market stand and were commonly included in restaurant orders, yet they were also a popular item with the CSA. We could provide our CSA with other vegetables but we risked losing income by not providing those vegetables to other markets. In the end most of the carrots went to restaurants, while the beets were split between the CSA and farmers' markets. We made sure the CSA received a healthy supply of carrots from the fall crop, but they received a limited amount during the peak of summer. Here the structure of the CSA relationship allowed us to cope with a difficult financial situation in a way that other exchange models would not allow. Yet it also illustrated a challenge in not fully embracing the CSA relationship. Trying to work the CSA alongside with other distribution models creates tension between the different values they are organized around.

This reluctance to fully embrace the CSA model is not solely on the producer end. There can be hesitation by both parties to fully commit to a different kind of exchange. During a CSA visioning meeting held by our farm, we asked for suggestions about what to do with leftover or excess produce (either a bumper crop or shares that weren't picked up). One member raised her hand, and was a bit confused, saying she thought that the idea behind a CSA was that members shared any excess. I explained that in theory that is true, yet often not in practice, in part because members wouldn't always accept the excess. We would offer it up at pickups, or through email, but most were not willing to take on that aspect of the CSA relationship. From our perspective, taking responsibility for the surplus, whether that meant finding somewhere to donate that produce (and the

logistics of getting it there) or processing it for winter, was part of the role of CSA members, not just our responsibility as farmers. However, most CSA members might not see that as a “reward” of the CSA system.

This tension or hesitation is also present in the literature on CSAs. Cone and Kakaliouras, one of the early writers on CSA, question how different the actual experience is for CSA members, suggesting that for most, “the demands of membership may begin and end with the bag of vegetables” (1995: 30). Writing in 2000, Cone and Myhre expressed concern that the potential of decommodification had yet to translate into “stable, committed relationships the movement requires in the long term” (196). Similarly, DeLind's (2003) experience with CSA farms in Michigan led her to conclude that the rhetoric of a shared commitment and responsibility between farmer and consumer is often not found in reality. She argues that CSAs have become little more than another market-based relationship between consumer and farmer, a tool used by farmers to diversify their income. Galt asserts that much of the enthusiasm about CSAs led to a weak critical engagement, arguing that in their excitement over CSAs “many scholars have dropped their political economy tools when examining it” (2013:343). He suggests that CSAs are best understood as a form of simple commodity production, an alternative form of capitalist production, not an anti-capitalist form of production. According to Howard, the problem is that CSAs themselves have shifted, arguing that “in the midst of their popularization, they have become less about community farming and more about subscription-based purchasing patterns” (2010:152).

Farmers themselves have mixed feelings in terms of whether the CSA represents a tangible alternative to capitalist exchange relationships. David (2) was conflicted,

reflecting that going into farming he had high aspirations about what a CSA could be, but eventually came to a more complicated assessment:

The CSA model is really good at stabilizing the amount of vegetables that are produced on the farm... But realistically, is it really a different economic system? I don't know, I really wanted it to be. I wanted it to be a co-op really bad, I thought there was going to be a core group, and I would be their employee, or their farm manager, or sell them their food, or some sort of co-operative through a group... I never saw myself doing all this.

Another farmer believed that CSAs could work in different economic systems, that there could be a capitalist CSA and a non-capitalist version. Eby (9) had a similar response, noting that there are clear capitalist elements to how they distributed their food, but that they also pursue non-capitalist elements. For example, they were working on getting members more involved through visioning meetings, as mentioned earlier, and they had long term plans of making the farm and its building much more of a community space. Hilary (4) in contrast to some of the other farmers, did not feel conflicted at all, seeing the CSA as something concretely different than capitalist economic relations. For her, the importance was the defined geographical region and the intensions both producers and consumers had in entering into a CSA relationship.

It is clear from these discussions that while CSAs may be one thing in theory, like many of the exchange models described in this chapter, they are many different things in practice. The original concept of a CSA promotes an exchange where food is de-commodified, but there is great variation in how the CSA model is enacted on the ground. Galt offers a helpful framework, suggesting that CSAs have both an exchange value and what he calls an equity value. Within the CSA relationship, there is a price that is assigned per week for share. That price exists within an equity relationship, where by share-members invest in the production, taking on some of the risk of production and

then share in the end result of that production (2013: 344). He describes an equity-commodity continuum, where different CSA relationships can be situated, based on how that tension is negotiated. This equity-commodity continuum can be a useful tool for not only CSA relationships but other kinds of distribution and exchange relationships, to assess what kinds of possibilities are being prefigured with their use.

Creating an exchange relationship based on use value over exchange value and moving from a commodity relationship to an equity relationship represent steps towards a collective autonomy by changing the nature of those interactions and the ethics that underpin them. Again, it is a process of collective disengagement, not retreating from interdependent economic relationships altogether, but working to build different kinds of economic institutions. It appears that both farmers and consumers struggle with this. Perhaps we want a relationship based on mutual aid and trust but we do not want to be ones to take the first step and expose ourself to the risk that others will not follow. It is also important to note that economic factors are not always the primary motivation behind the choice of particular exchange models. Other social and lifestyle factors also play a prominent role. This relates to the discussion around individual values and subjectivities of Chapter Five; farmers wanted to enjoy the work that they were doing, outside the financial gain it provided. They wanted to feel as though they are contributing to their communities in a meaningful way. Direct relationships such as a CSA or farm gate sales provide that intimate connection, opening up the possibilities for a deeper and more equitable exchange.

Over the years, my partner and I often struggled to find the right balance between distribution models. This involved a balance between coping and prefiguring. What

distribution model made the most sense financially and practically, while also representing an exchange system in which we were interested in participating? How do decommodification or defetishization co-exist with other values of choice or taste? In some ways, a system that gives the consumer no choice seems a bit ridiculous. One year we had a workshare member who had allergies to several of our key summer crops including peppers and tomatoes. As a workshare member, she was at the farm every week and we were therefore able to make substitutions to her share, but those kinds of individual needs do not fit well in models like a CSA. While surveys conducted with our CSA members have never identified more choice as something they would like, it is still something I wrestled with. One of the farmers interviewed joked that if they were not a farmer they likely wouldn't participate in a CSA, explaining that they had become used to the freedom of going out into the field and harvesting what they felt like eating! This may not seem as important as economic-based values, but our relationship with food is not just material and biological. It is also deeply emotional, cultural and individual.

*Strategies of Enrolment: Between Personal Responsibility and Inclusivity*

Hilary's earlier comment about intentions is a reminder that both producers and consumers (as well as other actors) have a role in enabling or constraining particular food networks. A process of de-etishization assumes that consumers want to know that missing information. De-commodification practices require an interest on the part of the consumer to employ a different valuation of food. In agriculture there is an acute emphasis on de-fetishizing food commodities in terms of environmental production practices. During my time as a vendor at various farmers' markets, it was very common for customers to inquire about whether or not we were organic. Not once did anyone ask

about our labour practices, whether we employed migrant farm workers, or whether we payed workers a living wage. Farmers cannot create a de-commodified or de-fetishized exchange relationship with only one side of the relationship. Consumers need to also be interested and committed to creating different kinds of economic relationships. Critical political economy work in this area often assumes that the relations of production are hidden from consumers, but in some cases, consumers are just as happy to stick their heads in the sand and not hear about those realities.

I often think about a conversation I had with a fellow student about CSAs. After hearing what I was researching, and that we ran a CSA farm, they proceeded to tell me that they had joined a CSA once, but didn't return the following year because they did not believe they were getting “good value”. In trying to remember what year it was that they had joined a CSA, they mentioned that it was the year that there was a drought (2012). To me, it was quite ironic that they used the drought as the means to identify the season in which they felt they did not get good value for their CSA share. According to the CSA model, that is precisely what should happen. Instead of the farmer bearing the brunt of the economic repercussions of nature's volatility, consumers are meant to share in that risk by receiving a smaller share of the (smaller) harvest, or by forgoing particular crops that were most vulnerable to drought.

Indeed, many farmers were critical of the dominant perspectives that society as a whole has around food and agriculture. At a certain point it is difficult for food producers to enact postcapitalist possibilities without a similar desire, understanding and active participation on the part of those who consume food. Several farmers felt consumers had a limit in terms of how fully they were willing to commit to alternative

exchange models, or an alternative system of values that might not necessarily benefit them directly.

When my partner and I made the decision to take a step back from farming in 2014, many of our CSA members expressed sadness that they would not be able to get their vegetables from us, and that they'd miss seeing us every week to get them. A couple asked for suggestions of others CSA farms, but none of them expressed any concern about where they would get their vegetables, nor did they have any reason to. The simple fact is that these experimentations are done in the shadows of other, much more dominant and pervasive forms of distribution and exchange. It can be hard to get away from the feeling that these other models are lying in wait, ready to welcome consumers back into their folds should there be any obstacle in the alternative model they have chosen to experiment with.

An oft-repeated refrain by farmers is that consumers do not prioritize or appreciate food in ways that allows farmers to earn a sustainable living. They felt society as a whole is too focused on individual monetary and material gain. When I asked Hilary (4) about challenges to encouraging more postcapitalist possibilities in food, the first thing she said was “people's ideals about what they want out of life.” Janet (10) felt that as a culture we have become more materially-focused and mean-spirited. Her husband Bruce concurred, lamenting that “everything is about money today.” He envisions a world where

[e]verybody would go to a farmers' market on Saturday. We've been in Spain and everybody was there with their bags and there were buying artisanal cheese, meat, milk, olives, everything. The market was a real bustling place. And the thing was, the difference was that instead of – they shopped almost everyday for things, where as here we shop maybe once or twice a week. That was a big difference.

Proposals such as these are often challenged with arguments that local organic food is simply too expensive. Farmers are familiar with this tension. Some presented a common response of blaming the disconnect between consumers and producers on a lack of knowledge on the part of consumers. Many farmers complained that consumers did not understand or appreciate the realities of farming. Some tried to explain the issue of accessibility, as in part, a result of this lack of understanding. Others articulated a belief that some consumers just weren't willing to prioritize local organic food in their purchasing. In these conversations many of the farmers position individual purchasing power as a vehicle for social change. Most felt their prices were fair and justified and claimed that if consumers do not want to pay those prices, they are free to purchase their food elsewhere.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the validity of these positions in many cases, there is a danger that this critique mobilizes a problematic othering of consumers as a group, as unknowledgeable, uncaring or unwilling. In some cases it is true that people are prioritizing other considerations and elements of their life over a sustainable and equitable food system. The family in a BMW, that Janet (10) referenced earlier, was the same family who later asked to pay for their purchase in instalments. Using them as an example of this problem is certainly a compelling story that fuels this narrative. Yet, it is impossible to know the realities of that family or anybody from one or two interactions. Nor is it fair to judge someone exclusively for their consumption habits. Regardless of how many examples there are out there like the BMW family, it is also the case that for a growing number of people, participating in these experiments and possibilities is not an option. It seems

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<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, while farmers felt their prices were fair, a couple of farmers asserted that they felt the prices charged by some of the other farms in the area were unfair.

unfair to mobilize a narrative that gives no room to them. Maxey also notes this tension between producers and consumers on the issue of affordability and sustainability. He asserts that these tensions are part of the “very real, but under-analysed impacts of neo-liberal policies, experienced by actors as they attempt to grow, sell, buy and eat sustainable produce” (236).

A few of the farmers did relate this tension between producers and consumers beyond individual interactions to structural factors that are generally absent in these discussions of affordability. One farmer responded that one obstacle is the externalities of the conventional food system that are not taken into consideration, noting that “the food in the grocery store is subsidized at the cost of the Earth and people.” As Emily (5) laments:

Alot of times you'll hear things that are kind of offensive to the farmer, and those people just don't know, don't maybe understand what all goes into the production of that tomato basket. So ya, when I go into stores, or look at flyers or whatever, its kind of shocking to me how cheap things can be. Like, how can, this mug, i t wouldn't be, but how could something else be a dollar at the Dollar Store? How is that even possible, and who's enslaving themselves or what land base is being destroyed to produce a mug for a dollar. You know?

While Emily identifies a lack of knowledge on the part of consumers as part of the problem, she also connects the tension to broader structural issues that creates a system of cheap products at the expense of human dignity and environmental sustainability.

Paul (8) in particular had an insightful analysis of the way that farmers and consumers are pitted against each other in ways that ignore the larger, more powerful players that often structure the producer-consume relationship:

it's the oldest trick in the book, its the divide and conquer, so the only way to keep your power dynasty is to make sure that the factions that could alter your power are fighting with themselves; and I think this is happening in agriculture. This is why we need to have less individualized approaches to overcoming the difficulties in our agricultural system because the more individualized our response is, the more we're going to be pitted against the other individuals

that are trying to offer a response, the less effective we're going to be in the long run.

Here Paul really encapsulates the danger in an insular orientation to coping and prefiguring. If different actors in the food network are each individually trying to cope and prefigure, they will likely step on each other's toes in the process. Using the example of exchange relationships between consumers and producers, we can see how the process of building a new and different food network is not an easy one. There is often a tension between the mobilization of different values by different actors. Working towards a collective autonomy requires overcoming these barriers to identify shared obstacles and collective solutions.

## ***6.2. Beyond the Consumer-Producer relationship***

In addition to exchange and distribution, farmers emphasized relationships with several other key actors in their food networks. In discussions of AFNs, there is often a focus on the producer-consumer relationship that fails to acknowledge the role played by other relationships within a food network. It seems that scholars have enough difficulty adequately incorporating producers and consumers into the analysis, let alone other actors.<sup>63</sup> Even Holloway et al's (2007) Possible Food Economies Framework, a notable attempt to develop an integrative analysis, has difficulty getting beyond the scope of producers and consumers.<sup>64</sup> While relationships with consumers or links to consumers (through retailers, restaurants etc) are absolutely central to the farms in this study, consumers were not the sole actors in their food networks. There is a broader array of relationships that provided necessary inputs, services and other resources. As with the

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<sup>63</sup> See Whatmore 2002; Lockie and Kitto 2000; DuPuis and Goodman 2002 for discussion on production and consumption in agro-food studies.

<sup>64</sup> To be clear, this project undoubtedly prioritizes the voices and perspectives of producers over any other food network actor. However, I try to include their interaction with this broader set of actors, extending beyond the producer-consumption relationship.

labour relationships, these broader network relationships operated on several different rationalities. Some are based on mutual aid, while others were based in solidarity and caring.

Particularly for the livestock farmers, strong relationships with other actors in their food network was vital. These included suppliers of stockers for pork and beef farmers, as well as butchers and local abattoirs. David (1) talked about the importance of his relationships with the abattoir, explaining

I know everybody in there; it's really important to our business, they know us and we have a mutual admiration for each other. They tell us that they love our meat, that we have the best quality meat coming through here, which is a real compliment. We make sure to maintain that relationship.

David also makes a point of paying the farmer who supplies him with pig stockers above what he asks, as a means of encouraging him to continue providing this vital input to livestock farming. It is an aspect of farming that fewer and fewer people are involved in. Eby (9) described how their farm makes a conscious decision to build relationships with farmers in their area; they attempt to source all of their inputs as locally as possible, and from farms with whom they have a relationship. One of the products their farm produces is veal, and they initially got into it because their neighbours are dairy farmers. Their neighbours were the ones who first suggested they take on a couple calves, seeing as they had a lot of pasture. Eby and the other members of the farm really appreciate knowing and trusting where the calves came from, and being able to ask them for advice as they went. She reflects that for some, more traditional farmers, this kind of relationship building took some getting used to, but it was something they continue to work at.

Erin (7) has developed an interesting barter relationship with an Ottawa vegetarian restaurant. She raises pigs, who can eat quite a varied diet, so as a way to cut

down on feed costs she picks up their compost, a service they are in need of, and feeds it to her pigs. Erin said they went through a few different restaurants before finding a relationships that worked. For it to work, it requires an interest and commitment on behalf of the restaurant, as they need to separate out any products the pigs cannot consume, such as coffee grounds. It is mutually beneficial for both, the restaurant, which has less waste to deal with, and the farm which gets access to nutritious supplemental feed for their animals.

Several farms spoke of informal exchanges based on bartering or gift exchange. In answer to a question about how they felt about bartering one farmer explained that she needed to balance her interest in bartering as an alternative form of exchange, with her existing obligations in a cash-based economy:

I would much prefer [to barter], and I think its going to lean that way more and more in the future. We do some bartering, but its more bartering for favours or stuff like that. I borrowed your tractor, here's a couple chickens. So, things like that. I definitely do more of the barter economy, on the labour side of things. Because I need to have money coming in to pay my bills. You are kind of stuck, once you get into that system, and its a debt you have to pay in cash...There's only so much you can do, but there's definitely going to be more and more I think, in general, reliance on, if I need something, my snowblower tuned-up, from another neighbour over there. Well I have a couple roasts of lamb, as opposed to cash. It all depends on what it is that's needed. But I do need to bring in cash to pay my bills.

Here we see how deeper enrollment in these kinds of postcapitalist practices creates a network where an increasing number of possibilities emerge. For instance, in the case of farm 9, their decision to collectively purchase a farm lessens the financial obligation of each individual in terms of housing costs. This in turn gives them more flexibility to explore different kinds of exchange relationships because the actual cash income they need to generate is reduced, making things like bartering more of a possibility. This can also play out in a frustrating chicken and egg dynamic, where it feels as though one needs

to attain a particular (financial) position for some of these alternative forms of exchange and distribution to make sense.

*From a family farm to community farm*

Historically, a dominant organizational structure of farms was the family farm. Just this past year the United Nations declared 2014 the year of family farming, in recognition of the vital role these small farms play in feeding the world<sup>65</sup>. While family farms continue to play a valuable role in food systems, the prominence of the network relationships discussed in this chapter suggests that a new form is also emerging, that of a community farm. Family farms as a unit relied on the involvement of the family (spouse, children, relatives), where as community farms rely on the involvement of their community. This may include family members, but it also includes friends, other farmers, consumers etc. These community farms are based on relationships of support and solidarity alongside networks of mutual aid and exchange.

In response to a question about how they've been able to survive as a farm, Katie (3) answered that a key reason was having “a really good support system, [and] great neighbours.” There were countless examples given of farmers supporting other farmers, sharing skills and equipment: tractors, putting up fencing, haying, cutting firewood etc. This kind of support came from various kinds of farmers. While one farming couple felt that organic farmers were much more willing to share knowledge and help each other out than conventional farmers, others recounted stories of their conventional, cash cropping neighbours being a great help to their small organic vegetable market-garden.

In talking to one farmer about whether she ever worried about getting older and perhaps wishing she had access to things like a pension or health benefits, she responded

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<sup>65</sup> See <http://www.fao.org/family-farming-2014/en/> for more information.

that she saw her relationships with her family as providing a different kind of social safety net: “I put a lot of trust in the relationships with our family, so I don't worry that when I get old I won't have anyone to take care of me. When my parents get old I would hope to be able to take care of them.” Hilary (4) is very grateful for the financial support from her extended family. She sees that support not as a weakness of the business model but an indication of the value of what they were trying to do, and part of what it means to be family:

We're lucky, but I see that as part of the support, they've helped us out because they believe in what we're doing so much. I don't think that that's an anomaly, I get from a lot of people that people help them, and it's their own interpretation of oh, I can't do it on my own, oh, and I'm like – take it! [laughter] that's what families are for! To help each other!

For others, it was friends who provided that support and encouragement. Heather (9) described moving into their farm one spring and how the first weekend they were there, nineteen of their friends showed up to help them build their greenhouse. This allowed them to bring in all their seedlings that were bursting out of their apartment in Montreal and get their first CSA season up and running in time. Similarly, following their move to a new farm property farm 8 posted a photo to their blog of a group of friends that had helped them get moved in and settled during their first week on the farm.

David (1) spoke about the reciprocal relationships that have developed between him and other beef producers. One year he had yet to completely sell out, so he phoned up another organic grass-fed beef producer in the area to see if he might have customers he could sell it to. As luck would have it, the other farmer was a bit short that year, and so he gladly purchased David's remaining beef to sell to his customers. The following year the reverse happened, with David purchasing some extra beef from this other farmer. This is an interesting instance of co-operation. In theory David and this farmer are direct

competitors, but instead of trying to attract each other's potentially unsatisfied customers, they chose to help each other out, creating a mutually beneficial relationship.

One of the benefits of interviewing both new and established farms is that I could see how these networks of support evolved over time, as farmers shifted between receiving support and offering support to others. Paul (8), who farmed on rented land for the first four years, had been responsible for making improvements to the land and building his own infrastructure. Now that he and his family have purchased a farm, another farmer in the area has started to graze cattle on that land. Paul is happy to see that the investments he made into that property were now helping out another farming as they start out.

There were two farms in particular that had quite a special relationship. Before purchasing her farm Hilary (4) ran her CSA on Bruce and Janet's farm (10), after meeting them at a Feast of Fields event. There was no monetary transaction. Bruce helped to prepare the fields and apply compost, and in return Hilary helped out on the farm and gave them a vegetable share. The relationship was not just a material one. Both Janet and Bruce have fond memories of the years Hilary used their land and they remain very close to this day. Bruce recounted how he enjoyed having “young people around.” He would go out to take them coffee and they'd sit in an outdoor kitchen Hilary built and talk with them. Even now that Hilary has her own farm, Janet says that she and Bruce talk on the phone daily to share advice and help each other out. As Janet reflects “we felt like we were cultivating a farm, supporting a farm. There wasn't an interest in a whole bunch of money changing hands, not at all. It's been great. We have a great friendship.” Hilary, who has now been on her own farm for several years, is now building supportive

networks of her own with younger farmers, sharing the land and resources in a similar way. Tracing the presence of these supportive networks is a crucial extension to the analysis of material relationships. They provide concrete, tangible resources yet the logic that underpins these exchanges is unlike many economic interactions.

Whether it was family members who provided financial support, or neighbours who taught them tricks of the trade, these relationships form an important network of support and solidarity. Ngo and Brklacich (2014) make a similar observation of interviews they conducted with new farmers in Southern Ontario. They describe an “agricultural community of practice” through which networks of individuals develop who are interested in, and support the farm. This community of practice included customers, other farmers, family and a “broader community of interest” who provided support, knowledge and inspiration (2014: 61). As was the case in my research, Ngo and Brklacich's community of practice provided not only moral and emotional support, but, particularly in the case of family members, key material support such as loans, operational assistance, and housing support.

### ***Conclusion***

The lens of a food network highlights that farms are more than discreet legal entities, or individual endeavours. They are a complex set of social and economic relationships that involve not only those who consume the farm's products but also those who exchange supplies and knowledge, offer gifts of labour and resources and provide emotional support and solidarity. One farmer jokingly described the process of getting farmers to work together as “herding cats” yet these farmers challenge the stereotype of farmers as solitary creatures in many ways.

As highlighted in Chapter Five, as well as in sections of this chapter, not all farms have the same political perspective, nor did they all see their farm work as political to the same degree. In a similar way, each farm participates in their own unique food network, yet I believe they can all be understood as enacting a collective autonomy through a dual practice of coping and prefiguring. These food networks created and maintained by farmers (along with other actors), are attempts to insulate their transactions and relationships from a capitalist ethic of commodification and exchange value. In particular Community Supported Agriculture and Farm Gate sales create a space where goods can be exchanged based on different rationalities, including defetishization and decommodification. Rather than seeking to modify or influence more dominant, hegemonic forms of exchange, farmers prioritized the construction of alternatives in order to disengage from the mainstream. The relationships with butchers, retail shops, neighbouring farmers and the broader community of friends and family also highlights how these farmers are able to meet their diverse needs through a different kind of social safety net, creating a community of both mutual aid and solidarity.

These networks and relationships provide a means of coping with current realities by insulating farmers from market-based rationalities and building a “community of practice” (Ngo and Brklacich 2014) that is both independent and interdependent, as Maxey (2009) suggests. We can think of this “community of practice” as a particular mode of ordering that circulated within these networks, enrolling actors based on a mode of collectivity and solidarity. It is perhaps even a mode of collective autonomy. Rather than small individual icebergs in an ocean of capitalism, these farms and farmers have linked themselves together with other actors forming a network of relationships that

allows them to more easily cope with the volatility of capitalist networks around them. While not an easy undertaking, these bonds have created enclaves of possibility outside of capitalism.

## CHAPTER SEVEN CONCLUSION

From the research on this sample of farms, farmers and food network relationships we can see several key areas of experimentation in economic activities, and cultural and social identities. In the preceding chapters, I have tried to illustrate how these experimentations are, in different ways, attempts to circumvent common characteristics of capitalism. In their place, farmers have created relationships of production and exchange, a sense of self and ways of relating to one another, based in a collective autonomy. This collective autonomy is an attempt to disengage from dominant economic and social institutions, to instead build relationships of mutual aid and to cultivate collective subjectivities. As Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) write of autonomous geographies, autonomy is a desire rather than a fully-achieved state. In the context of this research, it is an orientation, a set of politics that pushes farmers towards particular postcapitalist possibilities.

A collective autonomy also involve a continual process of looking to the future. These experimentations are not just about what is happening today. A key part of a politics of possibilities is nurturing what Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) call a “radical imagination.” Even as these farmers are coping and prefiguring, experimenting day-to-day on how to make things work, they also had ideas about what future possibilities might lie down the road. This chapter brings my project to a close by reflecting on some of these future possibilities, as well as identifying key challenges and critiques to the continued experimentation and cultivation of a collective autonomy.

The key challenges facing the sample farmers highlight the strengths of situated forms of weak theorizing, which leaves the researchers open to engaging in the messiness and complexities of particular instances of experimentation, without the pressure to make broad assessments of the food landscape as a whole. The reflections on future directions in this chapter are also a reminder of the role research and the research process can play not just in bringing to light the complicated realities of farmers and their networks, but in actively encouraging certain possibilities over others through the performativity of research. Finally, I believe this research project suggests the on-going need for analysis that weaves the economic together with the social and the deeply personal, approaching food networks as a web of complex relationships that are enabled and constrained by both human and non-human actors. The decision to emphasize postcapitalist possibilities in the context of livelihoods serves to expose and accentuate the tension, negotiation and messiness that surround these relationships and the values that give them meaning.

### *7.1 Dreams of seed and soil*

I asked farmers what a utopian food system would look like for them, and in their responses many spoke passionately about the need to treat food and land not as commodities but as basic necessities and communal resources. At the same time they recognized that they needed to earn a living. Some proposed a form of public or community owned and managed farms, either through formal mechanisms such as land trusts or informally through a practice of shared resources. David (2) describes an alternative land tenure arrangement in France, where ownership and control over farmland is conditional on one's intention to farm it. He contrasts that policy with the trend in Canada of landowners and developers sitting on large tracks of farmland with the

intention of selling or re-zoning it for a more profitable return.

For Janet (10), a utopian food system would be one in which farmers do not have to sell their farms to survive financially: “Not having to sell...it'd be wonderful if I didn't have to sell my farm in order to live. That's the big worry, and that's the shame of it.” She envisions a system where older farmers would connect with younger farmers to find a way to get them access to land. However, if farms are to be turned into a trust, for example, Janet emphasizes that farmers need a means to get there. The solution has to be one that also compensates farmers. As she explains “farmers' retirements are in their land, so they can't afford to just say we'll turn this into a trust, because they would have nothing to live on, or their children wouldn't, or grandchildren.” Bruce echoes this sentiment saying “society has to compensate. They have to compensate the farmer. We have friends in government and they don't think much of that idea.” Janet sees other opportunities in more informal arrangements, such as the one they established with Hilary (4), saying that “if you could convince people to see the land as a shareable resource so that for instance, you don't in fact sell the land but you persuade the people using the land to share the land, or it could be used for other purposes as well.”

Sarah (6) has quite an extensive utopian vision. She yearns for a world where food is not bought and sold, and a world where farmers can sustain themselves:

It breaks my heart that we have to buy it. We shouldn't have to be paying for food, people's access to quality food shouldn't depend on their ability to afford it. And that really pisses me off. But on the other hand, for those who have to sell their food to survive, at least for now, how can we make it so that the buyers as well as the farmers, the growers are all able to sustain themselves from that exchange.

What I would like to see is a world where everyone gets what they need as well as what they want, what they desire, the whole idea of bread and roses right? Bread is great but people need roses too. Everyone gets what they need and what they want and it shouldn't have to be dependant on your ability to do or to give or to pay in some way...There's room for barter and gift, but we shouldn't base an entire

economic model or system like that on one method. I'm not really sure what that would look like, but it will have to centre everyone getting what they need and what they want without strings attached.

Here Sarah articulates a vision based on nourishing not only people's material needs, but their social needs as well. In doing so she references a key framing of this project, that the material and social must be understood as relational and inherently connected to one another. Hilary (4) argues that food and capitalism have never been a good fit. She saw their separation as key to the kind of food system she wanted to see:

I don't know how the capitalist world, how food could get into that. It's so far removed in so many ways, I guess you can look at agri-mega ethanol corporate farms and the factory-ization of agriculture and obviously people don't, it doesn't resonate, it's not right. And what's right, what's feeding the world, and I do believe, more and more people, well I believe it because I've been hearing more and more sources, that small farmers are feeding the world.

She envisions a postcapitalist food system based on food sovereignty, which she describes as people at different levels having the ability to decide for themselves what their particular food needs and desires are. She sees food sovereignty as a dynamic concept that adapts to localized contexts and environments: “what I like about food sovereignty also, is it's not trying to put a square in a square, it's trying to put a circle in a square and just completely upset the system and turn it completely on its feet.”

Farmers imagine a world where food networks play a much more prominent role in society; where more people grow their own food and use green space differently. Janet (10) described a trip she and Bruce took to Italy where they were amazed at how people used space to produce their own food: little strips of vegetable gardens, goats grazing in unlikely spaces. For Hilary, an ideal situation would be one where people valued food and saw the importance of it, and where people were actively involved in its production, even if that means she's out of a job:

for people to feel like its more precious, and that they want control over it.

I don't know, maybe we have to feel threatened, just like during during WW2 and the victory gardens and that sort of thing. Ya, it'd be nice if people had that appreciation, and then it's, oh, you grow winter squash on your 2 acres lawn, I'll grow potatoes over here and we'll swap, or we'll have an arrangement. I don't mind being put out of businesses because people are growing their own stuff! I'll just move on to more honey! You know? So that would be my utopia.

Much like Sarah's proposal, Hilary's point here connects the cultural and the material, that our ability to imagine and enact postcapitalist possibilities can be curtailed by our materially-driven present realities.

### *Farming Together*

The idea of working with others in a more co-operative or collective way is another piece that came up in most interviews. While some spoke of more formal structures such as co-operatives, others highlighted informal ways to build collective projects. These comments are not necessarily about physically farming together, although in some cases it is. Rather, it is about building relationships and mechanisms to work collaboratively. Katie (4) feels the current scope of experimentation was largely limited to raw fruits and vegetables. Building a diverse food system beyond that, to include processing and storage capacities, will require a greater level of co-operation and collective approaches:

its going to really need co-ops, it's going to really need more local processing and storage capabilities. We don't have that now, they used to be, everywhere, there used to be local dairies, there used to be local canneries, there used to be local food processing plants and stuff like that and it all disappeared.

Interestingly, Emily (5) explains that when she first started farming, co-operative farming was something she had wanted to pursue in terms of how to structure her business. But, as time wore on, she felt content with owning the business herself and did not feel that a different ownership structure was necessary. She instead built a sense of community through her family and their family farm which formed its own kind of collective project.

Despite the difficulties and challenges in building these types of relationships and arrangements, this research has highlighted several emerging examples of co-operation, partnerships, and collective undertakings (both formal and informal) that sought to pool resources for mutual benefit.

### ***7.2 The road(s) ahead: challenges to nurturing postcapitalist possibilities in alternative food networks***

For the most part, the analysis presented in this dissertation has been hopeful, identifying moments of possibility and potential. However, as part of a process of encouraging the proliferation of these possibilities, it is important to acknowledge and understand the current limitations and challenges at hand. Returning to the literature on diverse economies and alternative food networks discussed in Chapter Three, a critique of this literature (on diverse economies in particular), is a tendency to uncritically celebrate successes without proper recognition of where these experimentations fall short. While the stories of this sample of farmers leave me optimistic, there are also limitations to these experimentations and critiques in terms of how these narratives are operationalized.

Maxey poses a provocative question in his 2006 article, questioning whether we can sustain sustainable agriculture. Applying this question to the postcapitalist possibilities discussed in the project, I would say the prospects are mixed. There are reasons to be hopeful, but also reasons to be frustrated, and concerned. There are both challenges in how to sustain and encourage postcapitalist possibilities and also critiques that need to be addressed in how they are currently manifested. Farmers identified a range of challenges and obstacles, some that they face themselves in enacting particular possibilities, and some that they see other farmers, or potential farmers, struggling with.

One farmer, for example, talks about the hostile political climate, while another thinks it all comes down to our unsustainable dependence on cheap oil. However, many of the key challenges that I see moving forward are not external to these alternative food movements and networks, but rather lie within them. As these are not challenges unique to the farmers of this study, this next section speaks to the broader scope of alternative food movements and postcapitalist possibilities enacted in food. In many ways the following discussion brings into conversation the perspectives of farmers in this study with my own, highlighting the moments where perhaps there is common ground, and others where there is discord between us. This is in hopes of nudging the scope of postcapitalist possibilities along a path that reflects my own utopian vision of a food network. These critiques also build on many of the issues scholars have raised within AFNs and diverse economies, some of which was introduced in Chapter Two.

### *Individual Imaginaries*

A pressing challenge I see moving forward is the persistence of individual imaginaries. Despite the move towards collective subjectivities visible in these farmers, there remains a certain individualism or individual practice that continues to influence what possibilities they see, as well as what possibilities exist in the broader food landscape. This is not necessarily the intention of farmers at the beginning, nor the desire going forward. Farmers can be forced into a narrow box of farm business owner, not necessarily as a choice, but as a practical reality of how society categorizes economic actors. It then becomes difficult to get out of that box, both in terms of material investments made, and from a mental and emotional standpoint. Farmers also often embody an ethic of doing things themselves and figuring out solutions on their own, from

within. This can have the consequence of becoming insular and limiting the scope of imagination.

David (2) touches on this problem when talking about the pressures new farmers face, and the pressure they put on themselves, to be productive and earn an income off of their land right away. He sees a real impatience to be making money, to have one's farm be a business: "It's difficult to convince someone to get a property and not make any money off of it for 1,2,3 years. The main challenge we have is we're so rushed, we're ignoring the required steps it takes to establish a farm." For some people it is a necessity. They don't have the luxury of building up the soil and taking their time because they need to start earning an income. At the same time, there is also a sense of urgency encouraged culturally and socially, to just get in there and start growing things. As a society, we see producing marketable crops off of a farm as the signifier of success.

Shifting towards a collective subjectivity is at times lacking within the broad sustainable agriculture movement or alternative food networks as a whole, not just within farmers but within all actors in the food network. As Paul (8) astutely observes, much of the current experimentations and alternatives in agriculture today are much more individualistic than previous incarnations. Winson (1993) traces the history of farmer organizing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and argues that during these struggles "the unity of the producers was an absolutely essential ingredient" (208). According to Winson, once farmers lost that unity it was difficult to replicate the successes of these large, broad based farm movements, such as the ones that strove for supply management and farm cooperatives. While there is much talk of communities and reconnection between producers and consumers in these experimentations, upon closer inspection it is hard to

deny that the possibilities being created have a certain individualistic character. In many ways, we have lost the collective responses by farmers from earlier decades, a loss that has had profound consequences.

The critique of local food movements fitting all too nicely into an individualistic neoliberal consumer mold has been well articulated (DeLind 2011; Levkoe 2011), but this characteristic also extends to other actors in the food network, including farmers. There is a noticeable difference between the kinds of alternatives currently being enacted and the kind of collective responses that farmers have historically engaged in to confront capitalist integration. Indeed most of the farmers I interviewed have managed to disengage or circumvent conventional systems through largely individual means, or through collective responses involving a relatively small number of people. It makes me wonder if there is a postcapitalist “we” or just a postcapitalist “I” in current alternative and local food movements. Paul (8) for example, contrasts the rise of CSAs and farmers' markets with the creation of supply management. He is frustrated that this new generation of farmers do not seem to recognize the importance and utility of these collective efforts. That's not to say that supply management is not without its problems, but it was a type of collective power that these new alternative spaces do not come close to achieving:

[I] just don't think that the way agriculture is structured now, its just, we have so little power as agriculture producers. There are better ways, and our ancestors have developed these better ways, I think we just need to hang on to them, and protect them and learn about them.

One example of the “better ways” Paul gives is supply management. The current debate surrounding supply management provides an instructive example of how this shift to individualism has manifested within alternative agriculture and some of the potentially

problematic consequences. Supply management is arguably one of the most significant factors shaping Canadian agriculture.<sup>66</sup> Supply management has long been criticized as an example of inefficient government intervention and an antiquated inhibitor to free trade. In the current climate, it is increasingly coming under fire from an unlikely source: small-scale farmers involved in direct distribution networks. Indeed, several of the farmers interviewed expressed frustration at the supply management systems in place. This critique of supply management highlights some of the unique cultural manifestation of this new alternative agriculture.

The disagreement centers around the exemptions levels to operate outside of supply management. In Ontario for example, there are small-flock exemptions from supply management for eggs and poultry, but they are very small.<sup>67</sup> Eggs can only be sold at the farmgate through word of mouth unless they are graded. This makes it very difficult to earn a living off these products. All the farmers I spoke to that have laying hens or meat chickens either have an interest in having more, or are skeptical about the financial viability of those products at their current scale. The problem is that there is a huge gap between the production allowed under exemptions, and the production needed to purchase quota. For example, the minimum amount of quota poultry farmers can purchase is equivalent to roughly 91,000 birds per year. That is an incredible jump in production from flock exemption levels, not to mention financial investment to purchase quota. Many farmers currently producing outside of quota want to scale up, but not nearly that much. No such exemptions exist in Ontario for dairy; essentially forbidding the

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<sup>66</sup> Through various marketing boards and quota systems, supply management regulates the supply of eggs, milk and poultry, allowing farmers with quota to produce a certain amount of a particular product.

<sup>67</sup> Farms may have up to 100 layers and 300 meat birds per year.

existence of small-scale dairy farms (Metcalf Foundation 2010: 11).<sup>68</sup>

In some ways supply management is itself an alternative form of agriculture, or at least was conceived as such. Indeed, Paul (8) frames it as a non-capitalist possibility in agriculture:

If you look at the history of the farm movement in Canada, through farmers organizing around supply management, through farmers organizing around institutions like the Canadian Wheat Board, but also we had single desks for pork marketing and those sorts of things. And I see all of those, group and sector organizing, around getting a fair price for their product, that's kinda anti-capitalistic; and we have a very strong history of that in Canada.

While it was seen as a mechanism to protect farmers' collective power in the market place, many of those in the new alternative camp see it as a barrier. New farmers often see supply management as an unfair government restriction that favours larger famers, instead of a collective effort by farmers to protect family farms. The point here is not whether supply management works for these farmers, but that the critique being put forth is an individualistic one, based on how the current system affects farmers individually, rather than farmers as a group. The source of the critique is that “I” want to increase my production. The focus is on an individual position within a food network, rather than an analysis or understanding of alternative food networks as a whole, and how this network might be affected by this change. There is a certain libertarian bent that appears to cut across traditional political lines. On the one hand those criticizing supply management s are part of this new wave of sustainable, small-scale agriculture, intent on building direct relationships with consumers. On the other hand, they echo the sentiments of far-right libertarian conservatives landowners famous for their “Back Off Government, This is our

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<sup>68</sup> Several small dairies, particularly producers of raw milk have sought to circumvent this rule by setting up a system where by consumers purchase a share of a cow, as opposed to the actual milk. Several have faced prosecution by the CFIA.

Land” campaign<sup>69</sup>.

This seemingly contradictory reaction to supply management highlights the challenges to enacting a collective autonomy, particularly when a collective subject orientation is in tension with a more individualistic one. The farmers in this study display a strong tendency towards a collective subjectivity, but there were moments when a more individualistic sense of self came through, particularly in conversations that spoke more directly to the ability to make a living, such as in the case of supply management. The weight of material or economic pressure can put a strain on certain clusters of actors and relationships within a food network, leaving farmers (and indeed other actors) feeling as though they have less room to maneuver in how they respond. The ability to find ways to cope that are simultaneously prefigurative, built on a vision of how the world could be different, such as the position that Paul articulates, helps to overcome this tension.

However, a return to a more collective orientation, one that fosters the collective subjectivities described in Chapter Six won't be easy. Katie (3) recounts how she attended a meeting with other farmers organized by a local NGO about developing a local food hub. The meeting did not end well. It was difficult to get farmers to work together, to trust each other enough to pool their products. When so much of the alternative food scene is about unique stories, individual and intimate relationships, it is difficult to approach it in a different way. In this talk of collectivity we should try to keep in mind that there is an important distinction between individualism and acting as an individual. This analysis is not to suggest that farming is inherently more socially just or anti-capitalist when done with others. Nor does it suggest that building collaborative or collective projects is without its challenges and limitations.

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<sup>69</sup> See for example, the Carleton Landowners Association (<http://carletonlandowners.com>)

I've experienced some of those challenges first hand. For a time our farm was a producer member of the now defunct Eastern Ontario Local Food Co-operative. Started by three farmers, it saw early success but as it grew, it was difficult to transition from this small project of three individuals to a formal co-operative run by a board of directors and a large collective of members. People began to bicker over each other's products and the salaries earned by certain individuals working for the co-op. At one point there were two competing boards each vying for control of the co-op. As a result, the co-op ceased operations a couple years after it began. It was very sad to watch what could have been a really innovative and exciting project get torn apart by interpersonal conflict. In reflecting on Paul's comments and the analysis of Winson, perhaps what's needed is not a return to the large-scale counter-hegemonic projects of the past. Instead, perhaps farmers can find ways to make use of some of the tools and capacities utilized in these projects, to build a multitude of collectivities. These collectivities aren't necessarily counter-hegemonic in their orientation, but non-hegemonic, and to borrow Day's (2005) language, emphasize a politics of the act as opposed to a politics of demand.

### *Privilege to Experiment*

This leads to a second related concern that I have, which is around privilege. This is perhaps the most troubling element of the scope of possibilities currently being enacted. One of the farmers made an interesting comment about risk by observing how in society we're discouraged from taking risks, because of our drive for material security and material wealth. She saw this desire for security as a hindrance to taking a leap and starting a farm for example:

We're not fostered to take risks, and less and less so take risks. Back in the day you could live off of very little..people are not encouraged to take risks, they're encouraged to find security, we're all, by all the forces making money off of it,

encouraged to save, invest, get a good job, keep up with everything, update your computer and your phone, twice a year.

From her perspective, as a result of these materialistic desires and expenditures, it becomes difficult to take risks and experiment, as the stakes feel too high. Hilary connects this situation to the idea of living with little, and having a supportive community:

[I] think encouraging people, that taking risks is totally fine, and things work out, and the exciting part being, if you have a network of security, being your friends, your family, your neighbours, you know, you all help each other, that makes it easier to take a risk and live with little.

While I understood what she was saying, I couldn't help but think that for many people it is not a question of fearing the loss of security, but of not having enough security in the first place to even contemplate such a move. There's a certain privilege in being able to experiment, in being able to articulate and live by alternative values. The critique that Alternative Food Networks largely cater to, and perpetuate, a white middle class consumer culture is well-established in the academic literature. As Levkoe argues, “[p]ut simply, encouraging consumers to “know where your food comes from” ignores the historical and structural conditions that have led to contemporary inequalities and ecological exploitation” (2011:691). However the ways in which this happens can often be more subtle than we might think.

For example, while most of the farmers I spoke with are earning a very meager living, many of them have benefitted from a supportive family or financial stability earlier in their life, which enables them to experiment, and take that “risk.” Even something as simple as not having a huge debt to pay off from attending university (or even attending university in the first place) or not having to financially support their parents or other members of their extended families can give someone the freedom and

privilege to enact a different kind of world. There is a certain comfort that comes from knowing your family will be there to catch you if you fall. In our own years of starting a farm and earning very little, my partner and I could rely on my scholarship funding to help pay our bills. Even if something awful happened with the farm and we couldn't pay our rent, I always knew that my parents would take us in and let us stay in their basement. That kind of privilege isn't always visible, but it is part of a farm's history or part of a farmer's rationale, and overall network, that enables them to get involved in the first place or be able to continue and pursue these alternative economies.

Hetherington makes an insightful distinction between conventional and organic growers in rural Nova Scotia. The conventional farmers were more likely to have a realist and practical approach to their situation, while the organic growers felt they could change their situation and create a better world. While the organic growers were critical of conventional growers, arguing their perspective was conservative and disempowering, Hetherington questioned this assessment, asserting that

[t]his world view rarely acknowledges that the freedom to imagine one's place in the world at such a scale is linked to a privileged class position that no amount of asceticism will erase. The liberty to imagine one scale and practice another, to improvise new lifestyles, economies and social models on their own bodies, to live in "a space for thought experiments about alternative possible worlds" (Harvey 2000: 199) is, once again, a hallmark of the taste of luxury (Peters 1997:91) (2005: 86).

The possibilities discussed in this thesis are in some ways possibilities only for those of privilege. Many of the strategies and tactics employed are simply out of reach for a majority of the population.

In addition to the possibility of becoming a farmer, there are important questions about who else can participate in these alternative food networks, as consumers or workers. In 2008, Farmers Markets Canada commissioned a study on the economic

impacts of Farmers Markets. They surveyed consumers to ascertain the reasons why they chose to shop at farmers' markets. The study proudly concluded that “low price is the least important factor in drawing customers to farmers' markets” (2008: np). While the study presents this fact as an indicator that farmers' markets are affordable, it is just as possible that this is due to the fact that those who shop at farmers' markets are in a particular class where the cost of their weekly groceries is not a high concern. Those for whom low cost would be a high priority may not frequent farmers' markets in the first place, thereby excluding them from those results. As discussed in Chapter Four, many of the alternative consumer and labour arrangements also require a similar form of privilege in order to participate.

Several farmers have taken on activities to try and address some of these structural inequalities. Farm 5 offers all of their CSA shares at a sliding scale, allowing members to pay according to their abilities (within a suggested range). Farm 9 also offers a number of their shares at a sliding scale and they encourage members or outside individuals and organizations to donate funds to help subsidize the shares of others. Another farm provides produce to the Good Food Box program at a reduced rate, while another spoke of a relationship they've developed with a local community organization to provide subsidized food for some of their programs and clients. These are steps in the right direction, but much more work is needed, on a much larger-scale, to address these inequalities.

One thing that my partner and I debated is what is our role, as producers, in trying to tackle these structural inequalities. We wanted the food we produced to be accessible to people outside of a middle class consumer base, but we also thought it was important

for that shift to happen not out of charity but out of a recognition of those structural inequalities. So rather than donating surplus food to various charities, or offering a discounted rate for selected shares (both things we have done), we felt it was important to set up the CSA in a way that acknowledges the different material wealth and power of our members. We offered our shares on a sliding scale, similar to farm 5, but we explained to our members that it was only through some members paying more that others could pay less. In this way, the sliding scale was something that not only we as farmers were taking on, but something that the CSA as a whole was working to address. We felt this was important particularly as many of our CSA members earned an income much higher than we did. While I did not think of it in these terms at the time, we were trying to build a collective subjectivity within our CSA members, to get them to see the CSA as an actual community, not just a trendy source of local produce.

Perhaps the greatest privilege stems from the on-going colonial project of Canada. These experimentations do not take place on a blank slate. These lands have histories that continue to play out, yet they are rarely acknowledged. While those “back off government” signs are a pretty explicit erasure of colonial history and indigenous land rights, there are other, more subtle examples found in the local and alternative food networks. There is a quote by Lester Brown<sup>70</sup> that is commonly featured on posters for sustainable food systems that reads “We have not inherited this earth from our fathers, we are borrowing it from our children.” One poster shows a young white woman carrying a baby in one arm and a tray of freshly picked berries in the other. On the one hand these narratives articulate a defense of the commons, calling for the decommodification of land and its protection for collective use. Yet these narratives also serve to erase histories of

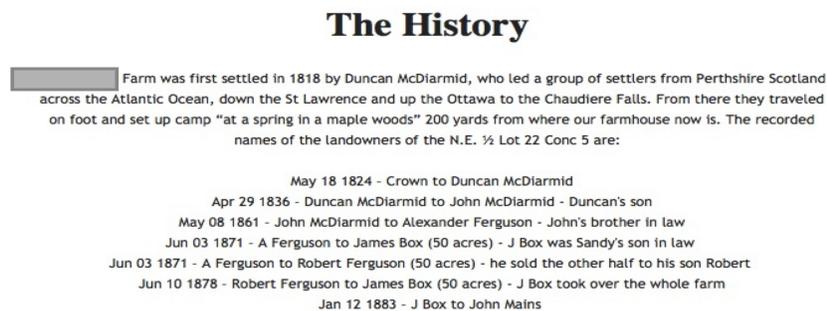
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<sup>70</sup> Lester Brown is an American environmental activist.

colonialism. Many farmers did actually inherit their lands from their fathers, whose ancestors were given or cheaply sold land from the government as part of a colonial settlement project. We cannot hope to decommodify land without an acknowledgement of who has benefited from its commodification in the first place.

For example, one of the farms featured in this project has a description of their history on their website. It has a detailed timeline from the past two hundred years, but it reads as if the history begins in 1824, with “Crown to Duncan McDiarmid.” This gives the impression that the crown was the original occupant, the beginning of the land's story. Yet that area has a long relationship and history with the Algonquin Nations, long before the Crown or Duncan McDiarmid were around.

*Figure 2. Historical Timeline of Farm 1*



The need for public land ownership and the decommodification of farmland are core issues raised in the interviews and in this thesis, but how do we talk about this without addressing the histories of colonialism? So while these farmers, and others, face many challenges and disadvantages in the present moment, they still possess privilege in multiple ways, not the least of which is from being settlers on Turtle Island.

A quote from one of the farmers stuck with me, as an example of how privilege works to encourage the participation of some while barring the involvement of others. This farmer was saying that she wants to see more local farms and specifically more small-scale farms, as a way to build community and more direct relationships:

they [consumers] would know that they're dealing with their neighbours and they would know how hard their growers are working, instead of having it not even enter into their minds because they don't know Jose who picked that tomato, you know? So they don't think about it. But if they know, it was Jane Smith down the road, and they've known her since elementary school, they're going to think about that.

The use of the names Jose and Jane Smith are significant here. Jose is the migrant farm worker, or farmer in the global South while Jane is the white settler. Even if Jose was physically in close proximity to those who were eating the food he was harvesting, he would still be separated from them cultural, socially and legally. If Jose is a migrant farmer, the community won't get to know Jose, won't see him as part of the community, even if he's been picking tomatoes in Canada for decades. Instead of pitting Jose and Jane against each other, we should be working towards food networks that build relationships and create diverse possibilities for both the Joses and the Janes.

As the critiques discussed in this chapter illustrate, we must continually ask ourselves, who is included in these experimentations, and who has been silenced or excluded in their cultivation? Questions of race and racism were not a focus of my interviews. In hindsight this is an issue that I wish I had delved into in more detail. While some of my conversations did touch upon it, I did not feel I had enough material to include it as a point of analysis in this project. Thankfully there is a growing body of work addressing the different ways that race manifests in alternative food network; a line of inquiry that deserves continued attention.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> See for example Guthman 2008a or Alkon and Agyeman.

### *7.3 A Cautiously Optimistic Poststructuralist Horticulturalist*

Despite the many barriers and challenges to enacting postcapitalist possibilities (and to enacting possibilities that are indeed post-capitalist), the farmer participants remained optimistic about the future. According to Sarah (6), pessimism is not an option:

I think if we can't be optimistic then what's the point of living! For me anyways, I only want to live in a world where things can get better. I don't want to let, even though lots of things can dash your hope, I don't want to give up on hope. And I mean, in a lot of ways its impossible for us to not enact these possibilities. We have so many moments everyday, that are beautiful where these things happen.

Janet (10) expresses a similar sentiment. Despite feeling negative and concerned about some elements of the future she refuses to lose hope: “I haven't lost my optimism, Bruce is right, we're resilient, humans. We'll find a way to solve these problems. We just hope it doesn't take too many people down at the same time.” I remain optimistic as well, though it is a cautious optimism. The challenges highlighted here are not easily solved; and the approach we take in meeting these challenges will have strong bearing on the kinds of possibilities that remain in the realm of possibility. It will influence whether we retain our capitalocentric blinders or whether we are able to expand the boundaries of the economy to include a range of diverse possibilities. Being hopeful and open to possibilities is important, but alone it is not enough. We must also continually reflect and analyze what kind of world these possibilities will create, and whether that is a world worth building.

In the long term, findings ways to link these individual projects together in a much more concerted way (without losing their respective autonomies) seems to be the most promising path to emerging out from under the shadows of conventional food systems. Approaching the task of imagining and enacting these possibilities as a collective undertaking involves not only our own process of becoming, but holding space for the

processes of becoming of others. Doing so challenges the very way that privilege operates as a gatekeeper to involvement and inclusion. Without this shift we risk repeating the path of organics, as well as other alternative institutions and models that have lost their critical culture of experimentation and imagination.<sup>72</sup>

It is here where I see great value in poststructuralist political economy, for its ability to link together the values and subjectivities embodied by various actors with their economic activities and relationships. Both of the issues raised in the previous section, the persistence of individual imaginaries and the privilege to experiment, illustrate the utility of analytical frameworks that avoid broad, blunt categorizations of different types of food networks, particularly those that take a dichotomous approach. By rejecting a capitalocentric view of the economy, this theoretical positioning is able to make room for diverse economic possibilities and configurations, without losing the critical stance needed to explore the values and rationalities that circulate within these networks. Further investigation of these two points, how the presence of individualism and privilege impact the kinds of postcapitalist possibilities that are being enacted (based on a collective autonomy and otherwise), would contribute to a research agenda of dislodging the binary thinking of alternative and conventional within agro-food studies in favour of acknowledging its diverse multiplicity.

As I was writing this thesis my spellcheck kept trying to replace poststructuralist with horticulturalist (apparently the closest word in its dictionary). In a way this reoccurring error sums up perfectly the complicated negotiation and search for balance that I have felt throughout this process, of both being an academic researching a field that I find immensely intriguing and thought-provoking and wanting to actually be in the

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<sup>72</sup> While not exclusively, in general I would also place the co-operative movement in the category.

field, literally, participating in, and imagining a different kind of food system. Over the course of researching and writing this project I have undergone my own process of becoming, my own negotiation of coping and prefiguring to make our farm work. In the end, my partner and I got to a point where we weren't able to make our particular set of activities work in a way that was sustainable for us. However, the process of coping and prefiguring has not ended, rather this decision has forced me to rethink and revisit what a food-based livelihood can look like for me. As I worked through final edits for this dissertation, I was also drafting budgets and business plans for a small-scale organic fruit farm. My process of becoming did not begin and end with a particular business enterprise. It will likely be a lifelong journey of imagining and enacting a diversity of postcapitalist possibilities in multiple ways.

Just as my identities and experiences are not static, the same is true for those I interviewed. All but two of the farming unit interviewed are relative young, which brings up questions of longevity and the longterm sustainability of these models. This includes both longterm financial sustainability and the physical sustainability of a very labour intensive profession. One of the older farming couples talked about this a lot. One year they almost quit farming because of health reasons and the toll farming was taking on their bodies. This was something that my partner thought about often as well. What happens when we injure ourselves, a challenge two farmers I know are facing this year. The recent news that Organic Meadow, Canada's oldest dairy co-operative, was filing for creditor protection is a reminder that even those (more mainstream) alternatives that seem stable and well-established continue to face challenges<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup> See Mann's (2015) article in Better Farming for more information:  
<http://www.betterfarming.com/online-news/organic-meadow-coop-seeks-financial-protection-60780>

Despite these lingering questions, I think one of the important and interesting insights from this research and the theoretic perspectives it draws on, is that in some ways it does not matter whether or not these specific alternative distribution systems or exchange mechanisms are successful in the long-run or can be replicated, or at least that's not the only thing that matters. What also matters is how participating in these experiences changes who you are, and how you see yourself, and how you relate to a community of people working towards shared needs and desires. Starting that process of cultivating postcapitalist subjects, and unlearning capitalism, is just as important as implementing particular models or structures. Those are reasons to be quite hopeful and inspired about what possibilities we're capable of enacting. For example, one of the farmers I interviewed has since dissolved their two-person partnership and has started another farm on their own. That does not take away from what they accomplished, or the space they were trying to create. Instead, it brings up more questions about how best to put those values and intentions into practice, alongside other demands and considerations.

When my interviews were wrapping up, farmers would often jokingly say “well, let me know when you have all the answers!” The truth is that there are no easy answers or silver bullets for the challenges that small-scale farmers face in trying to build a more equitable and sustainable food system, based in a collective autonomy or otherwise. I came into this project wondering how these kinds of farms were able to make ends meet, and the simple answer is that they do so through a complex process of coping and prefiguring. They rely on the resources and networks they have at their disposal, and when those fail, they build new capacities and forge new relationships. If those too fail then they re-evaluate their goals and the path they charted to get there. It is through this

coping with existing realities, and prefiguring alternative possibilities, that a collective autonomy is emerging.

The critiques highlighted in this chapter are important to acknowledge, yet their acknowledgement does not mean that the kind of experimentations undertaken by these farmers have failed. By understanding the activities of these farmers as attempts to build a collective autonomy, we see their farms, their identities and their networks as a continuing process of making and re-making. It is not only the practice of mutual aid, reciprocity and disengagement that matters, it is also the intentions, aspirations and commitments that root these activities in a particular food network that matter as well. A collective autonomy, as described within this thesis, is a multifaceted practice of coping and prefiguring. Particularly in the context of a livelihood, a collective autonomy is messy, complicated and incomplete. Despite the challenges encountered, and pressures to conform to capitalist values and forms of production, the livelihoods of these farmers remains a key way for them to put their ethics into action. Rather than speak of these farms in blunt terms of co-opted or revolutionary, the concepts of coping and prefiguring help to illustrate the complex ways that these farmers both exist within this world, while at the same time working to build a different one.

The relationship between farming practice and ideology is an interesting and complex one. As opposed to co-optation, which implies very little agency on the part of the farmer, or total transformation, which downplays the tensions and struggles with outside forces, we can see negotiation and experimentation. The farmers I spoke with saw their livelihood as a chance, everyday, to engage in their politics in a very direct and intimate manner, seeing farming as an extension or realization of their political and

ethical positions. A collective autonomy was something that was common to all the farms in this study but it was not something that was equally pursued by each farm or farmer. However, each in their own way sought to create a farm enterprise, a sense of identity as a farmer and a food network that espoused the values and orientation of mutual aid and collectivity in a way that was separate and outside of dominant food systems. The interaction between experimentation and survival, the mundane and the utopic, is a theme that I believe deserves consideration in future research, and I would argue that poststructuralist political economy is well placed to take on that task.

This thesis has only touched on a few ways that these farmers are coping and prefiguring, and there are certainly several other key factors at play. The ability to imagine and enact these possibilities is undoubtedly influenced by larger structural forces and the role of the state, two topics with which this project has not substantially engaged. This was in part due to the time and space limitations of a PhD dissertation, but also because of a desire to put the voices and experiences of farmers, those in the thick of it, front and centre. Bringing in the voices of consumers is perhaps another area in need of further attention. Particularly since several of these possibilities are being enacted in partnership with consumers (to varying degrees), having a stronger consumer presence would have enriched the analysis. On the other hand, I continue to believe that focusing specifically on farmers, those whose livelihoods and commitments depend on their ability to simultaneously cope and prefigure, brings a focus and depth to the analysis of postcapitalist possibilities that is a strength of this research. I have tried to avoid the assumption that these chapters contain the complete story of these food networks, to leave space for consumers, and other actors that were not taken up in this particular

project.

In reflecting back on my conversations with farmers and other food actors, and the research process as a whole, it is impossible not to have second thoughts over decisions I've made, or wishes for how things might have gone differently. I wish that I had been a more confident interviewer, a more decisive analyst, and of course, a more adept transcriber. I wish I had had more time with each of the farmers. I wish I could have gone back in the spring and summer to witness their farms fully awake and bustling with people, plants and animals. My politics were not something I tried to hide in this project, but I did struggle with when to let them through and when to let the voices of others dominate the narrative. To make matters more complicated, the lenses through which I see the world have shifted over the past five years, some of my politics have become sharper while others have become dulled and foggy due to lack of regular use. Though perhaps one key thing I have learned from this process, and from the scholars with whom I have engaged in this work, is an appreciation for messiness and uncertainty, and to learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable.

In the end, I hope I have presented at least part of the conversation on postcapitalist possibilities in food, a conversation that I hope will continue in other contexts and food landscapes. We can see the stories and experiences of these farms as a first step towards postcapitalist possibilities based in a collective autonomy. In exploring and trying to assess potential for these possibilities, we should keep ourselves open to the different forms that they take; not just bricks and mortar but ways of being and interacting with one another. Unlearning capitalism is a fundamental part of postcapitalist experimentation, as is developing an identity outside of the structures and confines of

capitalist economic relations. The stories of these farmers, to me, are a reminder that enacting postcapitalist possibilities is difficult but not impossible, and that food provisioning can be fertile ground for these possibilities to germinate and take root.

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## **APPENDIX I**

### **Scoping Interview Schedule**

[Review and sign Letter of Information/Consent]

[Introduce myself, explain both my academic background and “insider” status as a food producer]

Could you describe for me in your own words what your organization or enterprise does, and what your specific role is?

How did you come to be involved in this kind of work?

In this study I'm looking at what are often called “local and alternative” food projects, enterprises, activities etc to explore whether they could fit into an idea of a non-capitalist food economy or system. So exploring whether they are part of capitalism or if they are attempting to create space or relationships outside of it in some way. Can you describe how you (or your organization) understand or differentiate between conventional/capitalist food system and alternative/local (what terminology do you use?)

What does alternative mean to you, or your organization? How would you, or your organization understand alternative? Or do you use a different term/concept?)

[Explain my own understanding of capitalism: dominant economic system based on for-profit enterprises, free-market monetary transactions, waged labour and private ownership.]

Are there elements of the local food system that you think can be described as non-capitalist, or are in other ways alternative? Some examples might be a community kitchen or food bank, a free meal program, pot lucks, workshops, canning with or cooking with friends/a group, a community garden etc. ] In what ways?

Where would you place your own activities? Are there any examples you can think of to help illustrate this?

How would you characterize the presence of these types of activities – growing, marginal etc? What do you think are the possibilities for building this economic diversity in the National Capital Region?

What are some limitations or obstacles to strengthening or putting those possibilities into action?

Who have you seen involved in these kinds of activities – young/old, white/people of colour/newcomers, men/women?

One area that I'm focusing on, is the values, principles or idea that inform these activities;

and the reasons that people have for engaging in these activities – basically what set of conditions lead people to create and imagine these activities, and want to participate in them?

What are some important values on food provisioning, that either do exist, or should exist? Economic, social, environmental?

What are some skills or models that you think would be particularly useful or interesting to share with the local food community?

Are there any institution forms that you think are promising in terms of facilitating the development of non-capitalist possibilities? (in terms of credit, labour, distribution for example).

Can I get in contact with you in the future to see if you, or a representative from your organization/enterprise would be interested in participating in workshop on building autonomous possibilities in food provisioning?

What would an ideal food system, or relationship look like to you?

Can you think of anyone else in particular that I should speak to for this study?

Do you have questions for me?

## **APPENDIX II**

### **Case Study Interview Schedule**

[Note: These questions are a guide only. They will be adapted to the particular context of each case study, whether they are a primary producer, a processor, distributor etc, and to each specific individual based on their involvement with, and knowledge of, the organization/enterprise)

#### **Introduction/Context**

[Introduce myself, explain both my academic background and “insider” status as a food producer]

Describe to me in your own words what your organization/enterprise does, and the specific work that you are involved in

Can you give me an idea of how it all started/or how you got started in food-based livelihoods?

What was the intention or rationale, why was this something you were interested in doing? What were you trying to achieve? How has it evolved?

#### **Organizational Structure**

How many people are involved in your enterprise?

How is the organization/enterprise structured? ex. Sole-proprietor, co-operative, not-for-profit etc.? What was the reason behind this?

Does your organization have employees or other labour relationships? How are workers/labour paid? (cash, in-kind, volunteers)

How long have you been at this farm – were you looking to buy a farm, was that a difficult financial decision – what things helped/enabled you to make that purchase?

Is ownership of your farm important to you?

How has the farm evolved over the years- did it get bigger, smaller, new products – what was the rationale behind that?

#### **Supply chain/Food Network**

Part of my interest in this project is getting a better sense of a “food system” or “food network” as opposed to focusing just on a specific enterprise or organization. Can you tell me about some of the relationships your organization/enterprise has in terms of a supply chain or network?

How would you characterize these relationships? Are they long-lasting, built up over several years, what types of values are they based on? (efficiency, convenience, quality, cost, trust etc).

What kind of exchanges does your organization/enterprise engage in – monetary exchanges, barter, gift etc. - in terms of food, land, equipment

How do you sell or distribute your products – why did you chose those methods? How are they different from other options?

How do you set your prices? And how do you sell – by particular cuts, half cow etc.

There is a lot of discussion in alternative or local food networks about the direct relationships that development between consumers and producers Do you feel it is important to have a connection between these different components- be it consumer, producer, distributor etc.? Why?

### **Identity, Values and Ethical Commitments**

Describe your farming philosophy, the reasons why you farm and why you farm the way you do

What are the key values that underpin your work? Are there particular values or ethics that drive your work? How do they practically influence what you do?

How have these values or opinions evolved (or have they?) since your organization/enterprise started? Where do you see them going in the future?

Are there examples of activities you have done or do that don't make sense financially - i.e you do them for other reasons?

Values in tension? Are there times when you feel like you can't act on those values, or feel constrained/limited because of other considerations or necessities? How do you negotiate that? What kinds of strategies do you put in place?

Can you think of a specific experience or situation that exemplifies this?

How would you describe your relationship with the broader farming community – (examples of mutual aid,co-operation helping each other out)?

How do you think society values food?

Was there a time or a situation where you considered not doing what you do? What propelled you forward?

What does earning a decent living mean to you – and how does your farm income compare to that?

Are there things or strategies that you do to make you livelihood and life work?

### **Envisioning and Enacting Post-Capitalist Possibilities**

What are your feelings on capitalism/our current economic system – and specifically our food system

How would you describe your relationship or interaction with capitalism? (That's a big question, I know!). By capitalism I mean the dominant economic system based on for-profit enterprises, free-market monetary transactions, waged labour and private ownership. Do you see yourself as part of that economic system?

Do you think you have a role as a farming to bring about broader social change (reword) - where do you see the role of government or other institutions, society as a whole?

How do you feel about the government's position and action on farming – where do you see their role?

What do you think are some of the constraints to imagining or enacting non-capitalist possibilities in food provisioning?

Do you think its possible to exist within our current economic realities/structures and be non-capitalist?

What are some of the main challenges your organization/enterprise faces in continuing to exist or thrive?

What do you think are some of your strengths, or reason why you've continued to exist or thrive?

To me there's always been this DIY element to food provisioning activities; whether its farmers with a history of self-organization, or people taking an interest in gardening or community gardens, or community food initiatives that operates separately from state programs or initiatives. What has your experience been; Would you agree with that assessment?

In exploring non-capitalist possibilities in food, I've been particularly drawn to the idea of autonomous possibilities. To me the idea of autonomous is a commitment to building spaces and relationship that are based on self-organization, mutual aid and non-hierarchical decision-making – basically attempting to carve off a set of relationships, activities or space outside of capitalism – is that something your organization, or you as an individual would identify with – why or why not?

What would an ideal food system or food-based livelihood look like to you? In terms of the production of food, land tenure, relationship between consumers and producer, producer and producer

Is there something important we forgot? Is there anything else you think I should know about?

Thank you for your time!