

**Carleton University**

**Local Food Consumers and Reflexivity:  
Determining the Conceptual Boundaries  
Behind Community Supported Agriculture**

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**by**

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## **Abstract**

Local Food Consumers and Reflexivity:  
Determining the Conceptual Boundaries Behind Community Supported Agriculture

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Carleton University, 2007

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‘Local food’ exhibits the potential to increase consumer engagement ‘in place’, while subsuming the positive attributes of “whole” and “organic”. As a result, the growing local food movement has been portrayed as a serious challenge to the conventional food system, one that could play a significant role in promoting local agricultural sustainability.

To understand the potential of ‘local food’, and CSA in particular, this study has approached food choice as a conceptual process, establishing boundaries which guide consumer decisions and provide stability. Reflexive challenges to the legitimacy of the conventional food system — from unknowable risk to unanticipated effects — force the consumer to re-define the conceptual foundation of their food choices, thereby motivating a change to local food. The diversity of the identified challenges indicates that exposure to reflexivity — and the potential for adoption of alternatives — is widespread. However, while local food may consequently find broad consumer appeal, the “local” is not where it used to be.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis was written at Mount Haven Farm, where my parents have maintained a safe and fertile 'haven' for curiosity and inquisitiveness for over half a century. My siblings and I have often filled this space with idle speculation, healthy scepticism, overblown rhetoric, outrageous competitiveness and the occasional moments of lucidity. The pages that follow are in part a record of this family and this haven, and the curiosities, love and support that continue to fill it.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my wife Denise and my partner-in-crime Edward, for endless forbearance, support and insightful discussions throughout this long process; and to my friend Claire for particularly poignant editorial suggestions.

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## *Introduction*

The new rise of the *local* in food consumption has unleashed a whirlwind of real and imagined possibilities of change — whether as corollary, antithesis or simply adaptation to globalization. Among proponents of sustainability, already predisposed to ‘acting locally’, this ‘turn to the *local*’ in the over-developed world is cause for optimism and a sign of real change around the corner. However, in trying to imagine both what local sustainability will look like (whether in urban planning or agriculture), and where that change will take us, caution must be exercised: the *local* is not where it used to be.

While small farms continue to defy the logic of scale that rules the industrial agriculture process, members of small farm households earn as much off-farm as on, often have broadband internet or satellite television (or both), and increasingly interact socially with community members who are a strange amalgam of urban and rural.<sup>1</sup> Proximity to the urban becomes more difficult to distinguish or measure —although there appears to be more of it. Even Statistics Canada now defines four categories of ‘rural’ according to how much ‘metropolitan influence’ they experience — thus remaking the rural into Metropolitan Influence Zones. (Malenfant et al, 2007: 4)

While the ‘modern’ small farmer still chases the consumer, many of the most visible signs of change — from Community Supported Agriculture to community gardens — demand a more direct or active engagement of the consumer. In a world that ‘does’ consumption better than anything else, consumer engagement is seen as a ray of

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<sup>1</sup> Zuc-chi-ni: (zōō-kē'nē) n. pl. Members of a species of rural dweller with urban socialization and world-views (*see also* “urb-al”) which, like the summer squash, appear to belong but, given a chance, colonize aggressively, cross-pollinate with the ‘real’ squash, and produce a hybrid of strange tastes and questionable reproducibility.

hope. Active engagement reduces the likelihood of the consumer treating food as an object, a commodity, by bringing to light the complexity behind food. This engagement might also encourage the consumer to question the practices and opacity of the global industrial food system<sup>2</sup>, and link their food with the full biological, environmental, and social impacts of its production and distribution — that is, having the consumer acknowledge what traditional economics treats as ‘externalities’ to agriculture.

In the global industrial food system as it has developed, these externalities include: the environmental impacts of intensive production and over-reliance on petrochemicals, heavy machinery, and irrigation; the ‘hollowing-out’ of the rural, with rewards of scale driving mid-sized producers and suppliers out of existence, rural youth into migration, and rural communities into existential crisis; the separation and alienation of producer and consumer; and the increasing reliance on low-(economic) cost production in the developing world, increasing food travel distances and exporting environmental and social externalities<sup>3</sup>.

Any actions by consumers — such as the move to the *local* — that are seen to redress the effects of these externalities, therefore, are assumed to reflect increased awareness, represent ethical choices, and advance local food sustainability as an alternative process.

However, basing a strategy for local development on the assumption that sustainability-promoting food choices must be ethical in nature could lead to missed

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the paper, the term ‘global industrial food system’ will be used interchangeably with the term ‘conventional food system’.

<sup>3</sup> Along with the usual externalities, this relationship also encourages farmers in developing countries to shift to export production, with attendant negative impacts on food security for their own local consumers.

opportunities and a sustainable agriculture agenda that is, in fact, unsustainable. In effect, by assuming that local food choices are motivated by ethical and sustainable objectives, opportunities might be missed to further engage the consumer in questioning their relationship to food, and the full impacts of their food choices. If producers interact with their consumers based on these false assumptions, they may treat as insignificant the consumer's true motivations for that local food choice, and lose their custom.<sup>4</sup>

Equally, testing the likelihood of consumers adopting local food choices through research, based on the assumption that sustainability-promoting food choices must be ethical in nature, would increase the likelihood of obscuring or overlooking alternative or conflicting motivations for change.<sup>5</sup>

It is neither syllogistic that consumers' local choices are necessarily ethical (See esp. Barnett et al. 2005), nor self-evident that such choices — whatever their motivation — will produce sustainable outcomes. (See e.g. DeLind, 2006:125-127) What *can* be assumed is that this *local* turn results from new choices made by consumers. Consequently, an understanding of the impetus for change in 'early adopters' — consumers who are an early part of this move towards local food — must be at the heart of a strategy for interpreting local food choices and their potential impacts. This demands an untangling of the complex interaction of elements — reflections, motivations and prioritizations — that determine choices and provoke change. Thus, a theoretical understanding of the food choice process must both incorporate complexity that could

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<sup>4</sup> To compound matters, the producer will then assume that the consumer's reason for leaving had to do with these falsely attributed motives.

<sup>5</sup>This approach can be seen in research questions such as: "Do ethical consumers care about price?" or "Why does an 'ethical gap' exist between consumers' attitudes and behaviours?"

contain valuable insights into motivations, while also providing parameters and conceptual tools for its interpretation.

Beck's theoretical conception of the operation of choice under reflexive modernity gives a starting point in understanding this change. Beck's description of boundaries — to guide that choice — provides a conceptual tool that, with some modification, facilitates the interpretation of the factors behind complex food choices. Through a review of the literature on food choice, consumption, ethical consumerism, local food/alternatives and sustainability, a set of concepts and boundaries was established which would provide a framework for interpreting consumers' food choices.

By looking specifically at bell-wether<sup>6</sup> local food consumers, this study attempted to uncover the process behind the 'new', reflexive *local*: what changes these early-adopters have made in their food choice decisions; which elements in the reflective process were most influential in initiating these changes, and; which boundaries were renegotiated to enable a change in food choice.

This conceptualization of food choice process required a methodology that prompted participant reflection without guiding thought processes, with the intent of capturing the dynamics behind change. An in-depth interview process was completed, where participants were encouraged to reflect on their changed food choices, particularly relating to their participation with a local Community Supported Agriculture farm. In this way, it was hoped to clarify the relationship between the consumers' vision of the *local*, and their motivations and prioritizations in making food choices.

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<sup>6</sup> A *bell-wether* was originally "a wether or other male sheep that leads the flock, usually bearing a bell", but has become also; "a person ... that assumes the leadership or forefront, ... [and] shows the existence or direction of a trend; a person who leads a mob, mutiny, conspiracy, or the like; a ringleader." (Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1))

Understanding why consumers change to local food choices is an essential first step in determining whether local food can encourage identification and imitation among others, drive regulatory, retail and producer adaptation, inspire a realistic vision of the development of local sustainable agriculture, and live up to the hopes of proponents — in essence, deciding whether the *local* is here to stay.

Let's be clear about five things from the outset.

I have a deep interest in 'local food sustainability' because it's right: right for my family and friends; right for its conservative, transformative and adaptive properties; right for urban and rural co-existence; right for developing and over-developed societies alike; right for a future with or without oil reliance and climate change impacts.

I have no ideal vision of what 'local food sustainability' *must* look like, but I have an idea of some essential elements: safe and secure food; minimized energy and resource use; primarily small-scale production; built-in flexibility and resilience; and full value.

I have no doubt that these essential elements will be used because of demand; because of government incentives; in concert with unsustainable practices; by the bend in the river, where it floods every year; or by someone named Cletus, and as such, will look different, in different places, and over time.

I can't, for the life of me, understand why the people who took a year off to live and write the '100-mile Diet' didn't grow their own food.

I know that the key to local food sustainability is the consumer. I know that consumer attitudes towards the value of food have to change. I know that consumers have to ask questions of their food, and their food choices. I know that changes in consumer demand for local food will drive exposure, discussion, debate, policy and farming practices. And I know that I am a consumer.

## *Literature Review*

### **The All-New *Local***

The relatively rapid resurrection of local consumption in the over-developed world has led to diverse claims and aspirations being raised about the new *local*: from ‘traditional’ to ‘new’ and ‘popular’; from sites of fresh and safe to eat food, to vibrant community-building exercises; from local economy, sustainability and rural development stimulators, to the saviour of the family farm. (See esp. Allen et al, 2003: 64; Chung et al, 2005: 99; DeLind and Ferguson, 1999: 191; Lamine, 2005: 327-8; Hinrichs, 2000: 295)<sup>7</sup>

Farmers’ markets, community gardens, co-ops, u-picks, roadside stands, Community Supported Agriculture, local food processors, and direct marketing — as the most prominent elements of the burgeoning *local* movement — offer interesting challenges to the global industrial food system. Previous movements, such as ‘whole’, ‘natural’, and even ‘organic’ foods, were open to subversion by the conventional system’s retail and marketing sectors; appropriation of terms — and outright misrepresentation — created scepticism among consumers, and devalued the benefit of self-identification as an ‘alternative’. (Guthman, 2002; Giannakas, 2002) As Guthman (2004) has shown, the nature of the non-standardized organic regulatory process and the market success of organic producers conspired to create unintended negative consequences for ‘organic’, including increasing land and input costs, the invasion of the sector by large producers, and the watering down of organic regulatory standards. Also, significantly, the value of the concept ‘organic’ suffered, in the minds of consumers. (See

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<sup>7</sup> But see also proponents of ‘civic agriculture’, and organizations promoting local food, such as Farmers’ Markets Ontario, from whose website many of the above claims were gleaned.

also DuPuis, 2000: 288) However, it must also be kept in mind that organic faced internal challenges as well: unity in interpretation of the concept never existed, in the minds of either organic producers or consumers. (See e.g. Guthman, 2004: 3-4)

While the *local* has been criticized as non-ideological — potentially ‘alternative’, but not ‘oppositional’ (Allen et al, 2003: 61) — it could be suggested that this under-the-radar character, when combined with its spatial element and positive attributes, often thought to be contained within the *local*, gives it the potential to avoid the unintended consequences that befell organic. At the same time, for the same reasons, food localization could subsume — in the minds of consumers — many of the positive aspects of ‘whole’, ‘natural’, and ‘organic’.

The perceived attributes of the *local* may in turn create conditions difficult to replicate within the industrial food chain, and as a result, may prove a more stubborn opponent in the long run. Some of the more interesting of these qualities include social interaction, trust, transparency, and distance to market. For instance, Whole Foods Market was acting as a global organic retailer, (\$5.6 bn. U.S. in sales, 2006), until complaints over food miles forced the company to go “beyond organic”. (Renton, 2007) Many organic advocates would suggest that what lay ‘beyond’ — *local* qualities of economic and social sustainability — was inherent to the original ‘organic’ ethic: the potential of the local is reinforced by the perception that, ‘beyond organic’ lies ‘local food’.

### **Community Supported Agriculture: Trusting the *Local***

“This kind of community trust-building takes relationships to a whole new level. That's why agribusinesses will not be able to co-opt the CSA concept. They just can't put the heartbeat into it.” (Van En, 1995: 31)

The consistent attribution of ‘social interaction’, ‘trust’, and ‘transparency’ to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) was one of the main reasons that I decided to investigate CSA consumers’ attitudes towards their local food choices. (See e.g. DeLind and Ferguson, 1999: 190; Lamine, 2005: 331; Cooley and Lass, 1998: 228)

The CSA phenomenon is relatively new to the agricultural scene. It is an alternative structure that was developed by producers in the mid 1980’s, building off of direct-marketing, biodynamic farming experiences in Europe, and the ambitions and frustrations of some small farmers in the northeastern U.S. (McFadden, 2007: 1) The original formulations saw the producers and consumers develop a ‘shared’ price for the year’s production, which the consumers paid before the season. (Van En, 1995: 30; McFadden, 2007: 1) This pre-season financial commitment provided the inputs necessary to launch the planting season, and provided a guaranteed return to the farmer, sharing both the financial risks and burdens of agricultural production between producer and consumer.

The interaction, trust and transparency implied by the intent as well as the name, suggest the engaged involvement of the CSA consumer. Engaged consumers create the conditions for increased discussion and information exchange, which could lead to more widespread awareness of the impacts of externalities produced by industrial agriculture. (Allen et al, 2003: 72) Interaction, trust, and transparency also directly address a commonly perceived deficit of industrial agriculture: the alienation of the consumer from the producer. (Henson and Reardon, 2005: 243; Fonte, 2002: 17-18) These implicit

qualities could allow *local* to skirt one of the problems encountered by ‘organic’. Within an industrial structure, trust and transparency are replaced by regulatory standards and monitoring, which can only provide 1) quantifiable guarantees, and 2) as much control and monitoring as could be expected, given the volumes involved. Organic regulation, providing only quantifiable guarantees, was one of the factors that opened the door to the industrialization and devaluing of “organic”.

If, in a local food system, trust and transparency are provided only through direct contact with the farmer, this trust cannot be substituted. Or can it? For example, Lamine found that the proximity and *potential* for transparency provided by local relationships provides security to the consumer that an organic label could not. (2005: 331, 338) But few of the CSA consumers she interviewed had visited the farm, relying instead on potential transparency to provide a comfortable level of trust. This raises the question of whether trust issues would, in fact, motivate consumers to move to local food choices. Or, as Lamine concluded (2005: 334), would they be more likely to see *distrust* — of industrial food chains — as a motivator?

Similarly, as suggested above, the ‘community’ in Community Supported Agriculture is often imbued with a mystical quality that implies trust through personal interaction, that grounds market relationships in place, that offers consumer and producer alike a ‘situatedness’ — placing their interactions within a *gemeinschaft* of belonging, a collectivity possessing the shared beliefs and goals of the ‘rural’. However, in practice, the interactions often offer more evidence of ‘marketness’ than belonging (see esp. Hinrichs, 2000; DeLind, 1999). This raises many questions about the authenticity, interactions, and assumptions surrounding concepts of community and trust: Which type

of assurance provides an acceptable level of trust to the consumer? Is organic certification important to the consumer, at a local level? Where do CSA members' interactions fall on a spectrum of trust or situatedness — from 'assumed' to 'active'? Are local food producers and consumers trying to create the same 'trust', the same 'community'?

On the other hand, perhaps this desire for 'community' is simply reflecting that which is imagined as missing from the 'urban' experience: a quest expressing the modern food consumer's relative deprivation — the *imagined absences* — of common interests, of consensual ethics, of legitimate action, of meaningful interactions, as experienced in the global industrial food chain. As a result, perhaps the *local* has subsumed the romantic, ideal image formerly enjoyed by such terms as 'gemeinschaft', 'agrarian', and 'rural'. This romanticism is significant not only to understanding the nature of 'trust' and 'situatedness' assumed to be involved in CSA: as we shall see, these concepts may be powerful because they are based not on past achievement, or quantifiable goals, but rather on *what is missing* from the consumer's experience.

### **Questioning the *Local***

Many of the claims for the *local* are contested. Some, in the role of sceptic, have raised charges of exclusivity (Hinrichs, 2000: 301) and elitism in local food; either through participants' enhanced learnt abilities to "question their food" in complex ways (Cook, 2006: 659), or simply by virtue of local food's "status as a narrow 'class diet' of privileged income groups." (Goodman, 2004:13) In response, some would suggest that, whatever the income level, most Canadians should be more than able to access value-

added local food by devoting more of their budget to food.<sup>8</sup> This sentiment stems from the fact that food, as a percentage of household expenditure in Canada, has declined from 19.1% in 1961 — when it was the single largest expense — to 9.3% (and fourth-largest expense) in 2005. (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2005)

However, this statistic is skewed. High-income groups spend one-third more on food, per capita, than the lowest income groups, increasingly in restaurants, (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2005a). In addition, the after-tax income of low- and middle-income families has remained fairly stagnant for the last twenty-five years, while the after-tax income of families at the top of the income scale has seen large increases. (Office of Consumer Affairs, 2005) In fact, according to Statistics Canada's 2002 Survey of Household Spending, households in the lowest 20% of income had, on average, \$20 222 of annual expenditures, of which \$3504 was food. (ibid) Therefore, households in the lowest quintile devote over 17% of household expenditure to food.<sup>9</sup> Thus, while even low-income Canadians have most likely benefited from the steady decline in price paid to producers, it is not clear how much wiggle-room those in such households have for value-added food choices.

CSA has not been exempt from the charge of elitism. DeLind describes CSA customers as “usually well-endowed”. (2002: 218) Loughridge's survey of (U.S.) CSA studies indicates that CSA members are more likely to have above-average incomes. (2002: 77-78) This does not preclude involvement by lower income consumers. One of the two founding CSAs asked their members to pledge what they could to meet the

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<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Renton, who describes similar numbers in the U.S., without reference.

<sup>9</sup> For the middle quintile, this number was over 12.5%, while for the highest quintile, the same number was only 8.6%; just over \$10 000 to food, of over \$122 000 in household expenditures. (ibid)

farm's annual budget. (McFadden, 2007: 2) Thus, in some versions of CSA, collective subsidies to involvement — some type of social sharing — may permit the participation of the otherwise excluded. McFadden found that, since the initial establishment of CSA,

there had been steady growth in the CSA movement, albeit growth in many different directions. CSA had diversified into a range of social and legal forms, with philosophically oriented CSAs at one end and commercially oriented subscription farms at the other. (2007: 2; see also DeLind, 1999: 6)

CSAs have been created that encourage the consumer to participate directly in the on-farm production; that allow their members to work for a portion of their share price; that ask simply for a share purchase in advance; or that ask only for the purchase of a minimum amount of produce at a fixed price: "Each CSA is structured to meet the needs of the participants, so many variations exist, including the level of financial commitment and active participation by the shareholders, ...and details of payment plans and food distribution systems." (DeMuth, 1993: 2)

However, the fact that direct local farm relationships demand a price premium undoubtedly dissuades many consumers. Given that any movement towards sustainability in local agriculture requires, as a pre-condition, the internalization of true cost into the process, it would be surprising if the local food movement did not initially rely on economic elites as their base. Clearly, for those in upper income ranges, price should be less of an inhibitor in food choices. And yet:

...a 2002 survey revealed that 41 percent of Canadians with a household income of between \$40 000 and \$60 000 [and 'about one third of Canadians in the survey's top household income group (\$80 000 or more)'] reported being "very concerned" about having sufficient money "to purchase food necessary for a basic and balanced diet" ... for their family. (Office of Consumer Affairs, 2005)

These results would suggest that food 'affordability' is a relative concept; it cannot be assumed that income level will necessarily determine prioritization in food choices.

Similarly, some market surveys have found “a negative relationship... between income and socially responsible consumer behavior” (Roberts: 81), which suggests that claims of exclusion from local food through price may be overstated.

In the final analysis, it would be reasonable to expect that price premiums would influence food choices, and lead to greater relative participation from upper income groups. But to focus on price risks overlooking the influence of other exclusionary factors. In CSA, these potentially include ideological origins, organization, recruitment practices, distances from and transportation between farm and members, inflexibility, food volumes, and the consumer’s abdication of control over the selection of produce. These potential hazards result primarily from the initial selection of how and where the CSA is formed, but also from the demographics of the community. Clearly, any ideological principles incorporated into the CSA would impact not only form, but also involvement criteria, membership demographics, and recruitment practices. Does being an urban member of a rural CSA affect more than the chances of visiting the farm? Is a CSA that recruits by word of mouth more or less likely to be exclusive than one that recruits through media exposure and advertising? In which media?

Discovering how local CSA consumers interact with their specific CSA form, which barriers to membership were most (and least) difficult to overcome, and which most impacted their perception and prioritization of concepts relating to food, knowledge, money, place and social change would be another important function of this research. Assumptions about which factors produce exclusion would be no more helpful than those explaining inclusion. Charges of elitism, while merited, unhelpfully imply that, of the

various ways that consumers interact with food choices, a true alternative must address price first, to be valid.

### **Which *Local* ... and how?**

Allen et al criticize the *local* as potentially offering a non-ideological, subdued alternative rather than “a direct critique of existing industrial agricultural practices.” (2003:65, 72) Hinrichs questions the assumption that ‘social embeddedness’ comes automatically from face-to-face transactions, pointing out that, even if these exchanges avoid the exclusivity that is a part of many local-direct relationships, market elements are still a part of most exchanges, all of which are a part of a larger society. (2000: 301) These critiques stress that attention must be paid to the form of the *local* ‘in place’; that “the local is not everywhere the same.” (Allen et al, 2003: 63; see also Hinrichs, 2000: 300; Hinrichs, 2002; 33) With some critiques, the intent is to show that a goal has not yet been reached. (Hinrichs, 2002: 37) Others measure local forms by their ideological objectives: are they ‘alternative’, or ‘oppositional’? (Allen et al, 2003: 72)

Many of the above analyses, as with the charges of elitism, rely on an idealized concept of either goal or process to provide a critique of how transition to local food will happen: which type of economic relations (within or outside of the market) (DeLind, 2002; Allen and Kovach, 2000); which form of social organization (co-operative or individualistic) (Guthman, 2007; DeLind, 1999); which ideological stance (oppositional or alternative) (Allen et al, 2003); which type of exchange (embedded in community or commodified) (DeLind, 2006); even which form of land tenure (public or private) (DeLind, 1999) must be in place for local food processes to act as a catalyst to sustainability. As such, local food processes, and the many forms they contain, are often

labelled as ‘reactionary’, ‘regressive’, or ‘problematic’, when measured against these ideal visions of goals or objectives.

Yet, just as ‘the *local* is not everywhere the same’, surely the process towards local food sustainability will not be ‘everywhere the same’. It is not inconceivable that what is presented as an ‘oppositional’ form of local food — subverting the structure of global agri-business, for instance — may be broadly dismissed by consumers as leftie or “hippie food” (DuPuis, 2000: 286), relegating its local impact to ‘preaching to the converted’. At the same time, one could almost imagine merely alternative (or even elitist) forms of local food that, because of their lower ideological entry barriers, encounter broader adoption, and encourage, through their visibility, discussion within the local community, perhaps even provoking debate on the accessibility of local food.

DeLind and Ferguson have identified a similar problem in ‘feminist’ and ‘feminine’ distinctions: “such a framework privileges strategic over practical interests and assumes that practical or feminine movements have not evolved into full-fledged feminism.” (1999: 198) Similarly, in their assessment of the potentials of ‘civic agriculture’, Chung et al (2005) showed that it is possible for a private, for-profit local food initiative to produce more community engagement, interconnections and goodwill than a publicly owned community garden.

This is not to suggest that private ownership (or commodified exchange, or market relations) will do more to encourage local food sustainability, but rather that local food processes will always be situational and contingent, based as they are on complex sets of factors peculiar to place. What is presented as a ‘problematic’ form may, in place,

have a broad impact on social perceptions of local food: it may even prove to be the only way we make it ‘from here to there’.

In their defence, some critics recognize the unintended effects of such forms:

They may have effects in ways that are unexpected or out of proportion to what it seems they can actually accomplish given their small size and neoliberal orientations. For example, it is possible that alternatives like CSAs may indeed begin to increase members’ interest and engagement in food-system problems and solutions. (Allen et al, 2003: 72)

Thus, ideologically motivated, successful local food initiatives should be held up as examples of what can be done, and why it should be done, encouraging debate over their potential as goals. But to suggest that they are templates of ‘how we will get there’ conflates goal with process, and ignores the potential of unintended effects, as well as some crucial realities.

### **The *Local* is not where it used to be**

Every *local* is implicated and enmeshed in a global food provisioning system. Whatever form food localism takes — from ‘sustainable’ to ‘outside of market relations’ — it will be affected by, conflict and compete with, perhaps even adapt to, that system’s influences.<sup>10</sup> The clearest example of these influences is the comparison, by price, of produce from a small-scale, local, sustainable farmer against conventional produce — either locally produced, or from other regions and countries — whose costs externalize environmental and social factors. (Seyfang, 2006: 384)

This unavoidable interconnection between global and local is strengthened by the fact that the three factors producing most of the conflicting effects are three factors

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<sup>10</sup> Guthman (2004:199 Fn 1) makes much the same point regarding the realities vs. some of the hopes and claims made for ‘organic’ as against ‘industrial agriculture’ or ‘fast food’.

*shared* by food localism and the larger global food system: land, producers and consumers. Thus, while local food alternatives could have an impact on larger, systemic structures — from production to distribution — they also cannot avoid being affected by these structures. It is for this reason that DeLind suggests that, at best, CSAs can stand as a “partial alternative to the market economy”, but usually exist as “alternative market arrangements”. (1999: 5)

For example, direct food relationships demand physical proximity to the consumer: yet the ever-growing numbers of urban peri-migrants<sup>11</sup> impact land prices within local distance of urban consumers, changing the determination of what is *local* and/or economically sustainable for the producer and consumer. Similarly, small-scale local producers, whether established, transitioning, or new, have a specific set of neighbours to interact with, compare notes with, or look to for help. Who those neighbours are will impact the farming experience — sustainability is not just about economics. Your neighbour’s 450 horsepower double-dual John Deere may be able to pull your lawn and garden tractor out when it’s stuck, but the obverse probably is not true. Finally, to suggest that a CSA consumer — who has paid in advance for a season share, yet can walk less than a block to purchase kiwis and avocados (as well as cheap lettuce and tomatoes) — is somehow operating ‘outside of the market’, stretches credulity. It is to this consumer that we now turn.

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<sup>11</sup> Refugees from the urban to the near-urban, often motivated by lower purchase price, speculation, imagined benefits to child-rearing, land possession, or isolation from neighbours.

## The Rampant Local Consumer

Today's consumer is more aware of sustainability issues than ever before, seeking assurance that the food they eat has been produced in an environmentally sustainable way. Public pressure for more stringent environmental practices is growing, whether for fertilizer use, pesticide use, manure management or habitat stewardship. Consumers are asking not only for ingredient lists on their food packaging, but also for information explaining the practices used in production. For agriculture to grow and remain prosperous, these trends need to be taken into account.

— The Agricultural Policy Framework  
Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2006

If the rise of local food over the last decade has shown us anything, it is that consumers, when they stir, can be a powerful force. This is not to detract from the sophisticated efforts of producers to modify their marketing and consumer interactions, or to minimize the long-term impacts of generations of pioneering organic, biodynamic or permaculture proponents in the over-developed world. But when a trend like local food runs across the landscape with the relative speed and visible impacts of a tidal bore, folks sit up and take notice. In 2002, farmers' markets alone generated \$596 million in Ontario (Farmers' Markets Ontario website), with a \$1.9-billion economic impact on the province's rural economy. (OMAFRA, 2006)<sup>12</sup>

Across many disciplines that analyse food and agricultural processes, the very real impacts of consumers are gaining recognition. Consumers are seen to affect: sustainable alternative agricultural processes (Cash and Goddard, 2006; Furst et al., 1996; Goodman, 2004; Hinrichs, 2000); changing social values (Guthman, 2002; Lindeman and Väänänen,

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<sup>12</sup> By contrast, in 2006, \$412 million was spent on certified organic in *all of Canada*. (CBC News May 14, 2007)

2000; West and Larue, 2004); and the rise of the *local* as a potential nexus of change (Archer et al., 2003; Goodman, 2002; Lamine, 2005; Roininen et al., 2006; Weatherell et al., 2003). As a consequence, the potential for consumers' local food choices to play a significant role in rural change and local food sustainability is under increasing scrutiny.

Within food system studies, consumers had long been ignored, as a known and inconsequential element — either captured, complacent, or overwhelmed by the structural power dynamics of the food system. (See e.g. DuPuis, 2000) The accepted wisdom of 'substitutionism' held that the industrial agriculture system would find a structurally acceptable replacement for any alternative that offers a challenge, and even mitigate the effects of any consumer preference changes, including those based on "the changing legitimacy in the public mind of processed foods and the methods used in their preparation" (Goodman et al, 1987: 81-82; see also Allen and Kovach, 2000: 229-230). Yet even within food system studies, this was changing; attention was now being paid to the consumer. (Goodman 2002, 2004; Kirwan, 2004) This shift resulted from changing assumptions about the consumer, who was increasingly seen as integral to the rapid growth occurring in alternative local food structures.

The success of any such alternative structures would rely not only on encouraging new producers and circumventing established local food distribution channels (purchasers and retailers) as a means of adding value for the producers, but also on active engagement of the consumer. This engagement would demand seeking out alternative arrangements, perhaps sacrificing the convenience of one-stop shopping, and even paying more for local produce than non-local. But why would the consumer make these efforts?

To explore the possibility of an alternative structure, understanding consumer food choice changes is imperative.

Some have suggested that this wave, this tidal bore that is the *local* is the product of timing: the coming together of surges towards ‘organic’ and climate concerns (e.g. Renton, 2007), ethical concern (e.g. Kirwan, 2004), the impacts of food scares or rural crisis (Weatherell et al, 2003) — in many cases brought to light as an impact of food scares — muddies the waters surrounding consumer motivations. Assumed intentions do nothing to clarify our understanding:

What has become most visible is typically shaped by activist and/or farm-manager concerns. We seldom see CSA membership on its own terms and how involvement in CSA cuts across, confounds, and articulates with other aspects (and definitions) of people’s lives. (Delind and Ferguson, 1999: 194)

The assumptions surrounding the potential motivations for consumers loosely paralleled the assumptions of the benefits of local food — fresh food, supporting local producers, increased trust, acting outside of the corporate food chain, etc. Many of the surveys undertaken to understand local food consumer motivation have simply listed these assumptions (—‘check as many as apply’). (See e.g. Loughridge, 2002) At the same time, it was becoming clear that these assumptions weren’t being matched on the ground. In CSA, DeLind found that assuming an ideological motivation for her members, such as community-building, could have detrimental effects for producers and consumers alike: it tended to overshadow their more prosaic needs and expectations, leaving all disappointed. (1999)

### **In Search of the Changing Consumer**

My goal in this project was to attempt to determine — from conversations with local CSA members — the motivation behind their changes to local food choices. I

wanted to interrogate the assumptions surrounding local food, but without, as much as possible, presuming motivations. However, I did anticipate that the CSA members' motivations would be multiple and interacting, and therefore looked for a conceptual model that would allow me to capture and explain not only this interaction, but also any attendant changes in the consumer. That is, was it necessary for the consumer to make changes within themselves, in order to make this transition to local food? Or, in the process of making this change, was the consumer transformed?

From the literature it was apparent that an interpretive model must be able to capture a consumer's conceptual motivations as they related to the *local*, and to local food. That is, if these early adopters were shown to be motivated by 'trust', 'quality', or 'alienation', as has been assumed above, an interpretive model must be able to capture and explain why these concepts were activated, and how this activation led to change. However, as the previous discussion on local consumer trust indicated, care would be required to distinguish the type of trust involved, or even whether the more appropriate distinction was between trust and distrust:

...interviews with consumers reveal that a strong presumption of a causal link between industrial practices and food risks brings some of them ...to adhere to production and distribution systems where this perceived presumption is lower, or even reversed. We can talk here of a reversal from a presumption of a negative causal link functioning as a suspicion, towards a belief in a positive causal link. (Lamine, 2005:331)

This notion of reversal of distrust points to the links between, and the socially mediated nature of, trust, knowledge, information and truth.

Carolan (2006) suggests that we establish knowledge networks based on relations of trust. Information, before it becomes 'fact' (or 'truth') is measured against the trustworthiness of the source. From their survey of consumer studies in economic

literature, Cash et al show that “while... consumers do, in fact, respond to the messages they confront, it is also clear that they do not find all sources of information equally reliable.” (2006: 615) This reliability is affected by the consistency of the message, but also by a lack of transparency and what Henson and Reardon call ‘credence characteristics’. (2005: 243) The latter surely have much to do with distrust — or skepticism — caused by the conflation of marketing and information in corporate food messages, as well as distrust of ‘advances’ in food processing technology (i.e. irradiation). Which leads to the question: when do skepticism and distrust surpass the ability of increased standards and regulation to recreate an *acceptable* level of trust for the consumer?

The answer must explore the *interaction*, *interpretation*, and *relativism* that are confounding factors in food choices. ‘Trust’ is not an absolute, but rather a spectrum of possible interpretation. How the consumer engages trust in a given decision is mediated by other concepts (‘risk’ or ‘security’, for instance) that interact to help determine what type of trust is ‘acceptable’. For Carolan, ‘virtual’ trust is at one end of this spectrum, produced, for example, by abstract regulations over which the consumer has no real control. At the other end would be ‘active’ trust, where “trust is a locally meaningful performative act, premised upon the encapsulation of interests.”(2006: 328) Where does distrust fall on this spectrum?

Beck and Willms suggest that distrust has spread to messages from government relating to food safety — which leaves the consumer less able to interpret the complex mass of information with which they are faced. (2004: 119-129)

Fine captures this complexity with five words, describing food knowledge as ‘contested’

(by experts and science), ‘constructed’ (by marketing), ‘construed’ (by beliefs and cultural mediation), chaotic, and contradictory. (2000: 220) Confusion from too much or contradictory information can lead to inaction, and consumers who ‘just don’t want to know’. (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001: 572-3) This raises more interesting questions about the relationship of information and food choices: What food information do consumers accept, and why? How do consumers interpret food information, and on what knowledge do they then act? More precisely, what turns food information into actionable knowledge?

As Fine cautions, activism reflects information, but also misinformation, fears, ideology, and mistrust; of marketers, government, corporations and power.<sup>13</sup> (2000: 219) Developing an interpretive model to capture a consumer’s conceptual motivations as they relate to the *local*, and to local food, would prove challenging.

“The larger and more complicated it gets, the larger and more complicated it gets.” (Joan, interview participant)

### **Approaching the Consumer**

Understanding the consumer decision-making process is a complex undertaking, which defies simplification. The fact that academics from disparate disciplines can ‘understand’ consumer motivations in diverse ways indicates that consumer choice and action are based on, and motivated by, diverse, interacting mechanisms.

Research looking at the increased prominence of the *local* in consumers’ food choices from an economic (e.g. in Cash and Goddard, 2006) or rational choice perspective explains the consumer as ‘demand’ — an end-point in a production or

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<sup>13</sup> “Soylent Green is *people!*”

information chain. Such an interpretation restricts local alternative choice access to *those who can*, and *those who know*, while losing sight of “...the active, relational and political role of consumers in the genesis and reproduction of these new economic forms”.

(Goodman, 2004: 13; see also Barnett et al., 2005; DuPuis, 2000) This deficiency becomes clear when faced with the fact that consumer attitudes towards ethical food choices are consistently and significantly ahead of consumer behaviour — the so-called ‘ethical gap’. (e.g. Barnett et al., 2006; Cowe and Williams, 2000). In the absence of variance in income and information levels, oversimplified approaches struggle to explain such differing outcomes, often relying on parsing the notion of ‘fully informed’ to identify why sophisticated consumers act differently. (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001: 563) This research did make clear, however, that income and information were significant factors affecting the consumer’s access to change. That is, while their effect on motivation was unclear, differential access could stand as a barrier. In my quest for motivations, it would not do to ignore evidence that such barriers as access to income and information, once overcome, could return to influence regression; or that these barriers had not been ‘overcome’, but had been replaced in priority by other factors, or were simply being ignored while continuing to influence choices. For example, Hinrichs suggests that, while looking for (and expecting to find) the impacts of social interactions and ‘embeddedness’<sup>14</sup> (or ‘situatedness’) on choices, much local food analysis overlooks or undervalues the impacts of instrumental behaviours or ‘marketness’. (2000)

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<sup>14</sup> Hinrichs (2000:296) uses this term in much the same way that I have previously used ‘situatedness’. I have avoided ‘embeddedness’ because, as a conceptual vessel, it is already overflowing with contested meanings. (See esp. Kirwan: 397-399) At the same time, ‘situating’ the individual captures the relationship to social context while emphasizing a relationship to *place* that is key to understanding local food choices.

In an attempt to capture greater complexity, economic analysis in this field has increasingly turned to cognitive approaches borrowed from psychology. (e.g. Henson and Reardon, 2005) While highlighting the importance of “cognitive or non-economic factors”, this research is still incorporated within an econometric methodology, using rigid categorization of factors to facilitate analysis and modeling. (Cash and Goddard, 2006) However, to see these factors as belonging to discrete categories is to lose — or ignore — the effects of the interaction of factors and the influence of context. While we may be able to isolate factors conceptually, choices are mediated by context and prioritization. Therefore, we shouldn’t expect the same factors to be applied in each decision, and nor should we expect factors to be applied as ‘factors’, devoid of culture, space, tradition, relationships, etc.

Psychological studies also suffer from an inability to capture the complexity of the interaction of variables, in motivating choice. While efforts have been made to “develop multidimensional measures of factors related to food choice” (Steptoe et al, 1995: 268; see also Lindeman and Väänänen, 2000), the near exclusion of conceptual factors — and the treatment of those that are included as known, one-dimensional, non-interactive, etc. — limits the viability of this approach. Factor analysis implies that the most relevant factors in determining these choices are overt — that all factors are ‘present in the room’, when the choice is made. The answer to the question “why are you choosing tomato X over tomato Y?” will tell the researcher many things (potentially) — about visual appeal, texture, expectation based on experience, and even ideological indicators (“I don’t agree with purchasing food from country Z.”) But it begs the question (which needs answering!) “Why are you standing in *this* store, choosing your tomatoes?”

Once factors are acknowledged that predetermine why, where and how food choices are made (— why that store), the ‘factors’ applied in the actual food selection process (— which tomato) may reduce in significance. Of course, this couldn’t be clearer than in the case of the CSA, where *all* of the relevant factors precede this food ‘selection’ process, because the consumers do not select the food that they eat: “choices are made before the transaction, and these choices concern the production process and distribution more than the products themselves.” (Lamine, 2005: 332)

### **Consuming Dispositions**

Food choices, as with all decisions, are based on reflection mediated by individual identity and social context — which can be broadly conceptualized as *experience* and *information*. Experience is comprised of such factors as tradition, institutions, location and dislocation, interpersonal relationships, and social interaction. Information comes in many forms, and is mediated by access and source, including experts, friends and family, the internet, marketing, and the mass media.

Understanding *changes* in food choices is crucial to this research. As such, conceptualizing reflection as *process*, while complex, will facilitate the identification, description and anticipation of change in food choices. Reflection as decision-making process involves the prioritization of contextual components, which provide a framework for the negotiation of identity.

These complexities have posed significant challenges within all disciplines, but also in research that spans disciplines. Barnett et al (2005) advocate developing a process-based understanding of the development of a consumer ‘disposition’ —roughly the relationship between identity, agency, responsibility, and consumption — while

capturing how this disposition and relationship is mediated by context. Using this construct, they found that activating an ethical disposition required both economic resources and a self-conscious “performative practice“. (Barnett et al, 2005: 41) This captures what others have identified as the ‘active consumer’ (see e.g. Furst et al, 1996: 16) but also suggests a political role for that consumer: the performative practice necessary to an ‘ethical disposition’ turned passive acceptance of responsibility into active assumption of responsibility. (Barnett et al, 2005: 42)

But challenging this interpretation was the understanding that an act of ‘ethical consumption’ may not be understood by the individual as ‘ethical’, or as ‘consumption’! (See Barnett et al, 2006) That is, an ‘ethical’ choice may have been made for mundane reasons (‘Bridgehead is the only coffee shop on my way to work’), or in a role other than ‘consumer’ (‘It’s the only food I can give to my children that I know is safe’). Similarly, those who make non-ethical choices may not be constrained by resources or ‘performance’ anxiety, as Furst et al realized:

... individuals apply value criteria to negotiating food choices in situations where harmonious relationships with others and personal values may conflict. (1996: 262, emphasis mine)

### **The Super-Disposed Consumer**

In an attempt to expand the concept of ‘disposition’, Hobson introduces the ‘super-ordinate goal’: that is, a goal which is given generalized primacy in decision-making, but only in actions related to that goal. “If an individual has general and active concerns for the environment but does not relate certain practices directly to those concerns, the practice remains unchanged”. (Hobson, 2006: 295) This applies, for example, to actions which seem (to the outside observer) to relate directly to the goal, but

which the individual has decided are beyond their control or ability to affect as an individual:

...unless shoppers believe they are making a difference by choosing ethically, they can be motivated only by altruism or guilt. Consumers who feel their choices will not have an impact are less likely to factor ethics into their purchasing decisions. (Cowe and Williams, 2000: 29)

Hobson offers another explanation: the individual might see these factors as situational and therefore “behavioral outcomes are contingent upon the particular dispositions a specific situation evokes.” (2006: 296) Hobson suggests the individual can be seen as a collection of co-equal dispositions, containing ‘super-ordinate goals’ and identities, which come to the fore situationally. As a result, perhaps only at certain times, in certain places, with certain people, is buying food an ‘ethical’ moment.

While this conception of multiple dispositions captures the complexity of the consumer, and perhaps allows us to envision how multiple motivations might interact, it contained two significant deficits. First, it was becoming too complex to be useful as an explanatory tool, while at the same time raising disturbing parallels with astrology.<sup>15</sup> The process would require determining — and conveying — not only the consumer’s multiple ‘dispositions’ (including super-ordinate goals and identities), but also ‘selecting’ which were likely to be activated in a given situation. This begged a question important to this research: how does one determine which disposition is activated in an active consumer?

Further, the notion of situational employment of multiple dispositions suggests that the mechanism for change involves only a change in context. Put another way, new information or experience interacts with an existing set of goals and identities to produce

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<sup>15</sup> “You have an ethical disposition rampant, moderated this month by parental needs rising; unexpected information may cause you to revert to form.”

a new choice. This framing of change obscures the notion that a change in choice may have been the result of a *change in identity or understanding*, and not merely new information.

Crucially, I was looking for a way to conceptualize the change that was occurring in these new food choices. To minimize changes in identity or individual interpretation that were necessary precedents of these new food choices would defeat the purpose of the research.

What was needed was a concept that could capture the notion of identities and dispositions as *outcomes of change*, as well as actors behind change. What exists in the interstices of dispositions, activating them, giving them shape? Such a concept must also bring to light how and why ‘identity’, usually a construct producing structure and stability, could be engaged to produce change.

Ideally, this concept would situate within a larger epistemology of societal change, bringing together the complex, changing context of a globalized *local*, with the complex local food consumer. In such a manner, the multiple, situational identities of the consumer — and the conceptual constructs that frame them — might be clarified while exposing how change occurs to produce the complex, active local food consumer.

## *Theory*

### **Boundary Concepts**

We understand our world through conceptual interpretation of context.

In reflection, we prioritize these concepts. Through prioritization, we establish goals and dispositions, but also boundaries. These conceptual boundaries can be understood as frontiers, functioning both to include and exclude at the point of contact between the individual and their context. Boundaries also create internal structure, as sets of concepts which provide a framework for the negotiation of identity, and guide situational choices. Therefore, boundaries both maintain stability and consistency — as the mechanism controlling choice — and allow the incorporation of new experiences and information into previously established parameters of identity. Beck et al suggest that the function of negotiated boundaries is to establish legitimacy and delimit relevant context. (2003:15-17) In this manner, boundaries also both determine and strengthen choice sets that help the individual to simplify decision-making, and maintain stability within their identity.

Examining an individual's identity and context as static elements will not capture the process by which identity, context and reflection interact to change established decision-making patterns. Change, in this case, resides in the renegotiation of the concepts and boundaries through which the individual interprets identity and context, and forms decision-making patterns.

The potential for capturing not only competing motivations, but also any changes to conceptual boundaries, improves through looking at the consumer's prioritization of interpretive concepts. While the intent here is not to suggest an exclusive set of concepts

through which local food consumers' choices must be interpreted, some — such as 'trust', 'quality' and 'situatedness' — have been suggested by the literature.

Other boundary concepts framing local food choices may be easily imagined: in assessing a mother's food choices for her children as a negotiated set of conceptual positions, it would be clear that, while 'quality', 'trust' and 'situatedness' could play a part, 'agency', 'risk' and 'responsibility' might equally enter into the decision. Was the decision framed as a choice to protect her children from increasingly uncertain effects? ...a choice to educate her children about the impact of the global food chain on other children? ...a choice to establish local patterns or relationships that her teenage children could rely on to make their own food choices? Each response shows a different interaction or balance of conceptual priorities that not only provides boundaries for choice, but also gives the opportunity to more clearly establish a causal chain to motivation.

Simultaneously to internal conceptual negotiations, consumer change towards local food occurs within a context re-writing the boundaries between the global and the *local*, the individual and the state, nature and society, the present and the future.

### **The Externalities of Global Agriculture**

The development of a global industrial food system has produced visible, widespread effects that were the deliberate result of rational, effective actions and outcomes, designed to change the nature of food production and processing to comply with a scale-based, efficient supply chain model. While it is possible to celebrate the positive outcomes as a triumph of the trans-national implementation of technology and

policy (see, e.g. Pretty, 1995: 3), within a rational world market, other assessments of the Green Revolution arrive at different conclusions:

Where are we, then? We are embedded in a global food system structured around a market economy which is geared to the proliferation of commodities and the destruction of the local. We are faced with transnational agribusinesses whose desire to extend and consolidate their global reach implies the homogenization of our food, our communities, and our landscapes. We live in a world in which we are ever more distant from each other and from the land, and so we are increasingly less responsible to each other and to the land. Where do we go from here? How can we come home again? (Kloppenburg et al, 1996: 37)

Many of the most significant externalities of the development of global industrial agriculture result from ‘the tragedy of efficiency’: in the over-developed world, the demands of scale and increased productivity have contributed significantly to serious or unknowable environmental impacts, ignored in the calculation of ‘productivity’ and ‘efficiency’, as well as the price of the resulting produce. These externalities also jeopardize the sustainability of agriculture — through the losses of genetic diversity, nutrients, soil and soil fertility; through water table depletion and water contamination; through pesticide contamination (of soil, water and food); and through atmospheric contamination (see, e.g. Buttel, 1980: 457-459; Pretty, 1995: 4).

At the same time, this tragedy has been implicated in the increased losses of mid-sized, inter-generational farms, and the ‘hollowing-out’ of the rural. (Buttel, 1980: 462-463) Under industrial agriculture, the family farm was forced to increase in scale to match the demands of increased productivity created by false ‘market’ conditions: stagnant prices, and continually increasing input costs. In order to maintain an economically viable family farm, and transmit — in place — knowledge between generations, the family operation had to at least double this already increased scale, or find even more ‘efficiencies’ — in operation, or in simplified and condensed lifestyles.

Simultaneously, the prices of input costs and land (necessary for farm expansion) were rising steadily — due to inflation and ‘urban planning’.

Coincidental to these pressures of scale and efficiency, the gap was growing between the incomes and lifestyles of the rural and non-rural — the latter (seemingly) becoming more complex, with expanding opportunities. The perception of relative deprivation — an absence left by inaccessible possibilities or missed opportunities — was made tangible for rural youth (primarily) by the perceived rural-urban ‘gap’. This imagined absence, combined with the pressures of scale and efficiency, was stripping away rural expectations and illusions of stability, control and freedom: the three central pillars of the oft misunderstood and misconstrued ‘agrarian’ mindset.

As an important sub-plot to this tragedy, the rationalization of the industrial food chain separated producer from market and, thereby, input costs from receipts. That is, by separating the realities of local input costs from what was achievable in local efficiencies, the rationalization of global food production created artificial ‘market’ influences — including the competition resulting from the lower costs of production in other regions or countries — that forced farmers in over-developed regions to find super-efficiencies (i.e. scale), rely on subsidies, or sell the farm.

The interrelated effects of this tragedy included rural out-migration, more large-scale operations, and fewer family-sized farms. In turn, these effects had negative consequences for rural communities, which had evolved in concert with, and in symbiosis with, a larger local population engaged in agriculture.

The externalities of the global, industrialized food structure have impacted the consumer as well. Quality has been rationalized as a market outcome, based on in-store

appeal (largely visual) and convenience. Guarantees of food safety have been supplied by a regulatory structure rationalized by production, processing and retail forms, resulting in ‘the best protection possible’. But those forms accept, as necessary components, practices that are increasingly challenged by consumers, because of knowable impacts from externalities (from factory farming to over-packaging); because of unknowable impacts from externalities (produced by irradiation, pesticide, hormone and antibiotic usage) and; because of increasingly recognized or accepted externalities, and their effects (the costs of subsidization, the diverse impacts on developing societies and producers, as well as the previously mentioned impacts on the environment, local producers, and rural sustainability).

The challenges from revisionism and re-evaluation can be best understood as part of a broader process of change within the over-developed world; the process of reflexive modernization.

### **Reflexive Modernization and the Global Industrial Food System**

The ‘reflexivity’ in ‘reflexive modernization’ is ...not simply a redundant way of emphasizing the self-referential quality that is a constitutive part of modernity. Instead, what ‘reflexive modernization’ refers to is a distinct second phase... (where modernization) begins to transform, for a second time, not only the key institutions but also the very principles of society. But this time the principles and institutions being transformed are those of modern society. (Beck et al, 2003: 1)

The sources of transformation in the modernizing world, referred to above, “are all unforeseen consequences, not of the crisis but of the *victory* (of modernization)”. (Beck and Lau, 2005: 526, their emphasis) Giddens (1991: esp. 17-20) identifies four factors which have helped to produce this re-modernization:

- the separation and reconfiguration of time and space;

- the separation of interactions from space;
- institutional reflexivity, and;
- the emancipation of the individual.

The first factor leads to the standardization and universalization of not only the measurement, but the conceptualization of time. Outcomes germane to local food choices include the continual ascendancy of time (and convenience), and the loss of seasonality as factors in consumer decision-making.

For Giddens, the second factor — the removal of social relations from local context — involves abstract systems. In fact, the global industrial food system fills this role. This system separates the consumer from not only the source of their food, but from any connection to its source —including the land, weather, seasons, or producers. Giddens identifies ‘symbolic tokens’ — especially money —as significant to spatial disembedding, as well as expert systems that deploy technical knowledge. Both have played a large part in the development of global industrial agriculture: in the separation of producer and market, but also in the representation of ‘progress’ or ‘innovation’: primarily, as an improvement of the efficiency and productivity of the accepted, institutionalized process of agricultural industrialization. Included here are not only research and technical developments, but also policy adaptations such as agricultural subsidies and farm loans.

The final factor identified by Giddens in the re-modernization of modernity is his most significant contribution: the enshrinement of doubt and revisionism as the fundamental legitimative mechanism of modernity.

The original progenitors of modern science and philosophy believed themselves to be preparing the way for securely founded knowledge of the

social and natural worlds: the claims of reason were due to overcome the dogmas of tradition, offering a sense of certitude in place of the arbitrary character of habit and custom. But the reflexivity of modernity actually undermines the certainty of knowledge...

Science depends, not on the inductive accumulation of proofs, but on the methodological principle of doubt. No matter how cherished, and apparently well established, a given scientific tenet might be, it is open to revision - or might have to be discarded altogether - in the light of new ideas or findings. (Giddens, 1991: 20-21)

The challenges to the institutional legitimacy of global industrial agriculture, stem from this process of revisionism and re-evaluation.

### **Reflexive Revisionism**

Through collaboration<sup>16</sup> and elaboration, Beck has turned this reflexive necessity— this revisionism, and the uncertainty it produces — into the heart of what he describes as the *meta-change* of modern society.

“Reflexive does *not* mean that people today lead a more conscious life. On the contrary. ‘Reflexive’ signifies not an ‘increase of mastery and consciousness, but a heightened awareness that mastery is impossible’.” (With Latour, in Beck et al, 2003: 3, emphasis theirs)

As a consequence of challenges both from ‘outside’ and from within the sciences providing legitimacy to the processes of modernization, “scientific reasoning can no longer solve such situations the way it once did, because technical standards ... are now confronted by the conviction that some things are in principle uncertain.” (Beck et al, 2003: 14)

To the causative factors already listed, both Giddens and Beck add ‘the emancipation of the individual’, a legitimative construct behind much of the project of modernity. The process of reflexive modernity frees the individual from traditional and

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<sup>16</sup> Beck has collaborated and exchanged ideas on reflexive modernization — within and between publications — with Giddens, Lash, Lau, Bonss, Latour and Habermas, among others.

prescribed social roles. Rather than relying on tradition, individuals are choosing with which groups they wish to identify, and be active. Even the choice to act traditionally takes on a different meaning, when it results from conscious decisions. (Beck and Willms, 2004: 67) “Consequently, the self-definition and identity of individuals is increasingly independent of any single collective situation in which we might like to frame them.” (ibid: 24) But rather than understanding the individual’s actions as the result of multiple dispositions that are situationally activated, Beck sees these actions as resulting from the manifestation of an intentional yet necessarily compelled re-establishment of boundaries which guide choices:

The guiding assumption must be that the reflexive modern subject *creates* her network (and maintains it), where the simple modern subject *interprets* her network (through pre-given boundaries).  
(Beck et al, 2003: 25, emphasis theirs)

...there has been a fundamental change in the nature [and pluralization] of boundaries ...Every boundary becomes in some sense optional, in some sense a choice, and in some sense arbitrary. ...[And yet] people have to make decisions. Neither social nor individual life is possible without them, and every decision draws a line of inclusion and exclusion. So long as social life goes on, there must be a practical logic that allows us to draw boundaries on a daily basis...

(Beck and Willms, 2004: 27-28)

The process of reflexive modernization transforms externalities from the detritus of modernization into the catalysts of the reflexive decision-making process.

### **Challenges to Legitimacy**

According to Beck, the four effects of modernization outlined above produce five key side-effects: globalization, individualization, the transformation of gender roles, under- (or flexible) employment, and the perception of ‘global risks’ (primarily ecological). (ibid. : 6-7; Beck and Lau, 2005: 526) These unintended consequences

produce fundamental challenges to legitimacy. For example, in the public sphere, where unacceptable outcomes are seen to have been produced by the normal operation of modern institutions — that is, the result of acts which were promoted by (or acceptable to) the existing industrial, technical, legislative or regulatory practices — the result is not only contested boundaries of knowledge, but a fundamental challenge to how knowledge is produced, and decisions made:

The institutionalized answers of first modern society to its self-produced problems – for example, more and better technology, more economic growth, more scientific research and more specialization – are less persuasive than they once were, although it is not at all clear what should take their place. (Beck et al, 2003: 7)

However, because of the perceived inadequacies of the proposed institutional solutions — more of the same — and the challenge to the boundaries of relevant and accepted knowledge, credence is given to a broad set of positions and sources that were previously marginalized. (Beck et al, 2003: 20) Within the food system, evidence of this can be seen in the growing popularity of ‘organic’, a challenge that has forced adaptations within — and is now being promoted by — the industrial agriculture structure.

As a result of such challenges, “turbulence is caused by public discourse, that is, by the political arguments of collective actors that include consumers, the mass media and new social movements.” (Beck et al, 2003: 15) This politicization of effects is driven by another defining feature of reflexive modernization:

“a recognition of the imperative to decide”. (Beck and Lau, 2005: 531) That is, just as this transformation of public discourse challenges accepted boundaries and knowledge, producing uncertainty and ambiguity, it simultaneously demands the re-establishment of boundaries from within ambiguity and uncertainty, as these boundaries are necessary to guide actions, provide legitimacy, and assign responsibility.

Because boundaries are themselves negotiated balances of choices and priorities, the tendency towards stasis — produced by accepted boundaries — is constantly challenged within reflexive modernization. That is, the same process that produces boundaries and stability also produces the dynamism and impetus for change that challenges boundaries and stability.

### **Uncertainty vs. Stability: Boundaries in Reflexivity**

In reflexive modern society, ...there is not a limited array of already available options. Instead, the boundaries have to be created along with the decisions. The more various and divergent the recognized and accepted justifications for inclusion or exclusion are, the more they take on an 'as-if' character – the more they become fictive boundaries that are understood as such but which are handled as if they were true under the circumstances at hand. (Beck et al, 2003: 20)

The reality of reflexive modernization, where “every given is in fact a choice” (ibid: 16) means that, in effect, the freedom implied in the increasing ability to choose is mediated by uncertainty, and uncertainty by freedom. This conceptualization raises interesting suggestions about early adopters of local food, the ‘bell-wethers’ of the *local*. They must be willing to challenge the stability provided by personally or generally accepted boundaries. As well, the process attached to their re-created boundaries should give insight into the motivation behind their changes in food choices.

At the same time, however, it is important not to underestimate or under-value the influences of conservatism — including the desire for stability — as motivation. Not only do boundaries and knowledge often remain unchallenged in the face of alternatives, those that are challenged demand resolution and re-establishment, as they enable and mediate identity-formation and decision-making, and re-establish stability.

Because boundaries serve as both structure (internal and external) and reflex (as a short-hand in decision-making), the individual must adapt to living with uncertainty by re-establishing boundaries based on a different prioritization of concepts involved in the decision-making process: it's not all uncertainty, all the time, as Beck himself often acknowledges. (Beck and Lau, 2005: 537; Beck and Willms, 2004: 67-68)<sup>17</sup> By re-prioritizing the conceptual constructs which underlie their boundaries, the individual can re-establish stability without 'fictive boundaries', and without constantly challenging those boundaries which provide the basis of identity, stability and consistency within their life.

The choice to accept specific boundaries may be prompted by the need to make decisions in uncertainty; this does not result in a society of individuals plagued by ambiguity. Where a risk is seen to be minimal, uncontrollable, or irresolvable, it is left to fate, and boundaries for any decisions touched by this risk are determined by prioritizing other conceptions. (See e.g. Giddens, 1991: 183)

Perhaps this is what Parsons meant when he suggested that;

... the capacity of human beings to cope with uncertainty and ambiguity was systematically increasing during the course of evolution and that in modern societies in particular it was becoming increasing (sic) possible to make 'uncertainty' disappear, that is, to transform uncertainty into certainty, ambiguity into clarity and chaos into planning. (Beck and Lau, 2005: 537)

That is, this process of reflexive decisionism, whereby necessity forces choices within uncertainty, results less frequently in individual choices that are based on boundaries

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<sup>17</sup> In Beck's defence, the "recognition of plurality and ambiguity" that he deems "essential for the transition to second modernity" is often presented as institutional, rather than individual. (See e.g. Beck and Lau: 535-536)

recognized as artificial yet legitimate, and more often on boundaries that de-prioritize — or ignore completely — the uncertain or irresolvable.

### **Food Choices in Reflexivity**

Is the consumer simply a victim of false consciousness, in which organic dairy companies fool them with visions of happy cows, saved farms, and neighborly communities? Not necessarily. The consumer is evaluating claims and acting on these claims every time they reach for a milk carton or bottle at the store. (DuPuis, 2000: 293)

Consumers establish boundaries within which their food choices are made — we all do it. However, seldom would one find a consumer who is ‘evaluating claims’ every time they act. Rather, most of us use evaluations to establish boundaries that guide our future actions and choices. That is, the second time we reach for the milk carton, it is a reflex based on sets of choices which determine, and are determined by, our boundaries.

But we throw new information — when we encounter it — at the boundaries, to see what bounces off, what sticks, or what breaks. Of course, we establish boundaries around information-gathering and assessment, as well. With which concepts do we challenge new information? How often? Which sources? How skeptical? This helps us to define our self-identity (curious or content?), as well as the identities of others, but also delimits how often we are likely to encounter information that challenges our boundaries.

At the same time, we face different challenges through social experiences; in our history (which helped to build the framework of our boundaries); and in our day-to-day lives (which contest or reinforce those boundaries). Where Beck sees a difference in reflexive modernity is the frequency and nature of those new challenges to our boundaries. If our job, education, or exposure to media brings us into daily contact with

information that at least causes us to actively defend our boundaries, we are more likely to have encountered contradictory information, and/or information that caused us to alter our boundaries. Both produce further effects.

Contradictory information causes us to more actively *challenge* information, which in turn has the effect of making information eminently contestable. The experience of altering boundaries may make us more susceptible to questioning other boundaries in our life, having implications for tradition, social institutions, gender roles, etc. Alternatively, it could also have the effect of reinforcing the negative consequences of challenging boundaries, making us more likely to curtail information-gathering, and less likely to entertain concepts that challenge our boundaries.

Making the same choices, based on the same criteria, provides comfort and stability. Contradictory information is more likely to force the active questioning of *a source*, or a type of information, than the challenge of *all* information or sources. That is, we are just as likely to react to information that contests pre-established conceits by strengthening or shifting boundaries around whom to trust as source or what to believe as information.

### **Felt Risk Equality**

For Beck, the challenge to boundaries from the interaction of knowledge, individualization and legitimacy goes hand-in-hand with another fundamental outcome of modernity: new, transnational, trans-cultural forms of risk.

By their very nature, the various poisons that course through the air and the water and the ground cannot be spatially confined. For that reason, neither can ascriptions of ultimate responsibility, nor of their ultimate effects. (Beck and Willms, 2004: 115)

That is, while these risks — for example, risks attendant with the environmental effects of industrial agriculture — existed previously, and potential dangers were voiced, these voices were marginalized by technical assurances of safety. (Guthman, 2004: 4-9)

Also ‘new’ to these risks is their acceptance as criteria for decision-making. Evidence of the latter on a trans-national scale has been more prevalent in Europe, where the impacts of the Chernobyl nuclear plant explosion and Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) contributed to the decision to use the precautionary principle in banning Genetically Modified food. Isolation from the impacts of these risks in North America meant that, while policy decisions including such criteria were being taken (Montreal Protocol, Kyoto), they weren’t being taken *seriously*, until the direct, dramatic impacts of September 11, 2001. Perhaps for this reason, the discourse around ‘risk’ in North America has usually been attached to security and conflict, rather than ambiguous or unknowable environmental effects. This proportion is changing, with the increased public debate over policies to address the potential outcomes of climate change.

Change in the perception of the nature of risks impacts the process and outcomes of debate, the establishment of legitimacy, and the resolution of the political decision-making process:

...risks are not things. They are social constructs. They are perceived and established through social mediation: through knowledge; through publicity; through the participation of experts and counter-experts; through the ascription and establishment of causality; through the division and distribution of costs; and through the assignment and acceptance of responsibility. (Beck and Willms, 2004: 136)

The same instruments which were developed during the first modernity to assign responsibility and accountability and costs ...lead under the conditions of globalized risks to exactly the opposite result, to a kind of *organized irresponsibility*. (ibid: 134, emphasis theirs)

The inability or impossibility of assigning responsibility for ‘qualitatively different’ risks forces an individualization of risk-bearing which is reinforced by the fact that it is part of a larger pattern of responsibility-downloading. Taken together, the withdrawal of the state from previously ascribed roles, the flexibilization of labour, and the individual creation (rather than acceptance) of social and family roles, has led to “...new forms of boundary management, in which people set boundaries in a flexible and pragmatic way with regard to the family, friendship networks, working hours and individualization within couple relationships...” (Beck and Lau, 2005: 530) This in turn impacts conceptions of risk and agency, producing unintended effects.

### **Reflexive Individualization**

The individualization of risk-bearing forces the individualization of the decision-making process, within which risk is incorporated. The calculation upon which these decisions are based is also thereby individualized. The point here is not the fragmentation of the social decision-making process, but rather the fact that control over the inputs — the information, the acknowledgement of ‘experts’, and the definition of acceptable dangers — as well as responsibility for the decision, is now within the hands of the individual consumer. By assuming responsibility for risk-bearing, the individual also assumes agency: the power to act purposefully — a power that previously resided with the institutions responsible for establishing social boundaries of risk. This has implications for the potential rise of sub-politics, including increased consciousness of the personal political and the politics of place, of particular relevance to consumer interaction with local food. That is not to suggest that a sudden and catastrophic collapse of legitimacy will sweep through the entire industrial agriculture production and

distribution chain. However, individual events which challenge the legitimacy of that system are more widely felt, and more difficult to contain.<sup>18</sup> And the general unease of the consumer rises each time such a reminder brings risk to light.

In research on the reactions of the public to food risk messages, Kutttschreuter found that:

people generally trust the safety of their food, ...regard incidents as accidental in nature, [and] feel that enough is being done to prevent accidents... Yet they worry more than before and most agree food manufacturers should be even more careful. ...

Contrary to our expectation, risk perception was not significantly determined by coping perception. (2006: 1054-5)

This seems to echo a point that both Beck and Giddens make: this new form of risk — global, unknowable and potentially catastrophic — exists as a subtext in daily decision-making. (e.g. Giddens, 1991: 185) This means that a subliminal anxiety could lie in wait for activation with any change in conceptual interpretation. “It is these new kinds of risk, combined with the snowball and contagion effects that derive from their dramatization, that are pushing through a tendency towards felt risk equality.”(Beck and Willms, 2004: 130)

How the individual consumer will react to risk assessment is now less predictable; boundaries that prescribe choice in interaction with risk may be less stable, and the conceptualization of risk may be more open to social influence. However, as a result, individuals may be more driven to act, to change, to strengthen these unstable boundaries. Because of the individualization of risk-bearing and responsibility, they may also feel that agency — the power to act, and achieve this purpose — is now more within their control.

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<sup>18</sup> See esp. Beck’s analysis of BSE, in Beck and Willms, 2004: 121-129.

The individualization of decision-making is not only the result of the downloading of responsibility to the individual. Challenges to the existing decision-making processes also drive individualization. Within reflexive modernization, broader social boundaries — over accepted knowledge and knowledge sources, as well as decision-making processes — are challenged by a growing recognition that the promised solutions to problems are not coming, or continually deferred; that negative consequences (and unanticipated effects) are increasing; that previously marginalized challenges to knowledge have validity and present alternative solutions, and; that sources of knowledge previously relied upon are providing contradictory or ambiguous information. (Beck and Lau, 2005)

Such systemic challenges — as described earlier in the global industrial agriculture structure — also lead the consumer to take on the selection of their own boundaries, in search of legitimacy, effective solutions, or achievable goals. Diversity of motivations could lead individuals to adopt either a goal-driven or relativistic stance: choosing what is right, or choosing what is right *for them*. (Beck and Lau, 2005: 553)

### **Individualization and Agency**

But what are the implications from this individualization of decision-making? Is this the continuation of the neo-liberal project, inevitably leading to an egoistic society, where responsibility for regulation devolves to the individual? (Guthman, 2007) To answer this, we need to understand the trickle-down effects of this individualization. In a system where the individual accepts responsibility for establishing their own boundaries, and making decisions that have to be made daily — regarding their family's security, for instance — consumers are not likely to accept the same processes, the same inadequacies that led to, or resulted from, their loss of agency in the first place. That is, this

individualization of decision-making could lead to policy changes that would never have occurred within the previous system, as such changes would have been seen as irrelevant to the process. Transparent labeling on food, for instance, would have served no purpose to a regulatory structure where the product was determined to be ‘safe’ before it hit the store shelf.<sup>19</sup> Consumer demand for the tools to make a fully informed decision has played a significant role in the development of food labeling.

Despite individualistic discourse, or perceptions of the atomizing effects of individualization, it must be remembered that devolution of responsibility to the individual simultaneously devolves agency, which may or may not be enacted individualistically: by and large, individuals still interact, still problem solve, still plan and enact and enforce *socially*. That is, the most egoistically motivated decision not only has impacts beyond the individual (see e.g. Beck and Willms, 2004: 75); it may lead to collective action. For Beck, the primary implication of the individualization of such reflexive decisions is that they must be treated as purposeful, as the result of the exercise of agency:

...the pre-given intermeshing of role sets is replaced by a much more fluid situation wherein nothing is pre-given and everything has to be negotiated. This is what it means to say that individualization is the social structure of the second modernity. ... We have to examine how fluid life patterns interact with the nature of identity and consciousness. Under these conditions, individual agency now assumes a central place, one that was only talked about before. Individual action can no longer be treated as the resultant of group pressures... [or] the residue of social attributes. (Beck and Willms, 2004: 64-65)

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<sup>19</sup> Labeling is an interesting example, involving a complex interaction of forces — from marketing to food scares — that have, over the years, pulled and prodded processors and regulators to adapt the information delivered to consumers. But there can be no doubt that, had individualization of responsibility not been one of these forces, food containing genetically modified material — the product of biotechnology — would not have faced mandatory labeling in Europe.

However, recognizing the manifestation of 'agency' within this 'individualization' becomes complex. Agency is a construct and, as such, open to interpretation and alteration. As stated previously, how an individual conceptualizes and approaches agency (i.e. teleological or relativistic), may be influenced by established boundaries that frame social inter-relationships — as autonomous or co-operative, for example. While an individual may have identified certain goals through her own conceptualization and prioritization, if her preferred path to those goals is collective, co-operative action, she may eschew individualistic actions widely adopted, or expected, by others.

It will be important to distinguish the nature of the agency expected and sought through changed choices. Is agency seen by the consumer as individualistic, or socially produced? That is, does the consumer expect their own actions to produce effect, or be pointless without simultaneous, broader or collective actions?

This reading of reflexive individualization suggests that it is not enough to say that, because the individual has formed their own boundaries, the choices that result represent the individualization of agency. At the same time, irrespective of the preferred approach, the individual who assumes or is forced into the responsibility for decision-making, may find agency exists simply in the power to make these decisions.

### Consuming Agency

*Since the time when we sold our vote to no man, we have abdicated our duties;  
for the people, who once controlled military authority,  
political power, legions — everything,  
now is itself controlled, and anxiously hopes for just two things:  
Bread and circuses*  
Juvenal (Satires 10. 77-81)

While loss of agency could be seen as the result of the abdication of duties and responsibilities, agency could also be understood as marginalized by the process of modernization. The institutional and social processes of modernity that were expected to deliver agency to the individual — increased political access, increased general prosperity, and emancipation from traditional and social roles — have often fallen short of the expectations of the engaged citizen, or have led instead to either the power to act with uncertainty, or the power to consume. The relative deprivation — or imagined absence — produced by falling short of expectation can be a powerful motivation for change. Increased polarization in politics (combative as opposed to consensual) and the general perception of ineffectiveness, has led to widespread dissatisfaction — a ‘crisis of democracy’. For many, the necessities of individual decision-making in day-to-day life has produced an increased understanding that consensus — without agreement over claims to truth or knowledge — is a necessary part of social boundary formation within reflexive modernization. (Beck et al, 2003: 17)

Disillusionment can be seen in the growth of ‘sub-politics’, or political action outside of institutional politics. Sub-politics can be identified in acts as diverse as social fora, pride parades, protests (peace, pro-life, landowners associations), or volunteerism (Knights of Columbus, PETA, community gardens). Each of these examples can be seen to provide agency — the power to act purposefully — to the participants.

As such, individual consumer action that intends broader social change qualifies as 'sub-politics'. But can the goals of an active consumer be reached through the isolated actions of individuals? Delind, talking specifically of CSAs, suggests that "a highly individualized or personalized resistance — a resistance primarily of consumers" is insufficient. (1999: 8) Speaking more generally, Gabriel and Lang state that consumer action without "any wider notion of social solidarity, civic debate, co-ordinated action or sacrifice ...can easily degenerate into tokenism and is hardly likely to alter the politics of consumption." (1995: 182) This analysis would suggest that consumers who hope or *believe* that they are acting as "part of a larger collective group of concerned consumers", (Shaw et al, 2006: 1055) are unlikely to achieve their goal. Of course, this would also suggest that what will 'alter the politics of consumption' is a known, or knowable entity. And also that a broadly-based consumer mobilization, and 'civic debate', is more likely to result from actions represented as 'outside of consumption', as we know it, than the actions of 'other consumers'. Whether these assumptions have merit, or conflate goal with process, this debate speaks to the difficulty of assessing the sub-political agency of a consumer.

But what of the consumer accessing agency as an end? At the risk of sounding flippant, the answer to why a consumer acts purposefully may be 'because they can'. That is, a consumer may access agency not 'to alter the politics of consumption', but to control decisions and outcomes for herself and her family. (DuPuis, 2000: 291) This choice, if it is indeed sub-political, can only have broader social impact as a 'demonstration-effect': as symbolic consumption that acts as an educational tool both to

show other consumers *how* it can be done, but also *that* it can be done. But it may have already served a different purpose for the consumer.

### **Choosing Agency**

Beck talks of the internalization of externalities into the decision-making process as a major factor in reflexivity. If we understand agency as an externality — that is, as marginalized by the process of modernity — a consumer's exercise of control over a significant decision takes on new meaning. The choice between two brands of chocolate biscuits is significantly different from the choice to control the impacts — or potential impacts — of food on yourself and your family. The globalized food structure has substituted variety for choice. For instance, global access to different cultural food experiences provides the consumer with variety, but not an attachment to place. The uniformity of the industrialized food experience, the sameness that prompts an exodus to variety, creeps into the variety itself; rather than consuming a cultural experience, we end up consuming an image separated not only from place, but from any connection to place, and re-interpreted through ingredients provided by this same global food system. At the same time, this variety provides an alternative to neither connection nor choice.

Food localism is part of a reaction to a larger absence, a process which Giddens (1991: 17) has called 'disembedding': the dislocation, the 'lifting out' of the individual from *situation*, and all that implies. For 'situatedness' provides not merely attachment to physical 'place', but to the relations embedded in that place, as well as their unique expression due to local geography, climate and the historical process of local social development: through this attachment, situatedness provides 'belonging'.

### **The Marginalization of Boundary Concepts: Making Imagined Absences**

Equally important is the notion that, in the process of marginalizing situatedness, its conceptualization — and any connection to real practice, or lived experience — is also marginalized. As such, when the challenges of reflexive modernity raise dissatisfactions to the sophisticated, modern food consumer, the relative deprivation — the imagined absence of ‘situatedness’ — can only be measured against an ideal created by memory or imagination: an historiography of connection, rootedness, tradition, aesthetic; an icon of the *local*, a *gemeinschaft*, a talisman.

This ideal is likely to incorporate all of those interconnected concepts which the consumer senses as imagined absences: missing from their experience, but essential to the creation and maintenance of boundaries relating to food choice, identity, and stability. These concepts — marginalized within the processes of both modern food consumption and modernization more broadly — include not only *situatedness*, but also *quality*, *trust*, *responsibility*, *security*, and *agency*. That is, the concept of ‘trust’ within the conventional food system has been stripped of meaning; trust must be taken on faith by the consumer, in a system that does not allow them to develop relationships that might encourage the granting of trust based on faith — faith in the responsibility, ethical principles, situated acts or transparency of the other party. As a result, the consumer must rely on a trust ‘informed’ by blind faith, rather than based on the experience of positive relationships. This marginalization of trust (as with situatedness, responsibility, etc.) reflects patterns seen within the modernization of social relations more generally, and will not be seen as unusual by the consumer. However, given reason to re-define their understanding of these

concepts, the re-conceptualization is likely to include components that the consumer identifies as missing from their current experience.

Each of these boundary concepts, as with the example of situatedness, above, could play a significant role in re-defining 'local food'. The 'ideal' envisioned by the consumer will incorporate not only a renegotiation of the interpretations of these concepts as they relate to food consumption, but also a renegotiation of the priority assigned to each of these concepts within food choice boundaries. This ideal might include, for example: the interpretation of 'quality' based on authenticity rather than aesthetic; the interpretation of 'security' based on precaution rather than fortune; the interpretation of 'trust' based on active rather than virtual confidence, or; the interpretation of 'responsibility' as social accountability for the processes and effects of food production.

Each interpretation has the potential to dramatically change consumers' food boundaries; to address dissatisfaction, imagined absences and externalities produced by the global food system, and; in the right circumstances, to initiate public debate. From this, it could also be suggested that local food consumers, as 'bell-wethers' of the current 'turn to the *local*', are uniquely positioned to determine what the *local is* — in effect, to re-define the discourse surrounding the re-conceptualization of the *local*. That is, by making local food choices, while embedded in urban realities and relationships, these bell-wethers not only raise challenges that may cause other consumers to reflect, re-conceptualize and re-prioritize, but also, by their choices, could potentially play a significant role in defining 'local food'.

The full effects of the integration of individualization, imagined absences, and the re-conceptualization of the *local*, have yet to be made clear. Their potential suggests that

these effects — for example, the development of ‘thick’ trust or responsibility, based on personal relationships — could prove to be the essential elements of an incorruptible alternative that can neither be appropriated, nor substituted by the industrial food system.

However, we must first identify, if possible: whether local food consumers perceive that their food choices have been affected by the concepts identified as marginalized by the current global industrial food structure; which concepts they prioritize; how their vision of the *local* is informed by this prioritization, and; whether their understanding or prioritization of key concepts relating to food choice have altered in interaction with the *local*.

## *Methodology*

### **Looking for Truth(iness)**

I was aware from the outset that my task involved not simply telling the truth of this world, as can be uncovered by objectivist methods of observation, but also showing that this world is the site of an ongoing struggle to tell the truth of this world. (Bourdieu, in Wacquant, 1989: 34)

Dissatisfaction with assumptions made about local food consumers was a driving force behind this research. Determination not to restrict participants to conveying their truth through predetermined or imposed categories — but rather, to allow them to express their own truths, in their own ways — directed the form of the research. That is, dissatisfaction with the ability of survey-style research to capture conceptual complexities — the interactions of consumers' interpretations with context, mediated by boundaries and prioritization, within local food choices — demanded qualitative research methods.

This conceptual complexity would also demand participant historiography: boundaries and conceptual interpretations are formed and re-formed over a lifetime of experience, re-negotiation, and re-prioritization. It was decided that one-on-one interviews, as opposed to focus group discussions, would encourage the participants to more freely reflect on this personal process, and specifically on changes in their conceptual interpretations. However, such historiography is one of many potential “limitations of self-reporting and/or post-rationalization.” (Hobson, 2006: 297-8) Encouraging the participant to interpret their history, the development of their identity, conceptual sensibilities and boundaries, from multiple perspectives and choices —

looking carefully at process, rather than endpoint — might help them to uncover changing priorities and motivations as opposed to post-hoc rationalizations.

### **Looking for Key Concepts**

Once again, the object of the research was to determine why consumers make specific food choices and, as important, why such choices change. All choices are based on the interplay and prioritization of concepts, the formation of boundaries, and the impact of experience and information in a reflective process. As such, the research was intended to get a sense of this prioritization and the process whereby changes occur, as they relate to local food choices. For this, it was necessary to raise — to the participants — the concepts identified as both important to food choice, and marginalized by the global industrial food system: *quality, agency, trust, situatedness, security, and responsibility.*

At the same time, it was important to give the participants opportunities to describe their context, history, their relationships, and their general situation in their own way, so that their truths, their other priorities could surface naturally, be made clear, and be measured against food choice decisions and other conceptual priorities.

In order to facilitate natural, unfettered recollections, participant comfort in the interview was placed as a high priority. Each chose the location of the interview — from their home or office, to the local coffee shop — and, as much as possible, a time that would allow them flexibility to elaborate during the interview, while minimizing the effect on the rest of their schedule.

While attempting to allow the members freedom to describe themselves and their ‘travels’ to and through CSA, certain terms were also, of necessity, brought forward for

reflection, including ‘community’, food preferences’, and ‘local food’. The intent was to frame (rather than guide or steer) their discussion of these concepts in a context of reflection involving other choices, life experiences, the interpretation of information, and conceptual boundaries. For example, while I asked for separate interpretations of what ‘community’ and ‘local food’ meant, I did not specifically ask consumers to reconcile their concepts of *local* and *community*. Some made this connection or distinction immediately; others were prompted when I later asked whether they felt that it was important that their food choices ‘support *the local community*’.

It was also important to raise these ideas so that interaction with more general observations of CSA involvement might trigger spontaneous connections, boundary negotiations, and deeper insights that might otherwise have gone unremembered or unspoken. This speaks to the fine line between building a framework to encourage reflection, and guiding the interpretations of the participants. It also speaks to the complexity of interpreting motivation based on consumer conceptualizations.

For instance, ‘quality’ and ‘value’ are consistently mentioned as a strong ‘motivation’ for CSA involvement. (See, e.g. Henson and Reardon, 2005; Loughridge, 2002; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Furst et al, 1996) Yet clearly both ‘quality’ and ‘value’ are concepts and, in order to provide the basis for motivation, and establishing decision-making boundaries, must be based on pre-conceptions: at most, only the visual and tactile aesthetics of the actual product are known before the choice is made! Therefore, one of the jobs of research into consumer motivations must be to uncover the bases for these pre-conceptions: that is, which other concepts that have informed these notions of ‘quality’ and ‘value’, or — similar to the notion of distrust mentioned earlier — whether

pre-conceptions reflect a dissatisfaction with the notion of ‘quality’ as presented (and perceived) within the conventional food system. This research must also attempt to untangle whether ‘quality’ and ‘value’ contain, are comprised of, or simply bump into, concepts like ‘taste’, ‘flavour’, ‘nutrition’, ‘affordability’, ‘security’, and ‘trust’, and; how all of these relate to ‘local food’.

Many of these connections and distinctions must, however, be made in the interpretation rather than in discussion: aggressively pursuing connections could guide the participant to identify links that were not actually significant in the initial prioritization — only in the re-telling. Such guiding might also cause the participant to overlook other concepts or context that was relevant and prioritized at the time. In order to situate their food choices within a realistic framework of decision-making, it was also necessary to gain a broader picture of the consumer’s life, and raise, if possible, other potential factors, other priorities in their lives as comparison, and for discussion, including: time commitments, background, life experiences, self-identity, information, as well as approaches to understanding — relativistic or absolute, for instance.

This ever-changing dynamic could lead to changes in both priorities and actions. It would be important to be prepared for signals of change in the description: when one or more of a participant’s described concepts no longer matches their perceived reality, expectations, or aspirations; or when the basis for a choice is shown to be flawed, or inappropriate, leading to unfavourable outcomes such as unacceptable risk or inconvenience, unpalatable disappointment, or guilt. The descriptions could take on many forms, including: when a time commitment involved in an activity exceeds the perceived

value received; or when the participant perceives that their choices or actions are incompatible with their self-identity, with who they thought or hoped they were.

### **CSA Members as Local Food Bell-wethers**

Of the list of potential subjects (including those who purchased from farmers' markets, roadside stands or u-pick), CSA members stood out as the most practical pool to interview in the local off-season, mainly since their producers provided concentrated contact points. Just Food, the Food Security group at the Social Planning Council of Ottawa, provided a list of 'CSA' — and 'food box' — producers, stating "Food Box programs are a variation of the CSA structure":

Give them a call, find out about the way they run their CSA OR foodbox program, and sign up for great veggies all season long! From our understanding all of these farms use ecological, organic or biodynamic farming principles. Some farms sell all their own vegetables and some supplement with food from other farms or from elsewhere. Different programs suit different people – Find the one that works for you! (Just Food website)

I came to this project with no preconceptions of what a CSA meant: my wife and I live in rural Ottawa, and produce our own food (in season), and we had never had contact with anyone who was either a CSA member or producer. My initial sense — from bumping into the term over the course of time — was that CSA was a method of direct-sourcing food from a producer — most often vegetables, received in the form of a food basket. Essentially, CSAs were a direct-from-producer alternative to farmers' markets.

As mentioned earlier, research into the history and diversity of CSAs showed a wide variability in practice, "with the philosophically committed CSA at one end of the spectrum ...and the commercially-oriented subscription farm at the other." (Reynolds, 2000:1) How this variability was interpreted also showed diversity:

From an institutional perspective, this diversity is a good thing, as it allows consumers to place themselves at the appropriate place on a spectrum of commitment, from the sustainability activist to the less reflective eater. Moreover, this flexibility allows the CSA model to accommodate to regional and cultural diversity. (Reynolds, 2000:1)

Rhetoric aside, as I read accounts of today's working CSAs, few are really sharing the burdens of food production or the embodied experience, but are providing a pleasant and thoroughly necessary brand of subscription farming. If ... we attended diligently to member comfort and convenience – if we established drop off sites, hired “real” farmers, grew lovelier vegetables and threw nicer parties – if, in other words, we didn't push an already food conscious and environmentally sensitive membership to move beyond their private concerns and actually engage them in new interdependencies, into a more organic existence, where would community come from? (DeLind, 1999: 6,8)

Looking at local CSAs showed that what some called ‘essential elements’ of CSA — particularly participation and community-building — would be problematic, given the distances involved. Most were not located in the ‘City of Ottawa’, and the size and rural character of the city meant that almost all consumers would require a substantial day-trip to visit ‘their’ farmer.<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, all local CSAs offered delivery, some even *home-delivery*. These local variations in form appeared to be practical accommodations to allow such rural/urban CSAs to function.

However, the form of the CSA was less important to this research than the conceptual motivations of the consumers, and it was not clear that the latter are dissimilar from one end of the CSA spectrum to the other:

The CSA and the subscription farm are both examples of a new way of marketing and distributing farm products that I call the connection channel. In the connection channel, farm-direct products and farm brand identity come together to create in the mind of the consumer a connection to the land, reinforced through physical contact with the farm. The extent of the physical contact is a matter of consumer preference and CSA philosophy. (Reynolds, 2000: 1)

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<sup>20</sup> See below, “The Participants and the Local”.

Given that the point of the research was to uncover motivations behind local food choices (and not to determine ‘what is a CSA?’) it made sense to sample as broad a range of local CSA consumers as possible, and allow any distinctions in services, approach or outcomes to arise through their own words.

### **Bell-wethers and Boundaries**

As early adopters of local food, these CSA members might be assumed to have the qualities of innovators, (West and Larue, 2004) including a sense of agency or broadened responsibility. The origins of these concepts would require careful scrutiny: self-identification as ‘innovator’ is another of the limits of self-reporting mentioned earlier. Another possibility is that the seeking behaviour of bell-wethers may be motivated by a perceived absence generated by uncertainties or outcomes not directly related to food choices — lack of agency, situatedness or security could be the result of the broader impacts of reflexive modernization, as outlined above.

Also, unlike the early adopters of technical innovations, some of the bell-wethers of local food may actually be motivated by ‘tradition’ or scepticism of technological solutions. In fact, ‘innovation’ in local food may take widely different forms depending on how the CSA member forms food-choice boundaries — that is, how the individual conceptualizes and prioritizes:

- their role as a bell-wether (agency) — as symbolic vs. active, collective vs. individualistic, seeking progress vs. seeking achievement;
- their relationship to the *local*, and their farmer (situatedness) — as imagined vs. familiar, hermeneutic vs. vernacular;
- their relationship to food *as food* (quality) — as aesthetic vs. authentic vs. sensual;

- their relationship to other actors in their food network (trust) — as virtual vs. active, assumed vs. critical vs. skeptical;
- the threat from systemic risks (security) — as a function of fortune vs. protection, anxiety vs. fatalism, and;
- their relationship to broader society (responsibility) — as proximal vs. extended.

This brief outline exposes three important additive characteristics of boundary formation that also affect food choices: *interaction*, *engagement*, and *relativism*.

1) Boundary concepts are interactive, each potentially affecting the interpretation and prioritization of the other: an interpretation of agency as involving collective acts can both influence and be influenced by the nature of the responsibility accepted (i.e. extending beyond the individual); in turn, both will influence the perception of situatedness. (i.e. ‘mother’, ‘environmentalist’, ‘citizen’)

2) These boundary concepts can each be interpreted on a spectrum of engagement. Where the individual’s conceptualization falls on that spectrum will affect their prioritization of that concept, and its subsequent role in boundary formation and decision-making, as well as the role of other concepts with which it interacts. The adoption of ‘assumed trust’ — the disengaged, uncritical acceptance of trust — will lead the individual to minimize the perception of threat or risk; in fact, it could be suggested that such (false) security is one of the purposes of accepting ‘assumed trust’. As a result, the influence of both trust and security on boundaries and choices will also be diminished. Also, as mentioned earlier, imagined absences influence engagement with boundary concepts, and may be expressed as either dissatisfaction with existing outcomes, or the adoption of an ideal vision of the challenged concept.

3) The relativism of boundary concepts but also, and more importantly, the *societal acknowledgement* of the existence of this relativism, creates new obstacles and possibilities for the re-negotiation of boundaries. Whether the local food consumer engages with these boundary concepts as certain or uncertain, ambiguous or absolute, affects not only their approach to the social re-negotiation of boundaries, but also the stability of their boundaries, and the nature of information or experience that will challenge those boundaries. Does acknowledging relativism make all knowledge contestable, all choices ambiguous or uncertain? Is relativism compartmentalized, applied only to boundaries that face specific challenges to their legitimacy? Or is relativism seen as a mistake, the product of lack of rigor, an inability or unwillingness to make difficult decisions, to distinguish right from wrong, truth from falsehood?

### **Looking for Boundary Re-negotiations**

The re-negotiation of boundaries can result in what Beck calls ‘reflexive decisionism’ — the need to establish boundaries and make choices, even in the midst of uncertainty and ambiguity, because these decisions are necessary to daily existence. (Beck and Willms, 2004:27-28) Irrespective of whether the individual acknowledges challenges from — or even the existence of — relativism, they may be forced to re-negotiate boundaries involved with social decision-making, given a general acknowledgement. The outcome of the re-negotiation of concepts and boundaries depends on the individual’s interpretation of the extent of the challenge to knowledge, legitimacy, and certainty, as well as the method of re-negotiation employed to overcome these challenges. Failure to understand both the extent of the challenge, and the method

of re-negotiation, might lead to confusion when interpreting similar outcomes produced by dissimilar choices.

For example, both relativism and certainty could lead the consumer to seek agency and situatedness with like-minded others, to reinforce weak or threatened boundaries. Similarly, both intolerance and tolerance of diverse conceptual interpretations may — with relativism — lead to the rejection of alternative depictions: for the intolerant, because they know that their interpretation is right, and; for the tolerant, who must now be their own expert, because they know that their interpretation is right *for them*. But are the resulting boundaries, and the choices they produce, seen as traditional, flexible, provisional or reflexive?<sup>21</sup> Are they simply the old boundaries, re-imposed: as traditional; to re-create an imagined social stability, or; because the alternative could lead to unknowable consequences? Are the new boundaries the result of social negotiation? If so, were they produced by imposition, unanimity, compromise, or consensus?

In order to understand changes in interpretation, engagement and prioritization of boundary concepts, it would be important to encourage the consumers to reflect on how and when they re-negotiated concepts and boundaries relating to local food choices, while looking for evidence of:

1. the level of conceptual engagement;
2. dissatisfaction or idealized alternative conceptualizations;
3. the interaction of boundary concepts;
4. the influence of relativism and certainty in conceptual and boundary re-negotiations, and;
5. competition from priorities not directly related to food choice, as mediated by opportunities and limits.

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<sup>21</sup> See esp. Beck and Lau on the institutional re-negotiation of boundaries. (2005: 533-549)

## *The Interview Framework*

### **Background**

The initial set of questions would attempt to flesh out the respondent's background — family history, enduring cultural and experiential influences, competing priorities — as well as their interpretation of some key concepts and boundaries, including “community”, and ‘food preferences’. The intent of this section was to encourage the participants to establish boundaries and frame their approach to concepts and boundaries as rigid, adaptive, reflexive, or aspirational. The hope was, that the consumer might pick up their identity and turn it around a few times, looking at it from new perspectives.

1. Would you describe your family as rural or urban?

(Is this because of where you live, your family history, or your lifestyle?)

The first question allowed the participant a first chance to show identity, while offering them an opportunity to reflect on which components frame their situatedness. As an ice-breaker, this question could be answered quickly if the consumer wished, but might give an idea of their comfort with (or preference for) complexity in establishing boundaries.

1. a) Do you have any family (or other) rural ties?

This follow-up was inserted — when necessary — to go beyond a strictly spatial interpretation in the first answer. This question sought any major, minor or lingering influences on identity, especially cultural. Also, this provided a pause between the ‘rural/urban’ and ‘community’ questions, to lessen the chance that their framing or interpretation (i.e. spatial) of 1 might lead to the same for 2.

2. What does the term “community” mean to you?

(How do you identify ‘your community’?)

b. Would you describe yourself as active within your community?

This was a double-barrelled question with the primary intent of establishing a picture of how the consumer situated themselves in social context. But also which concepts were prioritized in the selection of ‘community’; the level of social interaction and engagement exhibited by this prioritization; whether the boundaries formed by conceptual prioritization related directly to local food choices, and; whether these boundaries were linked to agency, through political or sub-political motivations.

3. Could you tell me something about your food preferences?

This question attempted to get a better sense of how identity (as illustrated in the previous responses) intersected with conceptual interpretations and prioritization related to food. This picture, built around the participant’s conceptualization of ‘quality’, will clarify how previous experience informed or altered food choices, as well as how local food interacted with those boundaries and priorities.

### **Association**

The purpose of the following association exercise was to indicate the participant’s level of engagement with food questions; which information had been accessed; where that information came from, and; whether it had altered — or been altered by — their boundaries.

4. I’m going to mention several terms, and I’d like you to tell me anything that comes to mind: (not a definition, but any association this brings up)

“food miles”

This term, gaining prominence in Canada with the recent publication and media exposure of The 100-Mile Diet<sup>22</sup>, was intended to provoke reflection on the complex interaction of the *local* with a variety of factors including the global industrial agriculture distribution system, oil reliance, greenhouse gas emissions, and other environmental impacts.

“BSE”

Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), otherwise known as ‘mad cow disease’, is a neurodegenerative disease affecting cattle, but which can be transmitted to humans in the form of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD). As the first ‘food safety’ issue mentioned in the interview, this disease was raised to gauge: reaction to mass media presentation of information; the expected roles of government, regulation and the current industrial food safety regime; a personal sense of risk and trust, and how that guided choice, and; reaction to the practices that led to this crisis (i.e. were producer practices at fault?)

“Fair Trade”

This was followed with the most recognizable example of non-governmental / third-party regulation, intended to measure the consumer’s perception of individual or collective agency, their attitude toward political and sub-political thought and practice, as well as the interaction of scepticism, certainty, knowledge and trust.

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<sup>22</sup> See [www.100milediet.org](http://www.100milediet.org) for details of the experiment (now much more than a ‘book’) undertaken by Alisa Smith and James MacKinnon, of Vancouver.

“Monsanto”

This term was introduced accidentally after one participant heard ‘bST’<sup>23</sup> (rather than BSE), and railed against the company’s ethics and practices. This name elicited almost unanimous vilification, no doubt derived from many high-profile media forays — including, but not limited to, bST (or rBGH), the Percy Schmeiser lawsuit, Terminator Seeds, and Agent Orange.

However, I wondered if the name was serving as a lightning rod for not only all companies engaged in similar activities, but also *all* large industrial agriculture enterprises: seen as a negative influence by virtue of their scale, as well as their impacts, specific practices and motivations.

As such, the intent was to uncover the assumptions wrapped up in this package of what was “understood”; that is, which aspects of Monsanto’s public reputation were singled out, given primacy. What does the reaction tell you about how the consumer approaches agency, responsibility, or security?

“salmonella”

This second food risk was raised as a repetition of a media-related food-security, regulation issue, to gauge safety concerns, but also to prompt the participants to raise security issues that they find more compelling than media-generated-or-advanced. This also raised a food safety issue that could result from either producer or consumer practice, and could only be ‘controlled’ within the industrial agriculture ‘food-safety’ regime through the use of irradiation.

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<sup>23</sup> Bovine Somatotropin, one of the many terms used in the debate over the USFDA’s approval of Monsanto’s Prosilac, a recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH) that could be injected into lactating cows to increase production. (See e.g. DuPuis)

“agricultural subsidies”

The final term raised the interaction of global and *local*, with the intent of uncovering whether subsidies were interpreted as inward-looking, or outward-looking; as harmful or positive; with local or third-world producers in mind. At the same time, this might help give a sense of whether or how the participant related agency and situatedness to government policy.

### **Concepts and Boundaries**

5. What does the term “local food” mean to you?

This question was intended to reveal what, if any, innate values or attributes were attached to the participant’s conception of the *local*, beyond the spatial relationship — which was explicitly clarified. This term was also intended to uncover the combination of concepts, boundaries, information, and experience that shaped their expressed understanding of ‘local food’; how this interacts with other, already stated beliefs and practices, to change values, concepts, or priorities, thereby affecting boundaries for food choices.

6. Name three people, or categories of people, that you trust (e.g. ‘graduate student researchers’).

This question was intended to cause the participants to reflect on the boundaries established around the concept “trust”, when or how trust is granted or lost, what factors they rely on to make these determinations, and whether this concept altered depending on ‘situatedness’ — the distance between the individual and the object of their trust. This may help place the participant’s engagement with trust on a spectrum, from ‘virtual’ to

'active'. This question was also positioned so as to encourage association with and reflection on the relationship with their local food producer, in the section that followed.

### **CSA Reflections**

This section, while gathering details of the interaction with the farmer, was also intended to take the participant back to first contact, to discover: which concepts were prioritized in their search for local food; how they arrived at CSA (so to speak); what they were looking for; their expectations (and whether they were met); what attracted them; what source of information was relied on, or compelling, and for what reasons; whether new relationships, group affinities, or situatedness had developed as a result, and; specifically, the perception of their interactions with the farmer.

7. Who provides your CSA service?
8. How do you pay for your service? (seasonally, weekly, etc.)
9. How did you first discover CSA?
  - A. Where did you find / look for the information?
  - B. What, in the initial description, attracted you to CSA?
  - C. Did anything in that description surprise you?
  - D. Did that description match your experience?
10. Do you know anyone else involved in CSA?
11. Would you describe your interactions with your producer as a relationship, or a transaction?

This latter question was specifically intended to catch any perception of changes between the producer and consumer, or in the situatedness of the consumer, as the result of their involvement in CSA.

12. What is the purpose of a CSA?

At this point, it was intended that the participant pull the relationship, as just described, into the context of previously elaborated concepts, while raising their goals, intent and priorities. To see which floated to the top, but also to offer the opportunity for reflection on experience, agency and aspiration and, in the intersection, question and highlight their motivations.

**The ‘Other’ Food Choices**

It was hoped that encouraging the consumer to reflect on their other food choices, weigh them against their CSA consumption, within the context of their social reality and larger food choices, would uncover whether they approached broader food choices with the same conceptual boundaries and priorities as local food choices — and, if not, to focus on these other priorities and the conceptual negotiations that framed their selection. To what extent does the consumer divide life up into discrete bits, and use different conceptual prioritizations for different purposes? Are local food choices relative, or an ideal by which success is measured? Is local consumption interpreted using different boundaries to local production?

13. Food from CSA represents what part of your (family’s) total food consumption?

14. Where do you buy your groceries, typically?

15. How often?

16. What type of food do you eat?

17. How often do you eat out?

18. What’s your favourite place?

### **Surveying Conceptual Interpretation**

The final section was intended to interrogate priorities, help discover why change had occurred, and encourage reflection on previous responses, as well as the participant's attitude toward their own CSA service. Repetition and pairing was used to raise and rephrase key ideas, most of which had surfaced earlier: 'local community'; 'affordable and convenient' (time and money); 'trustworthy', 'healthy', 'natural' (security); 'consumption' (situatedness); and change. Pairing also juxtaposed ideas that would require separation and, in that act, further reflection.

These survey-style questions also raised explicitly some other key ideas, including: sustainability, agency (the role of the state and the individual), demonstration ('the right thing'), education, alternatives, ethics, responsibility, and advocacy.

19. Describe whether, and how strongly, you agree or disagree with the following statements:

- i. It is important to me that my food choices:
  - a. Support my local community
  - b. Are affordable and convenient
  - c. Serve as an example to others
  - d. Are sustainable
  - e. Offer a way to avoid some of the risks in modern food consumption
  
- ii. Being a member of a CSA:
  - a. Makes me a part of the local community
  - b. Makes me think about where my food comes from

- c. Makes me part of an alternative food chain
- d. Saves me time and money
- e. Is the right thing to do
- f. Should be encouraged by government programs  
[Can you envision and describe what such a program would look like, how it might function, etc?]
- g. Has changed the way I think about consumption
- h. Offer my family a trustworthy source of healthy, natural food

One final set of questions was added, to encourage the participant to reflect on any differences in approach or conceptual engagement, as uncovered through relationship negotiations.<sup>24</sup> Were food choice boundaries altered in this process? What concepts had been prioritized — or de-prioritized — in this re-negotiation?

- 20. Could you give me a brief self-assessment of the differences — where they exist — between you and your partner's approach, connection, involvement or commitment to Community Supported Agriculture?
- 21. Where do you think these differences come from?

The final element was a demographic survey, the results of which are included as Appendix A. This survey was used to gather information to round out the socio-economic context of the participants, including age, employment, education, income, political tendencies, religiosity, marital status, and children.

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<sup>24</sup> This last question was suggested by Furst et al, 1996: esp. 257-262.

## **Approaching the Results**

Before analyzing the results, before compiling a manuscript ‘in their words’, it is necessary to give a brief picture of the participants and their relationship to local food, through their CSA. This overview, compiled primarily from the demographic survey (see Appendix A) and the background questions, is intended simply to give texture to the surface on which this manuscript will be written. The survey statistics are not intended as a generalization of the overall composition of CSA membership; the participants interviewed represent only a small fraction of their own CSA’s membership, and an even smaller fraction of the entire Ottawa area CSA membership.

### **The Participants and the *Local***

All of the participants in this study were members of CSAs that served the Ottawa area. However, half of Ottawa’s urban area, and over 80% of its population, lies inside of a greenbelt that circles the city proper. Almost 85% of the area of the City of Ottawa is rural. (Social Planning Council of Ottawa, 2002: 6) Of the six CSAs with members in this study, only one was located within the boundaries of the city — in the greenbelt, itself. The three members interviewed from that ‘greenbelt’ CSA lived outside of the greenbelt, but reasonably close to the farm. Two other participants lived outside of the city, in the same rural community as their CSA. All but one of the remaining participants lived inside the greenbelt, most between 40 and 80 kilometres from their CSA — but some, over 120 km distant!

All of the farmers used organic or biodynamic practices<sup>25</sup>, two with certification. While organic practices are not unusual among CSAs, (all Ottawa-area CSAs use similar practices), or among small producers in general —as added value is one way to achieve economic sustainability — it may lead to a distortion of priorities, as described by the participants. Research into the consumers of local non-organic produce would help to clarify whether ‘conventional consumers’ describe a different interpretation and prioritization of security and trust from that of this manuscript.

Four of the six CSAs delivered food weekly to the homes of their members — one of these year-round. A fifth delivered to drop-off points in the city. Members of the sixth picked up from the farm — the only one located inside the city borders — and were required to work on the farm as a part of their membership. Given that all of the participants were CSA members, most of them urban, it is perhaps not unusual that very few mentioned the idea of growing their own food, or community gardens. Two who were actively involved in a the latter raised the idea. One participant grew her own garden — using her CSA only for the winter vegetables, while one now grows her own instead of CSA involvement. Only two others mentioned previously growing their own.

Three had previously been involved in co-operatives that required active engagement, and another three in organic buying clubs — one in both. Four CSAs asked for seasonal pre-payment of the member’s share, but allowed flexibility for members to pay in multiple instalments. Two allowed weekly payment, but of the 11 participants with this option, only three paid weekly; some paid seasonally, but most, monthly.

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<sup>25</sup> Biodynamic farming follows practices outlined by Rudolf Steiner, based primarily on self-sufficiency, holism and homeopathic composting.

### **Self-selected consumers**

Given the seasonality of the object of inquiry, (only one of the producers offers year-round produce), contacting consumers in the off-season required the complicity of the producers. Each producer in the Ottawa area was contacted with a research outline, and asked to forward this information to their consumers. Just Food also passed on this information to several producers at their annual CSA workshops. As well, the Ottawa chapter of Canadian Organic Growers (COG) put the information in their monthly newsletter. Only one producer explicitly refused to forward the information to their customers, on privacy grounds. However, several other producers did not reply at all. Three CSA farmers actively recruited members, leading to larger samples from those three farms — over two-thirds of the respondents (20 of 26).

The method of contact had unexpected implications during the interview process. Two farmers, whose customers were on email lists, immediately sent out my interview requests. Another mailed the request with their season package, a month later. Still others came to the process via Just Food and COG, also a month later. As a result of the time differential, and the healthy response from the first two farmers' customers, the 'top half' of the interviews were primarily from these two farms. While the interview process was intended as a reflective and adaptive process — and several changes had, in fact, been made to the interview framework early on — making changes in the framework beyond the midway point might suggest differences in reflection and prioritization, between customers of different farms, that didn't actually exist.

However these members discovered the project, they still made the choice to take part in an interview. Could it be anticipated that participants would be more likely to

proselytise, or to be active and engaged members, by virtue of their self-selection? The fact that most of these participants answered the call of their producer to share their experiences indicates a level of engagement between the two. This may indicate whom the farmers were more comfortable with approaching, or perhaps a greater strength of connection than with their other members.

The nature of this relationship might also influence the outcomes perceived by the participant — particularly their interpretation of situatedness. As such, the possibility that self-selection might limit the diversity of the results would have to be kept in mind — without distracting from the overall objective, lest this become a treatise on motivations behind interview involvement, rather than local food engagement.

What does self-selection mean? Could it shape the respondent pool in unexpected ways? Of the 26 participants, 23 were female. While many of the participants (19 of 26) had partners in the household who also ‘belonged’ to the CSA, and were encouraged to take part in the research, only one couple participated. The gender disparity in respondents may have been affected by antipathy to participation in research interviews, rather than attitudes towards — or engagement in — CSAs themselves. However, over half suggested that engagement played a role in this distinction, primarily because food provision and preparation was largely within their realm. Given the overwhelming gender disparity, it was decided that the influence of gender on interpretation — while central — would be neutral in effect. That is, while the influence of gender would be clear in their words — particularly in self-identification of roles — no attempt was made to

differentiate gender as a factor. Clearly, however, this is an area in which further study is required.<sup>26</sup>

### **Demographic Survey**

The survey results indicate several factors that might explain differences in participants' interpretations. The large number of participants within domestic relationships would suggest that attention to the negotiations involved in food decisions would be required. Half of the participants had children, whose influence on prioritization, interpretation and engagement would also demand attention. The survey also points to income and education levels as significant factors, although given the elevated levels of both in Ottawa's general population, these numbers may be deceiving. According to city publications, Ottawa "[Boasts] the highest number of residents with a post-secondary education in Canada, ...and more engineers, scientists and PhDs per capita than any other city in the country."<sup>27</sup> At the same time, these survey results might say more about the 'type' of member more likely to respond to an interview request, than the 'type' of individual likely to engage in local food.

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<sup>26</sup> Laura DeLind and Anne Ferguson provide the only analysis of gender in local food on record, in their article "Is This a Woman's Movement? The Relationship of Gender to Community-Supported Agriculture in Michigan". (1999)

<sup>27</sup> From the City of Ottawa website Ottawa.com, "Ottawa's Workforce".

### *In Their Words*

From the conversations with local CSA members, it is evident that many came to CSA through happenstance (12), and several through active searching (8) or the recruitment efforts of their farmer (6). While the precise moment of entry into their current CSA is a known event, what is of interest here is the combination of conceptualizations, experiences and information that combined to motivate the participants' involvement in local food, when the opportunity was presented to them.

In order to explain why these consumers moved to local food, it is necessary to capture, with their own words, how they understand and prioritize concepts that describe how they determine what they eat, and why; how they relate this food to place and producer, and; how they relate food consumption to other social roles. This analysis will therefore focus on the participants' interpretations of the concepts of quality, security, trust, situatedness, responsibility and agency. The resulting description, this collective manuscript, re-defines the *local*, as these six concepts are not only integral to consumers' food choice boundaries, but also at the heart of the expectations and possibilities that surround the notion of 'local food'.

A manuscript documenting the interpretation, engagement and prioritization of these concepts could potentially describe not only how and why these consumers have come to local food, but also whether they will stay, and whether other consumers might join them. However, it must be made clear that this re-interpretation occurs within a context that challenges the legitimacy — and therefore the permanence — of this manuscript before it is written.

### The *Local* as Palimpsest <sup>28</sup>

Modernity's reflexivity refers to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity, and material relations with nature, to chronic revision in the light of new information or knowledge...

The integral relation between modernity and radical doubt is ... not only disturbing to philosophers but is existentially troubling for ordinary individuals. — Anthony Giddens (1991: 20-21)

The susceptibility to 'chronic revision', that creates the opportunity for change, may as easily produce uncertainty as certainty, instability as stability. If the individual sees their re-negotiated boundaries as the product of uncertainty and ambiguity, agreed to only because these decisions are necessary to daily existence, the new boundaries are susceptible to challenge and re-interpretation. The potential of chronic revision, therefore, turns this manuscript of the *local* into a palimpsest: challenges to the legitimacy and stability of these concepts and boundaries can both prompt and result from revision. These challenges enable, encourage, or force consumers to 'write over' descriptions which no longer have legitimacy, with fresh interpretations over top of 'failed'. Implicit in this process is the potential for new challenges, and revisions of these revisions.

The stability of the re-negotiation hinges on three factors governing boundary establishment. The most important is the consumer's interpretation of these concepts. Stability is based in large part on the consumer's perception of the relativism and uncertainty surrounding the information and experiences that inform their conceptual interpretations. For instance, new information may be understood as reliable, or less unreliable, based on truth or precaution. One could assume that, the more uncertain or

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<sup>28</sup> Palimpsest n. a piece of writing material or a manuscript on which later writing has been written over the effaced original writing. [from Greek *palin* 'again' + *psestos* 'rubbed smooth'] (Illustrated Oxford Dictionary. 1998)

relativistic the interpretation, the less stable the resulting boundary. Proximal conceptualizations may make these boundaries more stable. That is, individuals may interpret more certainty and less relativism when responsibility is seen to directly affect decisions relating to family. However, because these boundary concepts have been marginalized by the process of reflexive modernization generally, and the global industrial food system specifically, the consumer's interpretations are often expressed as dissatisfaction or imagined absences. That is, their change to local food may have more to do with 'effacing' a concept — challenging its interpretation, as it is understood within the conventional food system — than providing a new interpretation. A consumer looking for 'better food' describes an interpretation based on dissatisfaction.

The other two factors governing boundary establishment — the consumer's engagement with and prioritization of each concept — are largely determined by their interpretations. However, both are further mediated by competition from existing priorities not directly related to food choice. These priorities compete for access to limited opportunity, as constrained by time, money, information and options.

In short, the revised manuscript of the *local* will describe the formation and stability of consumer boundaries governing local food choices. Each of six boundary concepts will be analysed, in turn: quality, security, trust, situatedness, responsibility, and agency. For each concept, the participants' interpretations will be presented, including the role played by dissatisfaction, relativism, or uncertainty. Engagement with, and prioritization of each concept will also be described, as well as any perceived limits. From these descriptions, a new collective manuscript, on the palimpsest of local food, will be inscribed.

### *Quality*

For many participants, the notion of ‘quality’ was equated with value measured through an association with attributes like ‘freshness’, ‘taste’, and ‘variety’. Several described how quality played an important role in attracting them to local food, and to CSA specifically, but only a few saw it as a high priority:

The only reason for joining was the idea of getting nice, fresh stuff. (Paul)

[What attracted me] was the quality of the produce, ...and the support for folks in that livelihood. ...But I mean, ultimately, it still comes down to the product — if the product isn’t good enough, the secondary point doesn’t really have enough strength to go it alone, at least not in my view. (Milton)

While the participants almost unanimously spoke of the freshness, taste and variety of the produce received from their CSA, other factors clearly influenced how ‘quality’ was interpreted and prioritized. For some, quality was perceived by inference:

I knew if they were supplying good restaurants with their greens, that was restaurant-quality greens I was going to get delivered to my door... that was the seller to me. (Lizzie)

Others interpreted quality through a lens of authenticity, suggesting that local food, as an alternative, had more value because it resuscitated attributes that had been lost to conventional food production. For some, this meant the return of flavour:

In terms of ...quality of food, the expectation here is that it will allow consumers to end up with a carrot that actually tastes like a carrot. (Joan)

For others, it meant a return to simpler consumer practices, in search of a value that must have existed previously:

I think it’s a really good way to... re-acquaint ourselves, with how people ate a long time ago. (Vickie)

We don’t have an understanding as consumers, anymore, about the richness and joy of food, basically. (Julia)

It's like what my granny tells me about how it was in Holland before they emigrated... on Fridays, the fishmonger would come, and on Mondays and Thursdays the fruit man would come, and the milk came every day — and it all came to your door, and it was all fresh... (Charlie)

### **The Marginalization of Quality**

Of course, the valuing of authenticity, as with freshness, taste and variety, implies that the conventional food system has marginalized these attributes, in the produce currently available. The perception of relative deprivation — or imagined absences — was widespread among the participants:

When I was young, my parents had a garden plot... I have great memories ... pulling carrots out of the ground, they tasted so good, and the tomatoes smelled good, and now — you can go to [the grocery store], you can sniff the tomatoes all you want, and you can't smell a thing. And the carrots taste like water and sawdust... Part of my hope, in a small [farm], is that they're really doing whatever my parents were doing, that magic that produced good tasting things. (Joan)

The belief [was] — at least in our family — that the taste of ...grocery-store produce had deteriorated to such a point that it wasn't terribly appetizing. ...It's the same with meat. (Milton)

What is also a major influence ...is the quality of the produce, its freshness, succulence and variety -- variety in vegetables and diversity of types, some of which are described as heirloom. You cannot buy such things in supermarkets which all feature the same two types of potatoes or carrots. (Carl)

Because all of the CSAs involved in the study used organic or biodynamic practices, any assumptions of quality automatically conferred by consumers, to organic, were often also transferred to local food. However, another assumption — that of a price premium for quality — was also attached to organic:

Organic is not affordable for a fixed income. (Faith)

I don't purchase much in the way of organic food, but that's mostly because of price. I'm fine with non-organic most of the time, but ...if there was no difference in cost, I would prefer [organic] all the time. (Socrates)

This assumption of a price premium appears also to have transferred to local food. Those who interpreted quality as having an increased cost attached saw this as either an expected reflection of value, or a limit to their own — or others' engagement:

I'm prepared to pay more and go further to get good food. (Montana)

It's good to spend money on good food. (Paul)

I consider [CSA] to be neither [affordable nor convenient] — which is why I'm not going to participate this year. No. It's quite expensive, and hard to get there on the day, at that time, when you have a full-time job. (Socrates)

I am very blessed in that I don't need to worry about funding. For many, this is an issue, and it's not for me: otherwise, I wouldn't pay \$55 bucks for a couple of bags of groceries from [my CSA]. That's pricey — it's prohibitive to most people. ...I would like it to be more affordable, so that more people could do it. I have friends who see what we do, and say "Wow, we'd really like to, but I've got little kids, and I'm paying daycare, and I can't afford to." (Fern)

Ideally, it would be better if the best thing was... affordable to everyone, and convenient. ...I feel very, very privileged to eat the way I do — there's quite a bit of guilt, for me... (Charlie)

However, several made the point that their CSA provided alternative sources of value — particularly through the provision of attributes that they had identified as missing from their food experiences, from security to responsibility, as will be discussed later. These alternative sources of value were not easily quantifiable, making it difficult to compare what was offered by their CSA to what they could purchase at the grocery store, even in the organic section:

You know, I did the analysis, last year, [comparing Loblaws to CSA]; it wasn't very enlightening. It didn't help me, in any way. It's different vegetables, different kinds of food — part of being in a CSA is about eating different than you would if you were just running to Loblaws. It's hard to compare; I don't look at it that way. (Gerrard)

By recognizing the marginalization of quality from their food experience, these consumers had opened themselves to the idea of valuing food holistically, which would, inevitably, make it more difficult than ever to compare apples to oranges.

### **Quality as Security**

Another attribute that many attached to their conceptualization of quality was the notion of 'health'. This was often interpreted as the result of choices, made by the consumer, to increase the value of their food selections, or as a by-product (or natural accompaniment) of other attributes of quality.

[I'm] into the end-product: healthier, fresher, better-tasting produce. (Charlie)

We're eating less meat, more organic meat, we do more vegetables, less sweet things; we're trying to be healthier. (Bugs)

I eat pretty healthily: I am a dietician, and I practice what I preach, pretty much. ...More vegetables and fruit, maybe, than your average person.  
(Socrates)

For those to whom nutritional value plays an important role in the conceptualization of quality, it is clear to see that engagement with quality can be interpreted as an important means of protecting the individual's health:

I was having trouble keeping nutrients of value; I started trying to make every bite count. There was no room for junk... The quality of the food [from the CSA] made my appetite increase. ...I spent more time with food processing — it was labour-intensive — but I learned of the value [of biodynamic food], it changed my perception. (Faith)

It can be no surprise that for Faith, the 'quality' of her food shared equal prioritization with an engagement with 'security', as the former was seen as a vehicle of nutritional value that helped to protect the latter.

### *Security*

My illness made a huge change in my food [choices]; [it became] a major motivator. For three years I've seen an environmental doctor. ...I have a rotation, a food family diet that I follow. (Faith)

For Faith, severe environmental allergies caused her to re-negotiate not only her food priorities, but also many of the other boundaries in her life. Social interaction and engagement were now curtailed, as was extended physical labour. This didn't stop Faith from 'volunteering' on her CSA: she was a member of the only CSA in the Ottawa area that asks for fieldwork as part of their share duties. However, a fixed income, also the result of her disability, demanded flexibility on the part of her farmer — allowing instalments rather than a single, up-front payment. This year, an inflexible farmer [new to the CSA] has removed that option; Faith is hoping to take part in a small community garden, as an alternative.

[My old farmer] was very accommodating; I could pay her in instalments. [This year] they want it up front; that's more of a challenge for me to be able to participate. (Faith)

Most of the participating CSA members showed a fairly strong engagement with the concept of security — though not to the same extent as Faith. While a few identified 'organic' as a side-benefit of their local produce, most had chosen organic — and therefore their CSA<sup>29</sup> — because of some perception of risk to health from conventional food.

Pesticide-free, specifically, I mean that's why we originally got into [CSA]. (Milton)

I rightly or wrongly believe ...that smaller farms and organic sources of food are going to [help] protect you against... food contamination issues... (Lizzie)

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<sup>29</sup> As mentioned earlier, all of the CSAs involved in this study used organic or biodynamic practices.

Participants were motivated mainly by illness (both mitigation and prevention), and interpretation of risk — based on equal parts experience, information and uncertainty. The more proximal the perceived risk — to the individual or their family, particularly — the more active their engagement.

[Avoiding risk has] always been somewhat important, but more important since [my partner] had cancer. ...If it's going to come back, it's going to come back. But whatever you can do to minimize that chance, why not? (Bugs)

I see it in my office, we see it in the neighbourhood; people sick with strange things that I don't remember as a kid. I think the less stuff we can get on our food, the better. Right now, even if it's just seasonally, I think it's a step in the right direction. (Theresa)

Some, however, interpreted security as a low priority — “not an obsession” (Carl), “not our main preoccupation” (Vickie) — in some cases, because risks were identified, but seen as too numerous and minimal to incorporate into decision-making boundaries:

I'm not [making food choices] because I'm afraid of catching something. You'd be paralysed if you think like that, today. (Vickie)

On the other hand, many had a general level of concern for security, but the level of uncertainty surrounding the interpretation of risk limited their engagement and prioritization:

My friend... told me the other day that, every day, she makes a smoothie with soy milk, a banana, and a raw egg. And it really surprised me that she ate a raw egg every day. She said 'No, I've been doing it for years!' ... It made me question some of my assumptions. ...I felt kinda lame, after that — maybe I should live, a little... (Charlie)

Despite — or perhaps because of — a general level of active engagement, the food security issues raised in the interview did not resonate with most; salmonella was seen as largely controllable through food processing and handling practices, while BSE was interpreted as a marginal risk, or tangential to food choices:

[BSE] did get me thinking, but it's one of those things: you hear about it less, it gets to the back of the mind. Because for a while there, we were looking at starting to purchase half a cow, and know where the meat was coming from... (Theresa)

There were, however, notable exceptions: experience of the specific results of risk caused Bugs to change her food choices, while uncertainty of both risk and response to risk left Charlie acting ...with uncertainty.

Well, we had a friend whose father died of [CJD], ...so I know what it can do, and it's one of the reasons we switched to organic beef. (Bugs)

[BSE is] probably one of the main reasons I don't eat meat anymore; when I do eat it, it's organic. And I really have no idea if I'm safe if I eat organic meats, but I have my doubts. ...I think we understand where it comes from: some say farming practices. But what if it isn't that? What if a cow does have BSE, and it comes some other way? Just because it's organic, it doesn't mean it's necessarily going to be safe. (Charlie)

The participants, however, found many opportunities to elaborate on their interpretation of food risks. Many identified pesticides, hormones and antibiotics as among the factors that had greater influence on their priorities. These influences were often strong irrespective of whether the identified risks were interpreted with certainty or uncertainty.

My older daughter, the one with ADHD, seems to do much better if I can remove as many of the pesticides... artificial flavouring, any artificial colouring put in food... Being able to remove what I can from her diet is great for me, as a mom. (Montana)

One kid has a tendency towards asthma, and [I was] ...just trying to keep the pesticides and stuff down, for his sake. ...And I don't know if the facts are valid behind this, or not, but if you think of all the growth hormones that cattle are given, and the studies that say that, ...the semen counts are going down, is there an estrogenic effect from growth hormones? I don't know, but raising two little boys, I was going to give them the best opportunity I could. (Henry)

But obviously, health is important to us — I've got two kids, it's important to know that their body burden isn't building unnecessarily through the food they consume: it's building a lot through other things, I'm sure. (Julia)

What these examples also show is that, when the risk was perceived as affecting — or possibly affecting — someone for whom the participant felt responsibility, a proactive application of precaution was applied. Among the parents in the study, this combination of security and responsibility was often given elevated priority. Identification with the role of security-provider — being able to fulfil this responsibility — also provided a level of agency to some.

### **The Marginalization of Security**

Each of these responses stems from dissatisfaction with — and recognition of — the marginalization of security, caused by risks produced and not addressed by the global agri-food system. That is, active engagement with security demands the identification of risks, association of those risks with conventional agricultural production practices, and the determination either that these risks will not, or can not, be addressed within that system.

CSA helps keep small farms going. And the last thing that we need ...is big agri-business. They stomp down the land with their big machines, and they just molest the hell out of the soil... The soil can't stay alive on nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, ...and neither are we going to stay alive, with the soil in that kind of shape. I tell people all the time: 'Why organic food? Well, if I just gave you a vitamin pill every day, do you think you would stay alive?' What do you think's happening to the plants? You don't have complete nutrients there. You're missing selenium, you're missing boron, you're missing... trace amounts that could make all of the difference to the absorption of all the other minerals in your body; if you're missing one or two, it throws the entire balance off! There's no way you can stay alive on partially-fed plants. So, forget the pesticides; that's just the icing on the cake. That's the toxicity. (Hope)

While participants expressed many different levels of interpretation, it was clear that, at some level, both information and risk identification were required, to trigger action.

I wasn't at the time thinking about organic; I thought it was kind of a bunch o' hooley. But since then, I've been involved with the environmental movement,

and I've been 'educated' ... that's when I learned a lot about what's actually going on out there. (Margaret)

However, as several participants indicated, this required stimulus could come from experiences as diverse as illness — not necessarily personal — or cooking:

Every health book, or cook book, or anything you pick up now recommends [organic], and I think it's been pretty much drilled into my brain that it's better — and I know there's some people don't really buy into it, but I don't see how you can think that eating pesticides is good for you... (Charlie)

### **Security as Trust**

But what motivates a consumer to choose local organic? While many reasons exist for an organic consumer to go *local*, one 'big' reason is big organic. The production and distribution of organic within the global industrial food system, as well as the purchase of organic 'labels' by multinational agribusiness interests, has raised a level of scepticism among consumers, leading to questions about the efficacy of the regulation of 'big' organic — questions that go directly to the heart of trust:

I'm a busy [person], I go to Loblaws 'cause I can buy absolutely everything I need... and I buy the organic stuff, I pay the extra price, even though I know it's probably half bulls—t. (Gerard)

### ***Trust***

The conventional agri-food system guarantees quality and security through a regulatory structure that relies heavily on the intentions and practices of producers, processors and retailers, reinforced by the deterrent power of penalties for infractions caught through random testing or through the investigation of systemic failures. While several participants expressed confidence in this system (particularly relating to BSE), many indicated that the value of the trust delivered was minimal:

You can't buy 'pre-washed' food, thinking you won't need to wash it. (Minnie)

When forming boundaries for food choice, consumers conceptualize ‘trust’ as the interaction of two separate factors: confidence and value. The ‘value’ of trust is captured by the consumer’s perception of the significance of the attributes delivered by the producer’s guarantee, as measured, for instance, by their conceptualization of quality and security. Confidence is a measurement of the consumer’s level of trust in the producer’s promise or guarantee to deliver those attributes. The measurement of confidence places trust on a scale from ‘assumed’ to ‘active’, characterized by the role of the consumer in determining whether measures that will guarantee the successful delivery of the producer’s promise — including practices and standards — are followed. Where the consumer has no role, confidence — and therefore trust — can only be assumed; the greater their engagement, the higher the level of confidence, and the more active the trust.

Trust, therefore, is relative to the guarantee on offer: the lower the standard promised by the producer, the greater the confidence of its being met; but the lower the value of the trust delivered to the consumer. Conversely, an elevated set of quality and security standards potentially delivers a more valuable trust. As such, one might expect that consumers would demand a high level of guarantee — perhaps through accountability, transparency, or active engagement — before expressing confidence in such standards. Many relied upon the guarantees provided by organic certification:

...Certification is really the only way of knowing that the producer has fulfilled their end of the bargain with the consumer; it is all we have to fall back on by way of insurance that the food we are buying is as they say it is. Call it truth in advertising, if you will. (Margaret)

Several participants, however, suggested that the level of accountability or transparency offered by third party regulation — including fair trade and organic — was not enough:

Fair trade is about cutting out middlemen who exploit producer costs, but I have questions about how effective it is. (Thomas)

I support it, but I don't believe that half of what I buy under the 'fair trade' label is actually fair trade. (Gerrard)

As soon as there's a good idea out there, there are other people, opportunists, who will take advantage of it... Does the term carry any weight, any more, once it's been discovered by the capitalists...? (Ani)

Much of this scepticism stemmed from the uncertainty over both non-standardized and standardized (but watered-down) regulation — and therefore uncertainty over the value of the guarantee offered. The subsequent loss of legitimacy contained by the term 'organic' resulted, for some, from the assumption of less confidence in a product with less value:

[One purpose of CSA is] to provide the consumer with an option for organic food that I really know is organic in the ways they want it to be — because I find this labelling system... we don't really know if they do anything other than follow the bare minimum rules. (Joan)

How can I trust something's organic? I guess you have to trust the certification body. ...You don't know ...The world is built on trust — and distrust, whatever you choose. ...And the reality is, when you're dealing [with a] bigger business, then you know that the motivation is more likely to be money than it is 'community' and 'co-operative endeavour', ...and 'sustainability', so, yeah, the risks are greater, and the potential for distrusting, mistrusting connections is greater... (Hope)

### **The Marginalization of Trust**

Also reflected in this sentiment is a general distrust of scale, and its effects on relationships of trust — particularly economic relationships — throughout society:

I tend to trust individuals, but not necessarily the organizations they work for. ...So if you're an individual who works for a very small organization, I'm more likely to trust you. [I've known] ...a completely trustworthy person, that suddenly became untrustworthy because he's working for a larger organization... I try to stay away from ...'big and impersonal'. (Joan)

This distrust of unaccountable, distant and impersonal relationships stems from the fact that the consumer, as a result, loses the ability to judge sincerity and motivation within this relationship: trust becomes marginalized.

As ‘assumed’ trust has come to dominate market and institutional relations, opportunities have dwindled for consumers to exercise some form of real trust, trust with value. With assumed trust, no exchange of trust occurs: the only option for the consumer is to purchase, or not; to interact, or not. This societal hollowing-out of the practices of trust could motivate consumers to seek relationships that allow or encourage a more active engagement with trust — or at least the option of active engagement.

If I wanted to drive out and see where my food was coming from, I could do it easily... (Theresa)

Such relationships would provide the consumer with the ability, the choice to exercise powers largely absent to the practice of trust — including, significantly, the ability to grant trust.

For many participants, the natural place to look for this relationship, within their food choice, was with a local producer:

[Without knowing the producer,] I think what you do is, you take it on faith; for those that have the faith, that believe that they’re dealing with somebody reputable, I don’t know if that’s as big an issue... But knowing the people that you buy your food from, ...knowing that they actually do the work, and stand behind it... the CSA is so relatively small, in comparison, that you don’t have that worry. If it became more commercial in nature, you could quickly see it losing its edge, its appeal. (Milton)

Some were willing to grant trust simply because a local producer represented an untainted alternative to a system that did not provide trust:

It looked really genuine, and really cool, and really not big business in any way, and I thought ‘well, that’s what I’m looking for’... (Joan)

I trust [my farmers] — I have no reasons not to trust them: I have reasons not to trust Loblaws... [My farmers] seem to live up to their promise. (Charlie)

Others saw such relationships as supplementing otherwise acceptable methods of delivering confidence and value:

[Certification is important] depending on where I was buying from: if I absolutely knew the producer and was confident in their growth methods, then sometimes I'll buy 'not certified', but... certification is there for a reason, and I do have confidence in it... (Henry)

Many agreed with Henry's sentiment that certification was less important or relevant with a more personal connection:

It really doesn't matter to me whether they have certification or not, because I know them, and I'm completely confident that they are not [abusing that trust]. (Julia)

### **Trusting Situatedness**

In fact, near unanimity was expressed over the sentiment that personal interaction greatly increases the confidence involved in trust. Personal interaction allows consumers to assess other criteria used to increase this confidence:

[I trust] people who I perceive have experience and wisdom, people of faith... *good* people. (Faith)

One of my criteria is: people that are really passionate about what they do tend to have put a lot of thought into it, and therefore are trustworthy... (Henry)

'I need your support, just like you need my support'. *That*, to me, is the basis of trust. (Hope)

[I trust those who] support a cause without incentive. (Ani)

In assessing their CSA farmers, participants used these and other criteria ranging from sacrifice, to intuition, to business sense:

...at the end of the year, getting [her producer's] balance sheet, with the actual ...income, and how much it had cost her to produce the food, and I thought 'That's all she gets?' ...That, to me, was a shock. That tells a lot about who she is, and what the philosophy of Community Supported Agriculture is... the people who do that... have a very generous spirit. They really want to feed people, that's what they like to do. They're not in it for the profit. (Minnie)

I appreciate her attitude and her passion.

...If I can choose somebody that has the ability to rely not only on their expertise but their intuition, ...their resources, to make sure the CSA will be successful, then I have more faith in that person... (Ani)

I think [the producer] puts some medicine on his plants, ...some herbal preparations... — it's not to say, necessarily, that that's better, but I thought it's really cool that he's so passionate about it... (Joan)

[My farmer] seemed very business oriented, she always provided a spreadsheet at the end of the year... She seemed very solid on the business side. (June)

Rather than replacing certification with a form of personal certification — through examination of producer practices and the CSA itself — members increased their confidence that the promised practices and standards were being followed through an assessment of the trustworthiness of their producer.

In my experience, trust is based on repeated, successful interactions. ...I've never met a grower that I didn't trust in the end, but it's not a matter of policy for me. (Gerrard)

I certainly do trust them; I mean, I think that I don't have any choice, but having met them, I like them, and they seem to try hard to promote their alternative; I like the way they think. (Carl)

The level of trust produced by this confidence was sufficient to allow some to overlook factors that were otherwise important to them. One of the CSAs involved in the study provides its members with vegetables produced exclusively on its own farm in season, but in the winter<sup>30</sup>, supplements from certified organic producers who have been sourced by the farmers.

I think that not all of it is their own produce; certainly some of it is — they do have greenhouses. ...[P.M. - And does that concern you in any way; that what you may be getting isn't necessarily coming directly from them?] I would prefer it was produced as locally as possible. I'm sure that it's organic; that's part of their ethos. ...I don't know, maybe it is their own. I've never inquired. (Carl)

I'm going to trust [my producer] — that he's looked into his suppliers. ...[But] I wish he'd carry more local products... (Fern)

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<sup>30</sup> This is also the only CSA in the study to offer its members vegetables outside of the local growing season.

In the winter, they get organic stuff trucked in — they don't say from how far away. I sort-of don't want to know... (Margaret)

These reactions suggested that the consumer situated their trust in a relationship which established a link between 'local food' and trust that could overshadow the *local* — making the 'who' of trust more significant than the 'where'. But was the *local* not a tangible reality? — did the *local* not also exist 'in place'? — and did that 'place' have no place in trust?

I have no blanket grant of trust — it's assessed individually ...in setting.  
(Thomas)

['Local food'] means knowing the grower, I think, most of all. I'm really interested in how social relationships change market behaviour. ... Literally, concrete interaction with the grower and the land. Inherently valuing the relationship between the person and the land — and the food that they eat... Certification is a substitute for knowing the grower and knowing the land. Certification says 'we know the grower, we know the land, we can vouch for them.' You could cut that out if it was all local. (Gerrard)

### *Situatedness*

As mentioned earlier, the connection of the consumer to their food has faced increasing separation under the global industrial food system. If food has a 'place' in this system, that place is exotic: food in this instance is commodified as variety, not from the soil of a tangible place, produced by real farmers, within real circumstances. One assumption of local food has implied that re-situating food in the *local* re-creates all of these connections, starting with the connection between the consumer and the place where their food is grown.

I believe in direct and local: I think those two things tie together. We'd love to do everything direct, and sustainable ...with hands-on experience....Get your fingernails dirty. Get into the soil, the place where you're getting your food from. Know where your food's coming from — be educated about it. Better connection, I guess — not just the people, but the actual land. (Hope)

As previously stated, theorists of the *local* have suggested that the introduction of ‘community’ into local food was intended to situate the connections of the consumer to both food and producer, as connections to place and the relationships of place. However, the mostly urban participants, even those who did not identify strong ties with their neighbourhood, made a distinction between their ‘community’ — or their ‘local community’ — and their CSA. As well, every participant identified local food and local farmers as important factors in determining their food choice priorities. What was responsible for the disconnect between *local* and situatedness? That is, why did *local* not include, by definition, a connection to place, its surroundings and circumstances, to ‘community’ that so many theorists suggest is an essential element of ‘local food’ and CSA?

Was it simply distance? For many, the perception that their CSA was not *local* was a significant factor in their interpretation of situatedness:

[P.M. - Do you have an idea of what *local* is, in your head?] Well, if I did, [my farmer] and his business would be outside; it’s a long way off. *Local* — it’s pretty hard to say more than 100 kilometres. (David)

I have some sort of relationship with [my producer], but they’re not *local*... and I don’t know other members of the ‘community’... (Carl)

I’m kind of surprised that they chose Ottawa as their market. ...I felt a little uncomfortable. But then I thought; ‘you know, in the grand scheme of where my vegetables normally come from, it’s still pretty good’. (Joan)

### **Interpreting Local Food as ‘Closer’ Food**

For most, the concept of *local* was relative — and could be applied to activities within their own neighbourhood:

I’m a very firm believer in trying to do a lot of things locally, or supporting people locally; ...shopping down the street... (Theresa)

The notion of ‘local food’, on the other hand, was seldom interpreted as within the city.

‘Local food’, instead, stretched from within 100km — or one hour — to a flexible, indefinable area:

Depending on the food, [*local* is] something that is produced in ‘my region’, or in ‘my province’. ...If it’s not grown here, *local* becomes a little bit further away. (June)

That is, while it was rarely seen as ‘close’, local food was often understood as ‘closer’:

Again, it’s all relative: Ontario-grown could be [considered] *local*, considering stuff coming from India or the Philippines... I’d rather ...buy Ontario than California; that would be *local*. (Margaret)

‘Closer’ was seen to have benefits other than distance travelled or regionalism: ‘closer’ allowed the envisioning of alternative structures, of a return to ‘traditional’, which addressed many of the externalities of the global industrial food structure — including supporting sustainable local food structures.:

Local food is produced in the area, by small, independent operators, by-passing the standard distribution networks.

...[The purpose of CSA is] to bring me closer to the food production, the natural rhythms, seasonal foods. When I grew up, we ate our own food, there was no year-round grocery. Food ‘when you want it’ is an unnatural relationship. Seasonality keeps us in tune... My mother still comments on [the availability of] fruits and vegetables out of season, in the grocery store. (Thomas)

I would like to see more distributed processing, like we used to have. ...It would also mean buying in season. (Fern)

Perhaps as the result of distance — or the separation between the participants and their idea of ‘local food’ — most had not worked on, or even visited their CSA. As mentioned earlier, only two of the participants lived in the same rural community as their CSA. In total, five picked up their food weekly at the CSA, while only four members —

the three ‘greenbelt’ members and one other — had worked on their current CSA.<sup>31</sup> From their words, it is clear that the intent of physical involvement includes building ‘community’:

You need to allow people to come out there and be part of the farm, [a CSA] needs to include that. ... There needs to still be some level of connection amongst the people who are engaged; the opportunity for connection. I mean, if it’s not used as an educational tool, and people don’t get out to the farm to feel it, and appreciate [it]... they just meet the farmer, they just say ‘Give me the food, here’s the money’... (Hope)

Over the course of the season we have commitments to work a certain number of hours. ... For the practicality of running of the garden, you needed that, but also to try to build community, try to cut through the consumerism idea: if people were to actually come and work, they would also have a different understanding of the CSA. (Patience )

Of the remaining 22, most saw visiting the CSA as a largely unexplored option, not an essential part of their membership:

I mean, I think if we went out, it would be even better, but they’re very personal. (Theresa)

While none of the producers discouraged visits, some members felt that farm visits might not be the type of ‘support’ that their farmer would value:

I would suspect that [customer visits at the farm] would be difficult for them to do, because they are so busy, that to have to stop your work in order to entertain your customers — with all their customers... I mean, if I go there, and [either of my farmers are] there, they’ll show me what they’re doing: ‘come and look at this in the greenhouse’, type of thing... (Paul)

Our children [if they tried to work on the farm] would be more of a hazard than a help. ... [It was] great, from my perspective, for the kids to see the farm, feed the animals. (June)

For some farmers, maybe they don’t necessarily want the hassle of people coming out... We visited a ...very small CSA [near Waterloo] — it was almost a full-time job, just dealing with the volunteers. They were so close to town —

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<sup>31</sup> Six participants had previously been members of other CSAs. Of these, two had worked on their farms.

and she had a full-time job, anyway... she was running the CSA 'on the side'. And it just sounded like... the point of the exercise had gotten out of control. ...I like the idea of local food, supporting the farmer — that's their skill-set, it's valuable and important; I have my own. I'll do what I can to help, but I don't want to be a burden. (Bruce)

As fieldwork was not a prerequisite of the other five CSAs involved the study, the producers and members were clearly relying on other factors to provide 'connection' to place and community.

In fact, many understood any 'connection', any 'community' within CSA as separated from place — if place meant the CSA farm. Like Joan, many found the common ground of 'community' easier to walk if it was within their own neighbourhood:

What appealed to me [about my old CSA] was this idea that ...you would share with your friends. It was a big share — you could share it four or five ways. ...They had a central depot — and you could walk, it was in someone's back yard — and everyone would come and get their things... (Joan)

I guess I'm part of a CSA community, too, but that's not something I'd think of... it's a very exclusive community, right? I mean, if you're talking about ...everyone in my neighbourhood? Then, really, not [a community] at all, at the moment — which is a shame... In that sense, it would almost be better if the CSA serviced several blocks, because I'm not even part of [a CSA community] necessarily — I might have like-minded people living around me who are also part of CSAs, but they're part of a different one, and we lose all the common ground. We can't talk about the farm, ...'isn't he a great guy'. ... I feel like I'd be more a part of the local community, actually, if I went to the Landsdowne Farmers' Market, which I've read a lot about, and would like to do, this year...(Joan)

### **The Marginalization of Situatedness**

The disappearance of situatedness from modern social relations goes far beyond the individual's relationship to food. The re-negotiation of traditional family forms, dislocation necessitated by economic mobility, and loss — through diversification — of shared interests and culture, are among the many factors separating situatedness from 'place' in the modern urban context. The process of re-creating urban communities

recognizes and challenges this marginalization, starting with re-situating community where residents live. Most of the participants associated ‘community’ with their place of residence, whether or not they ‘situated’ themselves in this community.<sup>32</sup>

However, when extending the idea of community to CSA, the notion of ‘communities of interest’ resonated with many of the participants. In the absence of connection to place, shared intentions, interaction and activity were seen as integral parts of engagement within ‘community’:

I feel good about [the CSA], but I’ve never even thought of it as a community. ...I don’t really interact with the other people, and that’s what a community is. ... (Vickie)

[CSA] doesn’t define my community; maybe if people I knew were doing it... (Thomas)

It’s more communities of interest. The neighbourhood where I live... I don’t find that I’m very active, there. I don’t know my neighbours – not very well. (Carl)

For many, interaction and shared interests, occurred not ‘in place’, but in indistinct *places*, where ‘place’ might have little relevance:

Community is a place where you would have some type of cultural ...or linguistic common denominator; ...whatever’s inside you, that makes you connect with a very tight group of people — [a place where] I can talk in the language I think in. (Fern)

As an editor, I belong to an editor’s association, which is a community, of sorts — and I’m very, very active in that: I’m on the national board, I’m chair of the board here. (Vickie)

[Community] means a lot of things. It is a coming together of interests. It can be social values, it can be very tangible interests, like... biodiesel. Community can be also more spiritual, it can be a lot of things. (Minnie)

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<sup>32</sup> Many of the participants live in Ottawa communities where this ‘re-vitalization’ process is particularly noticeable: Westboro, Hintonburg, Vanier, and Ottawa South.

This brings to the fore the problem of situating interests — shared by spatially dispersed individuals — within a concept like ‘community’, which has traditional associations with specificity of place. When the separation from place — of urban CSA members from rural CSAs — is combined with a conception of community that is not situated in place, the nature of the engagement in *Community Supported Agriculture* changes. Even those who favoured increased engagement on the farm understood CSA as primarily involving activities other than farming, in places other than the farm:

I like to go to my yoga class and have the guy’s wife hand me my greens... [Community] will come — because I really haven’t yet got that much involved in it — so, I’ve had the vegetables, and I’ve talked with people involved, so I’ve made those connections, but ...we were away a lot last year, so we didn’t get to go to any of the dinners. (Bugs)

Those with little connection to the farm put further distance into their interpretation of situatedness within CSA:

It’s like a ...small store, where you go and buy stuff regularly. You get to know the butcher, you get to know the lady running the cash. So there is elements of a relationship with it, and I think that makes it positive. ...When I think of my food transactions, I like going to places where I know somebody who knows their stuff, and can talk to me about it, and maybe recommend something. (Elizabeth)

Having lived — and participated in CSAs — in both urban and rural settings, Henry saw that situatedness was easier to achieve in the rural, because of a connection to place, and that urban ‘community’ must accept its different foundation and nature:

It was a little bit larger community [living in the city] — because of ...the difference between [connecting in] the city and having to connect with somebody in the country — but I think that’s really important, that we do make those connections. (Henry)

### **Engaging with a Community of Expectations**

This raises the question of different expectations between different members of the same CSA — or between the farmer and her members — based on different

experiences of situatedness or community in other areas of their life. As mentioned earlier, participants identified a diverse set of origins and interpretations of the interests that they saw as integral to community.

[Community is] a mutuality of ideas, a sharing ...[which I get] mostly through the Church. (Faith)

[Community is] being understood by others and gathering in a safe and secure place. Extending ...your ideas about family. (Ani)

Members also identified different sources for engagement with CSA:

[My partner] didn't go to university and that is where I encountered a lot of the ideas that lead me down this path... Not that university itself was necessary, but one needs the right opportunities to meet a community that values things like CSAs. (Joan)

We grew up attached to neighbours, going to the local farmers' market in Kingston ...and with parents who believed in community, co-operation and philanthropy. CSA's are a natural extension of this approach. (Hope)

However, if the consumer understood the commonality of their community as 'shared interests', this could lead to assumptions about the nature of that community, and the motivations of other members. Some came to CSA with the assumption that, if it were to succeed, other members would have to share their values.

The initial idea was that people would all come to this with the common view that ...we want to support a farmer, and we want to eat locally, and that we all accept the risk of what that means, and that we all get involved in making it ...possible... by volunteering hours; and in that way, becoming more of a community around the farm. This has not happened, really. What's happened at [my CSA] is that people have been buying shares, and then remaining consumers... deciding 'well, that's not enough for me, next year I go somewhere else' — as opposed to becoming a part of making it work. ...The ideal ...is that the community would ...make it work; it wouldn't be just the farmer, saying 'I'm going to farm for a year', ...but it's fallen into that, for some reason. Even if it's a small ...coalition, we have been unable to make a community. ...I mean, I know it's possible; I know it exists somewhere else. And maybe even in Ottawa — I'm sure there's another CSA where [the members have] enthusiasm. ...There's other ...CSAs in the States that work out of the community spirit. (Patience )

Patience realized that such assumptions could lead to disappointment, should the diversity of conceptualizations prove to be reflected in a diversity of competing assumptions about fundamental commonalities. If other members do not share values or motivations for choosing local food or joining a CSA, they could also have different notions of which interests were being shared, what level and type of engagement was necessary, or even whether shared interests or interaction were essential to CSA.

Some people ...just come for the organic food, or the idea of the farm, or some people just see the sign on the street, and say 'Biodynamic? What does that mean?' (Patience )

I have some friends... who were part of a food co-op, for a while, and certainly that was very social for them, because... the bulk orders would come in, two or three times a year, and they'd all get together and re-pack it... I don't have the time for that, right now... [The current interaction] is kind of one-way... [which is] right for me, right now — I'd need more time to devote to something like that... (Vickie)

The email interaction, the status reports makes it personal; I consider [my producer] an 'investment', of a type.  
...While [my wife and I] are both committed to CSA, neither of us is really involved with it in any way other than as customers. (Thomas)

I like the idea [of a share]. Kind o' that nice little feel of, a little bit of almost *ownership* in that crop. (Theresa)

It [would be] an odd thing, to ...meet with people, where what you have in common is ...your consumption of vegetables. (Carl)

I met a few people... when I was volunteering [at the CSA]. ...It widened my understanding. I met an unhappy [member] ... she wasn't prepared for the quantity, or how heritage vegetables look. (Faith)

That was the one where you ...paid the \$500, but then you had to also participate in taking care of the land. And she said it might take a few years ...and there will be good years and bad years. It seemed to be a bit more 'co-op organized' ... I think of [my farmer] as a separate producer that you're buying a service from. (Elizabeth)

It is one thing to suggest that the purpose of CSA is "to extend the notion of community out a little, to broaden it." (Milton) But whose community?

### **Re-negotiating Community**

Some CSAs, either intentionally or accidentally, attain a level of homogeneity in the assumptions, intentions and expectations that surround their 'community'. This is often achieved through internal dialogue or recruitment practices:

It's all a very large, incestuous community. (David)

I could ask myself the question 'Would we be members of a CSA now, if we weren't friends?' ...I'm not sure. I mean, it certainly fits, philosophically, with a lot of other things that we believe in, but whether we would have actually sought it out: probably, at some point, but not as early on, I'm sure. (Julia)

However, as much as it might simplify the functioning of the CSA, another danger exists in unchallenged consensus, or homogeneity:

That's something about communities that's ...almost dangerous; ...if one gets into a community, one starts to believe that everybody thinks that way. Then you may start to have a more rosy view of the world than actually exists... (Joan)

As well, the potential exists for such a CSA to become both exclusive and exclusionary, becoming isolated from the discussions, practices and interactions of the food systems around them, even other local food systems. As a result of this isolation, opportunities for creating links between local food 'communities', or for encouraging new local food consumers, and cultivating broader social changes in attitudes, might be squandered. After all, if every consumer came to local food — and CSA, specifically — with the intention and expectation of establishing deep connections to a community of like-minded individuals, there would be no 'community-building' necessary. If local food is to broaden its impact, and create a stable, more serious, and flexible alternative to the global industrial food system, consumers who are not 'pre-motivated' must be attracted and engaged.

It would be a disappointment if [CSA member's attitudes were] uniform — it would mean the possibility of extending beyond the current population would be limited. (Julia)

That is, local food — and CSAs, specifically — must attract and engage consumers who come out of ambivalent curiosity, challenge, or scepticism, as well as those who bring hope, engagement and anticipation. In fact, it could be argued that those who approach local food with the former attitude are more likely to have encountered alternative perspectives; more experienced with accommodating the needs and expectations of others (or, at least, with the process), and; more familiar with and adept at consensus building. Negotiating social boundaries of interpretation in a reflexive manner — or at least anticipating that such may be a necessary part of the process of local food — could well cloak this alternative system with a legitimacy that might engage and retain diverse consumers. Several participants identified the need for flexibility of engagement with a diverse membership.

I'll do what I can to help rally the community for him, but I also don't think that you can ...force it. ...It'll be a continuum of ...involvement, out there. (Bruce)

These are hybrid models: I don't think everyone has to be out there doing the work. I guess the key is sharing the risk, right? For a ...farm, they have somebody else sharing the burden of the finances, so it definitely makes a difference, and it does keep people in an urban context connected to what's involved.

...Not everybody can do the work, right; someone may be disabled, someone may be ...time-challenged, may have little children... or can't be out in the sun very much.

...There are too many ways to contribute, I don't believe in just one way, and everyone has to do it, and everyone has to be in pain. (Hope)

That is to say, we should expect a 'continuum of involvement' because different interpretations of *local* and 'community' produce different conceptualizations of

situatedness, but also because these interpretations imply different levels and types of interaction and engagement.

At the same time, because of the limits of time, capital and energy, it must also be recognized that, while many opportunities for situatedness and engagement will arise, most will remain dormant, supported and ‘engaged’ only conceptually:

In theory, it would be nice to support [my local community] more, but my reality, in feeding three small kids, means that sometimes ...those chicken nuggets, that have nothing to do with my local community, go over really well... (Theresa)

Basically, I shop mostly for organic food. This part, I’m very embarrassed about: we go to the ‘local store’, and that happens to be Loblaws, which I never, never shopped at before I moved here. ...That is definitely an inconsistency that we are working to change. And I recognize that part of that is that I put so much time into the ...school, plus my practice, plus my kids... I had a buying club ...I stopped ordering, and I feel badly about it. I know lots of other people who’ve got the buying club, and I just cannot pull it together. So obviously, my energies have gone elsewhere.

One of the ironies; if you really want to see all of these wonderful organizations keep going, then you end up over-extending yourself... (Hope)

Opportunities for engagement can also remain dormant until such time as priorities governing situatedness converge with food choices:

We’ve always gotten involved in whatever ... our kids are doing.

...At that point [when we joined the CSA], most of the kids were at home ...and two of them were vegans, and we were just struggling for something for them to eat, and as well, a place that we could get that. (Vickie)

### **Situating Responsibility**

Clearly, however, the most important relationship or connection in local food, for both parties, is that between the consumer and their farmer. The depth and engagement of this connection help to ensure a continuing relationship — from year to year — that establishes real security for the farmer, in a way that an annual share cannot. Because of

the relative depth of the investment, the farmer will always have the ultimate responsibility for ensuring the success of the relationship:

...it's more [my farmer's] community, not my community, if you know what I mean... (Fern)

It's sort of funny, in a way, that we [CSA members] can do it with a bit of a blasé attitude, because we'll just go and supplement it from ...California. (Joan)

At the same time, for the consumer — depending on their prioritization of quality, security and trust — this relationship is the basis for continued and strengthened confidence in the guarantees offered by the producer, which establishes real trust for the consumer in a way that certification of retail purchases cannot.

The relationship is probably the big one, right? — because you could probably go to the Herb and Spice<sup>33</sup>, and take care to buy organic, local food...(Joan)

As their discussion of trust showed, many participants associated the marginalization of trust with both the impersonality of relationships and the lack of opportunity to practice trust. Similarly, the negotiation of mutual interests, expectations and responsibilities — the boundaries of the community — is as important a part of 'the practice of situatedness' as engagement in commonalities. Where the conceptualization of 'community' is based on a separation from place, the negotiation of boundaries within the CSA relationship becomes all the more significant. Matching interests, expectations and responsibilities between consumer and producer — whether this negotiation is communal or individualized — establishes a foundation for continued and expanded re-negotiation of community boundaries.

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<sup>33</sup> Herb and Spice is a local natural food store.

However, these boundaries must be compatible with the prioritizations of all parties. Given the diversity involved, it is not surprising that, what some may see as reasonable (or even essential) accommodations, might be interpreted by others as incompatible with their expectations. Many of the participants, whose farmer delivered to their house, identified convenience as a positive attribute of their membership:

They really help, with the convenience part: the fact that they deliver really helps. (Theresa)

We don't have to do the shopping, and we trust him to make nutritious choices for us. So it saves us time — there's the convenience factor — and ...he's doing the legwork [sourcing] new things, and we trust that they'll be nutritious and tasty. ...But we're not doing those micro-economic decisions every day... going to the grocery store, "what do I buy" ...we end up buying the same things, because there's too much choice. (Elizabeth)

Frankly, I'm willing to pay a premium, if they bring it to my door — even more of a premium, if they'd put it away for me. (Vickie)

I think ...you need convenience... if it becomes inconvenient, then it's an issue. But convenience, again, is a relative word. (Milton)

Others identified problems with fulfilling their expectations of situatedness, while offering door-to-door delivery:

I thought maybe I would get to meet him more, but they're really in a rush, I never saw them. ... I was surprised that they didn't make more of an effort to meet you on your doorstep... because they seem so personable in the letter ...That's why I like the depot idea much better: I don't think that the delivery really fit with the rest of the [CSA philosophy]. (Joan)

Of the six CSAs involved in the study, four delivered weekly to their members' houses. Joan was a member of one CSA in the process of re-negotiating this aspect of the relationship. In this case, re-negotiation came at the prompting of the farmer, with the express intent of promoting a sense of community around a central drop-off point. All of the participants who were members of this CSA looked favourably on the initiative. But

the farmer's suggestion of change included a discussion of benefits to members and farmer alike, and inevitably led to a wider re-negotiation of community boundaries:

He's complaining... that he never gets to talk to anybody — I mean, I say hello, if I see him... it would be more efficient to have people come and pick out what [vegetables] they want, within a category; I mean, you'd still have to use up all of the food that he grows, but he could pick a little more of the types of things we like. And it would be more efficient if we could have a central location that we could go to. (David)

I'm actually offering to help him out this year, and get a cluster of people in the neighbourhood... to try and help him get clustered drop-offs... He's instituting a drop-off charge for everybody, and I'm sure ...I've got three people already, to pick up from our place, and then none of us, maybe, will have the charge. And he likes that idea. ...We've offered our driveway, if he wants to park there, and have everybody come to him — but that may take a little while to pull off. ...He wants to meet people. We always wave to him and talk to him, when we see him, but some people, he's never actually met. (Bruce)

To these members, convenience was simply one more element in the process of re-negotiation of community boundaries; this process has an important situating function but, at the same time, clear connections to responsibility.

It's not just about being together, it's about supporting one another — and that means, you've got to be able to take the interests of the farmer, and the farm, and the land, and the crops into account, not just 'I want five good-looking carrots'. 'I want my beets for Tuesday'. 'I don't want a chicken with half a leg missing' ... (Hope)

The re-negotiation of shared responsibility can help to clarify the benefits and obligations of situatedness that can otherwise challenge the connection that holds the consumers to local food:

For whatever reason — I'll give her the benefit of the doubt — I never did get an email from [my farmer]. There was a newsletter, weekly, and I got one, somehow, and I was like ... 'there's great stuff in here' ...and I emailed her, and it never did work out. ...That really made it harder. Between that and just not having a lot of time to go out to the farm ...it hasn't been that much of a 'relationship'.

Of the three that I've been involved with, it's been the least satisfying. ...after one year. And all of the other CSAs I had been involved with for two to three

years. So this might change. And my own ability to engage has been less in the last year than it has been [at any time] in my life. So, it's not a one-way street, by any account.

I realized... 'why are you blaming ...the CSA? ...You're a member, why don't you get involved? Quit b-tching, and go off somewhere else —if you're going to be a non-contributing member, except for some cash — where you'll probably be unhappy as well... (Gerrard)

Continually re-negotiated community boundaries establish an accepted pattern for member interaction, which, in turn, encourages an exchange of information and experience. In this way, members of the community — farmers and consumers alike — are more likely to understand the dissatisfaction and priorities that initially encouraged each member to experiment with the *local*:

I want my community to be there for my children. I want the luxury of crossing the road or taking my bike ...to get my food instead of *having* to put my future in the hands of people in the city who don't care about me and my community. I don't want ... the people who are trying very hard to make my community sustainable, driven out because I'm not going to support them.

...I felt more mature after ...participating in [paying up-front for a share]... It takes a community to make change: why should she have to suffer for all of us if it's not... a good growing season. (Ani)

### ***Responsibility***

The interpretation of responsibility articulated by Ani, simultaneously extended (promoting sustainability both for her community, and over time) and narrow (directly sharing her farmer's burden through support), was common throughout the participants. For almost all, either explicitly or implicitly, responsibility was expressed through a willingness to 'pay more' to support the sustainability of their community, local people, or their farmer specifically:

Our communities need supporting... [I'm] happy to do my part.  
...For me, I'm prepared to pay — I'm prepared to do without other things...  
But that's very much ...a mentality from where I'm from, and where [my husband] is from. ...We live modestly, but we eat well. (Montana)

[The CSA is] doing good things for the community, providing employment, providing healthy food ...like everybody else on this planet, you have to make a living: I'm quite prepared to pay for what I consider to be good quality stuff. (Paul)

To me, [the purpose] is more to protect the farmers than... to get a 'good deal'. (Gerrard)

How this money would provide support was interpreted in diverse ways. For Gerrard, this responsibility of support was informed and largely predetermined by experience.

It's actually one of the things... that I believe in, about CSAs — money up front — having been on the producer side... From doing it... I know that joy, and I know that exhaustion, from a 14 hour day, For me, through that connection, I just value that, I support that, I want to maintain people that are connected with the land. ...I think about it as something more basic than support. ...It's one of those things I have a knee-jerk, romantic [reaction to]... (Gerrard)

Some saw guaranteed payment to the farmer (for some CSAs, up-front payment) as another part of relieving the burden of the farmer — in this case, the burden of carrying, by themselves, the investment for seed and seasonal requirements — and therefore the risk of the success of the crop.

Mine's seasonal, and here we pay... in instalments, whereas there ...they have a weekly fee, and that's what they pay.  
...The CSA I think of as supporting one farmer. (Socrates)

It really makes you ...have a better sense of what it's like to farm, but ...take some pressure off the farmer. ...I got the sense they prefer it all at once, and I figured, it's more helpful to them, so if you can afford to do it, why not help them out that way. (Joan)

Several felt that providing support through payment required a justifiable sacrifice, or a return to previously accepted obligations, including the need to proportionally increase food budgets:

[In our society], an ever-declining proportion of our income goes towards food... (Julia)

[CSA is about] paying for what I think is the true cost of food. ...It is — for my lifestyle — important that [my food choices] are affordable ... 'cause it's not like we have tons of extra money, me being a student. At the same time,

...we spend more on our food ...as a percentage, than most people would, and we don't feel badly about it. (Lizzie)

I would say my food budget takes up a way larger proportion of my overall budget than it does for the average person, and that's something I'm entirely comfortable with. ...If you're going to consume things ...it's better than going to Wal\*Mart and making yourself feel better by buying yourself a new ...set of china...(Joan)

Others felt that this responsibility had to be a reciprocal relationship of fairness between producer and consumer:

[The purpose of CSA is] to get me fresh farm produce; to support a local grower on a consistent basis... (Henry)

[PM - Do you feel... obligated, as a weekly customer, to continue with the service, because you realize that ...consistency supports the farmer?]

No, I don't feel an obligation because of that. It's easier, economically, from my point of view, to put out a small amount of money weekly. I can understand their reason for wanting an up front share, for those that charge an annual fee, because it gives them money at the beginning of the growing season, and they don't have any other income going in, so that's an advantage to them...

It's more important to me that [my food choices] be fair, both to me and the producer, both to me as a consumer and to the producer. (Henry)

### **Re-negotiating Responsibility**

Responsibility of support was seen by few as unqualified. Many identified a responsibility on the part of the producer that went beyond the guarantee of security, discussed earlier, to include diverse expectations — from variety to proactivity.

The first year, by the time we got to October, I had way too many potatoes in the fridge. So I stopped, and then I started again the following summer. And I did that for several years, because there were just too many root crops — they just didn't have the variety they now have. (Carl)

She was a woman who wasn't raised to be a farmer. She was an urban woman who went to the farm, and did all the courses, and it was extremely challenging for her. ...It was a lesson for her, in terms of asking about support — she wasn't as good at asking for support as she needed to be. That was all part of the lesson. (Hope)

The responsibility to support the farmer's economic sustainability was often part of a negotiation, either implicitly or explicitly involving the farmer, and concerning budgetary, time and mobility limits:

The first week I got the basket, I thought 'Is that all there is?' I thought ...we were paying a lot for what you got. So I emailed them and said, 'you know, I was a little surprised by what I got', and they sent me back a breakdown... They don't normally do that, but they did it for me. (Vickie)

He was trying to say, in a roundabout way, that it's really incompatible to care about local, organic food and to care about cost. It worked... I had been a bit anxious about spending that money again this year, ...my budget's changed, and I was like, 'well...', and just to read that, it kind of reaffirmed — it's worth spending that money, and here are the reasons why...(Joan)

If the guy who I had a CSA with in Vancouver did not deliver to my university... they only had 2-3 drop-off points in the whole bloody city, and he was in Abbotsford, or something like that — he was way out there, up the valley — ...if he hadn't been delivering to the university, I wouldn't have been in the CSA, because ...I had no car. And that's an issue with [my current CSA], too. ...Basically, I had to pick up every single delivery, last year, for ...us, and the other couple we were splitting with, because the other couple... didn't have a car. I had a car, but I didn't drive it to work, so I had to actually drive my car to work, on those days, to get back and get [the food basket]. ...It is, potentially, a real challenge, for a lot of people. (Gerrard)

We've been tempted to [stop in some months], but they can't have customers that do that to them, so we try really hard not to do that to them. ...[I was surprised by] how dependent they were on their customers to *not* be fickle. It surprised me that *I* felt a responsibility towards *them*... I don't treat them like I treat any other business...

...I've also been surprised by how much the price has gone up in the last year or two, and how much I've been willing to take. But it's the feeling of responsibility... to them. I'm not going to cancel my basket because it's going up by \$5 a week. ...In the summer, when they're at the markets, the outdoor markets, we buy stuff from them ...preferentially; also because they treat us really well.... Which is another reason we couldn't justify cancelling our baskets — 'cause every time we go there, he gives us free vegetables... ...We pay them, and that's the only way they stay in business, so to me it's the same; whether it's a co-op or a business, it's the same idea... (Lizzie)

Because I choose to not have a car, it has to be close ...but I'm willing to go through the time, supporting the CSA, of putting an hour into washing and sorting and bagging the vegetables, because it's worth it to me. I'm not one of

those people: ...'I really care about the environment, and stuff, it's important, but I just don't have the time' ...in fact, I ensure that my life is not that stressful... (Joan)

These comments reinforce the important role that engagement and prioritization, but also interaction with other conceptual interpretations — such as quality, security and situatedness — can play in the negotiation of responsibility.

Of course, this negotiation between priorities and constraints often occurred in the mind of the participant:

In terms of ...ethics, ...I'm aware that, when I eat out at a restaurant — I don't go to the Green Door,<sup>34</sup> it's too expensive, right? — all my [ethical code] goes out the window. Which is one reason why it's so important to follow it when you can. (Joan)

The domestic negotiations of boundaries also produced competition and limits. Of the participants who negotiated food decisions, some attempted to convince their partners of the strength of their own interpretation and prioritization. Others looked to their partner's prioritization, attempting to convince them that CSA could fulfill such requirements.

I tend to focus on the benefits of fresh and organic produce and my partner focuses more on the cost - he needs to be persuaded that it is worth it. Where do the differences come from? I am more involved because I am retired and he is still working and so he spends much less time in the community and is less connected to it. (Bugs)

Some compromised, finding a middle ground; in fact, CSA often served as a middle ground between *local* and organic.

We're both committed to the product being organic, pesticide-free, and local where possible. That said, on the specific issue of which is more important, *local* or organic, we sometimes differ. For example on apples, I'd pick local apples over imported organic, and he would do the opposite, because he believes the pesticide risk is more important. As for where that comes from,

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<sup>34</sup> The Green Door is a vegetarian, organic restaurant that uses locally grown ingredients.

I'm not sure because I'm the one with more background in health, and him in environment, but I guess my reasoning is I'm looking at whether the food is good for us (apples being good) and saying I'd rather have something local and fresher, whereas for him, the fear of the unknown potential impact of pesticides is the bigger issue. (Lizzie)

At one time my wife was more concerned with health and nutrition issues, while I was more concerned with the social and economic impact of our food distribution system. This led to some small differences in food selection at one time — for instance, buy organic or buy *local*? — but a combination of finding more options (organic AND *local*), plus each of us gaining more appreciation for the other's point of view, makes this a non-issue these days. (Thomas)

Social negotiation presented greater challenges — both to the farmer and the group — where the CSA demanded direct involvement of the members in production and organization.

Some of the members — although we thought we were clear about that — expected that... the farm would succeed, we would get a huge basket every week. (Patience )

People can mouth words and not necessarily follow through with actions. And they won't even be aware of the schism between those words and those actions. That is the real challenge for the CSA, for any co-operative... anything where there's a need for collective action. ...[Consensus] is more challenging when it has to be formally established, because then you have to establish rights and responsibilities. That's a whole area that can be ...very challenging in any organization of a collective kind, because the people are much happier to get their "rights" without doing their responsibilities. And people take up the slack, and then become very resentful... (Hope)

Addressing the externalization of support for local producers played a large role in the participants' negotiations of responsibility, particularly where this coincided with the relationship to their farmer. However, many identified roles for alternative, equally important interpretations of responsibility, involving social accountability for their food choices.

## The Marginalization of Responsibility

Throughout their discussions, participants described dissatisfaction with what they saw as an absence of accountability in broader social decisions. Many saw their food choices as a direct response to this marginalization:

[Local farmers] are the stewards of the land. These are not the factory farmers — they're not the people putting in ...the massive pig farm in Cumberland. (Fern)

[Fair trade is about] making people aware of where food comes from — bringing moral choices into food choices. ...and supporting more humanistic economies. (Elizabeth)

[CSA is] buying local, supporting small farms nearby, ...paying for what I think is the true cost of food, ...[and] maintaining the diversity of our food supply. (Lizzie)

Within the global industrial food system, local agricultural sustainability is not a consumer choice. That is, by favouring large-scale production and distribution structures, the option to choose *local* increasingly disappears from the consumer's retail experience. Several participants identified the difficulty of supporting local producers, or making alternative choices, in an infrastructure designed for conventional distribution and food preferences:

It's not always possible to [make sustainable choices] — you know, given the infrastructure that we have. (Carl)

Although I'm a vegetarian, I do eat dairy products and eggs. ...I just think it would be way too complicated to try to cut those things... and they're a handy source of protein. If you're travelling, sometimes it will be the only source of protein. ...and I love cheese! (Minnie)

In recent years, we've made more of a conscious effort to buy food locally. Oranges aside. Where there's a choice, we choose to reduce our food miles. ...I'm in a position to do that — I know that the choice we're making... is the more expensive choice than going down to the big grocery store... [for] stuff that doesn't have the same quality, and I think that's terrible ...but that's the way our agricultural distribution system is set up, right now. (Vickie)

Many saw the marginalization of local sustainability as the product of flawed collective choices: a new consensus would need to re-integrate this and other externalities into the decision-making process, in order to achieve social responsibility. Despite a widespread unease over a potential role for government in local food, some participants suggested that the limits to CSA involvement could be addressed through the promotion and subsidization of local food models, or through the removal of subsidies to conventional agriculture.

There's so many systemic subsidies to larger production. ...It's ...about thinking in... systemic ways about the kinds of thing that gets supported by all the dollars that go into road building, or the fact that costs aren't internalized from mining, oil... it's a much bigger picture. (Julia)

The government could play a very good role, starting with subsidies. ...We have so many agricultural subsidies right now that do just the opposite — that favour huge land assemblage, and industrial farming — [they should instead] offer subsidies that *did* favour the small producers. ...Tax hydrocarbon inputs, instead of subsidizing their use. (David)

[The government should] subsidize models of sustainable economies: through agriculture is a great way. ...We rent from the NCC, but the NCC could forgive that: they have their research [stations], the Experimental Farms, well, we could [become one].

...Wouldn't that be nice: all the farmland the NCC owns, right now they lease to all kinds of people, but they would decide, as a project, 'Let's [make] all of this [land] that surrounds Ottawa organic'. ...And ...give access to people that want to do organic farms and CSAs. ...If all this was [changed], it would be enough to give you a big part of your food [within the city]. (Patience )

Julia suggested complete transparency in labelling — for instance, listing health and environmental externalities, to facilitate consumer calculations of true cost, and consumer choices while, perhaps, encouraging the prioritization of food choices among the plethora of competition for consumers' resources. However, in the interim, 'local food' served as a short-hand to responsible decision-making, containing many of the goals that she valued:

Ideally, if the world operated according to the Adam Smith model of capitalist economies, where everybody had perfect information about the things that they were consuming, the concept of local wouldn't necessarily be the ...difference between something that is ...appropriate to purchase from personal health and environmental points of view, and something that isn't. But ...in the absence of that kind of information — and hopefully there's a growing demand for that and we'll become more sophisticated in our labelling, et cetera — local food means ...a lower level of environmental burden in terms of transport, primarily, but possibly in terms of production, as well. It means some sense of supporting the local economy, and having money circulate more within the local economy...

It means, potentially ...supporting smaller producers, supporting people in something they feel passionate about doing... (Julia)

### **The Individualization of Responsibility**

On the other hand, many interpreted responsibility as the individual acceptance of accountability, or the internalization, within their own food choices, of the externalities produced by the conventional food system. Some saw the price as a reflection of the responsibility of the consumer to pay full value for a product that addressed some of the negative effects of conventional food production. Such an exchange was not possible within the conventional food system, where externalities — from environmental degradation to uncertain risk — were absent from the price calculation. The elimination of the potential impacts of excessive mechanical, chemical, and energy use in the production of their food, therefore, demanded that the consumer pay the labour costs incurred to replace these inputs. Many went further, suggesting that the cost of local food was a means of recognizing the value of other attributes supplied by the farmer — like trust, situatedness...

It has to do with how much the consumer is willing to pay for their food. ...If I've read anything through my exploration of an alternative lifestyle, and working with the CSA, it's that most people don't pay — for food — the 'real price' that it should be. (Minnie)

I have difficulty with how things are valued [in society]: by name, instead of contribution. We need to change that structure.

...[CSA] values the sustainability of the small farmer, the community basis — knowing the farmer, knowing the produce —and it values integrity, and repeat customers. (Faith)

Therefore, while supportive of local farmers, many simultaneously identified their choices as alternative: as protest against the effects of the negative externalities of the conventional food system, and the absence of accountability within that system — or, as Bruce stated, a means of “bypassing the corporate wall of groceries”.

[The purpose of CSA is] to bring consumers closer to food producers, it's to bring consumers closer to food choices, to their food sources, it's to go around the middlemen ...huge companies trucking food across the continent. (Elizabeth)

I am very much repelled by agri-business, and would avoid supporting it as much as I can, and I feel that being a member of a CSA is a way of opting out. (Carl)

Several identified responsibility toward the environment as a primary motivation — either through the reduction of effects from the externalities of conventional production, or through the promotion of sustainable methods addressing these externalities:

The most important thing to me is to know that the food is produced without too much harm to the environment — my primary motivator. ...Because my predominant driver is ...an environmental interest, I am not that keen on the big California producers, or buying organic apples from New Zealand. ...I'm one of those who would buy *local* over organic...(Julia)

Why should we be — unless it's absolutely necessary — importing huge amounts of vegetables, at great cost to the environment, if it's all available here? (Paul)

Hot-house tomatoes in the middle of January, around here, [represents] ...the over-use of resources to produce something that isn't absolutely essential. ...A percentage of food will always come from further away, but the relative amount “can be shifted a great deal, and provide a lot more economic ...and social benefit in local areas — [to be] more equitable, more sustainable than it is right now. (Bruce)

Some acknowledged that, while aware of the effects of these externalities, they had instead prioritized a narrower interpretation — that of responsibility to family security:

There is a gap between my ideals and the reality. ... I want to give [my children] the best [food available].

...Because I choose to eat organic, I get food from California and all over; ...because I cannot be sustained by a local farm all year round. I wish I could live my life just eating the food that is available. (Patience)

What we do, when we go to Loblaws, we buy everything that we can't get from our farm friends. ...Our meat and our eggs still come all year-round, ...fresh and direct. And the greens don't. So we buy fruits and vegetables, some of which come from places that are far away... My friends won't believe this. You're changing my name? ... "She's buying California organic! What the hell's she doing! ...All the transportation costs, and energy consumption! (Hope)

For parents among the participants —half of those interviewed —the elimination of risk from the family food supply was an important aspect of responsibility. Equally important was the education of their children about how food was produced; the problems and realities of the conventional food system; the benefits of local food, and; their responsibilities as a consumer.

I do want to teach my children the importance and the value of eating well ...[and] concern for local farmers... We are both pretty committed to organic, community co-op agriculture. We both come from very small communities — me Summerside, PEI, [my husband] Ponta Del Gada in the Azores Islands in Portugal — where life had very little pre-packaged foods when we grew up. There was also very little obesity - and we really see a shocking difference now in the city. We worry about our children, and want so much to set them on the right path - to support *local* and small, and that simple is yummy ...and that cooking with fresh foods is not hard at all. (Montana)

At eight, he was spreading clover seeds in the field ...and they all know what a weed is, and what isn't a weed, so they've learnt it all. And they complained, and it would be hot ...well, they had to work! They had to put in ...effort, and what's the impact of that? Well, do you think my kids are going to grow up saying 'Just give it to me off the shelf'; 'Who cares about those farmers?' ...No way. My kids are completely conscious of the whole food cycle... from beginning to end. (Hope)

Our kids will love that — see where their food is grown, and appreciate that it doesn't just come from a store. (Milton)

While many interpreted this responsibility for education fairly narrowly — including only family or close friends — as many conceptualized responsibility for education as ‘extended’ to broader society, because without broader social awareness and action, broader engagement and change would not happen:

That would be something I would recommend, is to have ...more gardening opportunities for children — to grow their vegetables, supervised or run by CSA farmers... (Socrates)

There’s a huge importance to promoting the concept of Community Shared Agriculture. Not that it’s going to be possible for everyone to engage in it, but it’s a huge opportunity for education: even that alone, to me, is useful. It’s not just about those who are directly engaged in it, it’s about educating people to know that there needs to be shared *risks* involved in growing our food, which is promoted through the CSA. That’s part of the sacrifice — there isn’t a guarantee ...and it’s a lot of work, so we’re all going to need to take more involvement. (Hope)

Several felt that the general alienation of consumers from the reality of food production, and the source of their food, was an indication of the need for broader educational efforts:

We had a housewarming, and we thought; ‘wouldn’t it be great to have a pig roast. Wouldn’t that be fun’. ...So we had the pig in the backyard. We had people we thought we knew, who came to our house, saw the face on the animal that we were going to eat, and turned around and left. They’d never eaten an animal with a face before. ...They weren’t vegetarians, but they had to get their meat from a styrofoam plate. (Fern)

There’s a concept of ...‘serve me’ when I’m a consumer, and there’s a whole other ...concept when it’s community, where we are all responsible. ...We all need to take responsibility, and that responsibility needs to be shared... because it’s not always fun — in fact, it really does require sacrifice... I think one of the great travesties, in our society, over the last ...100 years, the shift from rural to urban existence, and the alienation of the urban population from the rural lifestyle — is that we in the city *don’t get* how much sacrifice is entailed in sustaining a rural existence, and in maintaining a farm... Growing crops, the amount of work, and lack of predictability, based on natural cycles... In the urban context, we’ve been raised to think that we can control things... we’ll walk into the supermarket, and there it will be... (Hope)

### Agency Through Responsibility

Most of the participants had a strong sense that their actions and choices with regards to local food were ‘responsible’: comments relating to the purpose of CSA — including “making consumers accountable for what they’re eating” (Lizzie) — often suggested as much. However, most of the participants interpreted responsibility as a burden that they chose to carry, rather than an obligation for which consumers were accountable. As such, most approached the social negotiation of responsibility using their choice as an example, rather than a judgement. Relativism relating to responsibility was fairly widespread; some saw their own actions as relative to circumstance, while most were not willing to judge the interpretations, engagement or prioritizations of others.

For me, [CSA] is [right], I don’t know if it always would be, for another person, in another circumstance... (Henry)

It’s right for me. (Paul)

[CSA] is ‘a good thing’— I don’t want to push [my views]. (Faith)

Better food choices is the right thing to do for everybody, but it doesn’t have to be through a CSA. (Lizzie)

Some were willing to pass relative judgement:

That depends on your values. [CSA] is the right thing ...for me. I mean, I think there’s *some* objective [values] ... It’s the right thing to do if you value the health of the environment, and humans, and the local food industry; if you don’t value those things, it’s not the right thing to do... (Joan)

Clearly, during the social re-negotiation of boundaries, relativism was not the only experience of the participants. Some expressed their choices as opposition to the re-negotiation tactics of others:

What works — and not just about food — is walking your talk, being true, and then people will ask questions. ‘You look so vibrant, so healthy: what do you do?’ [Rather than] trying to shove it down their throat, just be it, and people will see. (Patience )

I have a friend who calls it 'lifestyle politics' ... it's so pervasive now that people are really judgemental... even among your group of friends. (Charlie)

I never force my principles on someone else. I'd hope that they'd think that what I did was valuable, and... basically emulate me. (Carl)

While many saw responsibility for their actions or values as a priority, some interpreted this narrowly — as applying to their actions or their role within the family. Where responsibility was interpreted as extended, some chose active, missionary roles, but most avoided advocacy or judging, opting instead for leadership by example:

I mentioned it at work, and a number of people started because of those kinds of discussions... My dad was a preacher, and I think I've got some of that in me. (Henry)

I don't proselytise about it, but ...if people find out, I feel good about being able to say what we do, and why. (Julia)

I do try to ...set an example, I think that's the best way to try to influence for change in all kinds of matters. I do tai chi... and the way we learn tai chi is by the example of others... (David)

Influencing change through the example of engaging in responsible choices serves to lend agency to the actions of those local food consumers who, like Joan, face an immovable conventional food system, and complacency, alone:

I have a bit of a fatalistic attitude: if I make that effort to bring my plastic container to the Herb and Spice, so that I can fill the peanut butter up again instead of buying another new container there, that's really not making much of a difference right now, in the world — and if I was really doing it because I thought it would make a difference, I wouldn't do it, right?  
...The reason I've come up with is, I ...walk around preaching this alternative way of living and I'd better be able to prove people that I'm willing to do it, and that it's possible to do it... (Joan)

As Joan's statement suggests, an important part of agency, for many, is the belief that one's actions could 'make a difference'. Of course, how actions achieve such a purpose could be interpreted in many ways.

### *Agency*

For the participants, agency — as with responsibility — was often attached to the their role within the family, often as ‘example’ or ‘policy-maker’. For some, control of and responsibility for family food decisions, since moving to local food, have produced opportunities for an expandable, unobstructed source of personal engagement and empowerment: ensuring food quality; making responsible decisions, and; giving purpose to the family’s food choices.

In our household, I do the majority of the food purchasing, so my husband ... agrees with pretty much anything I purchase to eat. ...I have the direct connection to the CSA and [he] is a happy consumer along for the ride. I am the one involved because I spend my time making the food choices and most of the food preparation. For us, it is simple division of household tasks, and the food tasks are mine. (June)

For that kind of stuff, my family tends to follow my lead – I’ve given out some vegetables, and prepared meals that had the fresh vegetables, and let them see for themselves, and that’s the best kind of promotion... We prefer Fair Trade, organic, *local* — I describe it as shopping politically. ...I have to confess that I run the show when it comes to food procurement around here. ...I am the political one in the family and I am the cook; therein lies the power. Ha-ha. (Margaret)

Some saw the family — or the self — as the only realms where purposeful action should have an effect. For some, this was the result of an individualized interpretation of responsibility:

You should be able to take care of yourself; ultimately, it’s not dependent upon others, for you to decrease your footprint. (Milton)

However, while some chose to constrain their actions, many others felt that, beyond their immediate circumstance, their power to effect change was limited:

If I were to have a philosophy about my own existence, it would be to do no harm; to make as little negative impact on the earth as I can while living a ...healthy life... even though I realize we are a raindrop in the ocean. ...My sphere of influence is my family. (Montana)

Agency was most often identified with the ability to challenge the interpretations of others through personal example:

If I'm righteous in my actions, I do want people to observe them. ...But that's not the purpose ...not to boast, or pontificate. ...I want people to know what I'm doing, because I want them to do it. (Ani)

I think people have this pre-conceived notion of who does — or who does not — ... participate in certain groups, and so it's always fun to break ...some stereotypes down a little bit. (Milton)

The sentiment was widespread that the example set by personal engagement in local food — and CSA — could help to raise a general level of awareness among other consumers.

Most saw awareness as the first step in their own engagement; therefore, encouraging awareness could open the door to broader participation in local food. Both access and awareness of access to local food were seen as important first steps:

It's the first time ...who and where — the accessibility to the name, and how to contact them — was there... It had been something I had been thinking about doing, but hadn't put the time and energy into ...researching and doing it, so when it kind-of fell on my lap, I thought 'perfect!' ...A lot of it is just simple awareness, putting out links for people. More people would do it if they understood it. (Theresa)

I've always tried to buy local and organic. I have become more and more committed ...partly awareness and personal reasons, but partly because it's also more available. (Henry)

Many associated their increased awareness with an empowerment to make the difficult choices that led to their own engagement with local food. This included the choice to *abdicate choice* to another, through the exercise of trust — a necessary part of CSA:

I remember her telling me she got organic vegetables delivered, but you couldn't pick what you got, and I remember thinking 'oh, that's really strange, who'd want that?' (Vickie)

Some people want what they want, when they want it... and the idea of not knowing exactly what you're going to get every week... that sort of thing isn't for everybody. (Bruce)

I'm trusting him with the health of my family — I'm trusting him to choose nutritious choices for the good part of [our diet]. (Elizabeth)

Participants identified a broad range of courses of action and potential effects achievable through raising the general awareness of individual consumers. The actions and effects identified by each often suggested areas of personal priority, reflecting their own path to engagement:

It took it from being that thought in my head, somewhere, to doing it because it was right there. If there was some way of reaching people through various ...programs — easy accessibility to 'phone numbers and places, and more information... (Theresa)

It's good to get the message out; the government gives us ...messages on all kinds of things — why not? (Bruce)

Local action, but globally informed. ...Buy as much as you can locally, and then you're conscious of fuel economy and fair trade for the rest of your purchases, or interacting with other 'local food economies' ...that have different specialties ...working with different co-ops, ...trying to network. (Henry)

I believe that one of the reasons that I have a facility for being co-operative is because my own father ...would say to me, over and over again, 'everybody helps everybody, and everybody keeps company'.  
...I think you have to have ...a certain philosophical set of values. People need to appreciate, even if they're not engaged in it fully all the time. You really have to have people understand what the point of it is, right? It's not 'Give me some food, cheap'... As I say, I really feel it's a huge educational opportunity: people need to get it. (Hope)

It takes time and effort to educate others in order to make real change in our systems of approach. It is no easy task to convince people that they should abandon the choice that takes the least effort to make. Leading by example — participating in a CSA — is one way to educate that food in the stores is not only affecting climate change, but it is not as nutritious, and is economically damaging for local economy. Overall participating in a CSA is not just about supporting the farmer, and having organic food, it's about supporting a sustainable community and a future for our children. (Ani)

## Interpreting Agency

However, irrespective of their own path, many saw greater agency — or potential for agency — in collective action. This extension of agency both affected and was affected by their involvement in local food:

[Community is] a very potent and powerful thing in social relations. The environmental activist community — or those that are interested in some aspect of environmental sustainability — whether they be people who like dogs, or birds, or canoeing, or they have a cottage on the lake, and they understand that the lake is in trouble if they don't do something ... then they get involved, and they work with their neighbours... There's a lot of things around here where my involvement is minimal: even if I don't go to the meeting, and even if I don't make a donation or write a letter, ... I'm still, hopefully providing some kind of support, in the sense that I'm saying to the group... 'Carry on with this', or 'I'm glad you're looking into that, we have to do something about that'. (David)

I see it as part of a group of people who want to preserve quality food and untainted food, and who want to set against ... mass production... and I really like that. (Bugs)

Putting your efforts together, whether it's your funds, or whether it's your hands in the dirt, you can't help but be a part of ... a greater cause. (Ani)

For some, both individual consumer choices and collective agency had sub-political possibilities; from encouraging broader consumer engagement, to shifting political discourse and action.

I think it's a bit of a political message, too, in the sense that if enough people [use their consumption to advocate for change], the government might consider, itself, doing more regulation to support local farmers, because my understanding is that a lot of these farmers couldn't sell at a grocery store if they wanted to, the way distribution networks aren't set up, and you always hear things about farmers wishing that the province would ... change its policies... (Joan)

[While it's an alternative now], I think [local food] is becoming more mainstream; I hope it's becoming more popular... On Eco Perth's website, one of the things they say is that in the 1960's, 70% of our food was purchased locally. Even the food in the grocery stores was from local producers. ... That's a big change in a very short period. (Henry)

I am blessed — my kids go to a Waldorf school which has a direct connection to a CSA... a biodynamic farm. They go there every spring [to work]. ...Wouldn't that be wonderful: if all children really got that experience — really got to be engaged. So Community Shared Agriculture is ...such an opportunity as an educational tool. ...There must be creative ways to evolve an educational [curriculum] ...to connect the public school system to the farmers, and the farmers must be able to see that there is a way to get support that they ...need and deserve. (Hope)

It takes a community to make change. ...It is very political: It's the kind of movement that, I hope, influences the people who are on town council... [My farmer] is much more effective doing what she's doing now, in terms of making changes. (Ani)

The benefits of collective agency were not contained to the perception of broader social effect: some identified sources of personal agency simply from engagement in collective action:

Anything that's collective gives us more power, within ourselves, individually. If I know that you're having the same views, that you're doing the same thing that I'm doing, it reassures me — I know I'm in company. ...We always feel more empowered when we're in company. (Hope)

To feel part of a community ...I need to feel like I have a little bit of an influence on what's going on, that I have a bit of a voice... and that I am able to contribute in ways that I find personally satisfying and that I think are moving the community in the right direction: towards sustainability — that's a very big part of the picture for me. (Julia)

While these words show the potential to derive 'agency from agency', they also describe how collective action could easily become a limit to agency. The perception that the power (the 'ability', the 'means') to act purposefully has diminished, through a change in purpose, can lead to disappointment from unmet expectations, or disagreement over direction, control, or influence.

As the preceding sections have established, each of the boundary concepts governing food choices has been marginalized as the result of the development of the global industrial food system. 'Quality' has come to be measured by visual appeal;

'security' by what is possible within a regulatory structure. 'Trust' is most often 'assumed'; 'situatedness' is relative to a label reading 'Product of...'. 'Responsibility' can be accessed by choosing 'travelled' organic, while relying on a regulatory structure of uncertain merit. (See 'trust', above.) As a result, it is understandable that, throughout this manuscript, participants have expressed, as a form of personal agency, their ability to access and deliver food of unsurpassed quality, and guaranteed security, their ability to grant trust, create tangible connections to their food, or assume relationships of support and responsibility.

## *Conclusions*

### **Local Food as a Reflexive Process**

From the conversations with local CSA members, it was clear that, whether they came to CSA through happenstance, through active searching, or through the recruitment efforts of their farmer, all were, at the time, predisposed toward local food. Each, at some previous point, had an experience, encountered information, or was exposed in some way to ideas that challenged the legitimacy of at least one aspect of the conventional food system.

This encounter with reflexivity left them with an awareness of externalities produced by that system. Continued exposure to, and awareness of externalities, challenged the legitimacy of food choice boundaries. The conventional food system's marginalization of the concepts upon which consumers based their food decisions exacerbated this challenge. The increasing uncertainty or ambiguity of these boundaries caused participants to seek, or consider, alternative solutions. Reflexive exposure to challenges, awareness of externalities and marginalization, and acknowledgement of unstable boundaries, in concert, provided a predisposition that motivated participants' involvement in local food when matched with the opportunity to choose a potentially stable alternative to the conventional food system.

Whether their motivation was overtly framed as dissatisfaction, a search for an imagined absence, or simply an appreciation of a specific attribute of local food — 'freshness', for instance — their description contained the implication that the consumer sought something that the conventional food system could not supply.

### **Re-Interpretation of Boundary Concepts**

The use of boundary concepts, as a tool to analyse the participants' descriptions, brought to light the clear connections between identified externalities, the marginalization of consumer choice, and challenged conceptual categories:

- quality (freshness, taste and variety);
- security (pesticides and nutrient loss);
- trust (confidence and transparency);
- situatedness (meaningful interaction and seasonality) and;
- responsibility (accountability and sustainability).

That is, challenges to legitimacy affect not simply the consumer's immediate food choice decisions, but also their interpretation of the concepts, and the stability of the boundaries, guiding those decisions.

In the re-interpretation of these concepts, participants often described a search for what was missing (from 'taste' to 'connection'). This search for 'imagined absences' demands that the consumer interpret a new conceptualization based on memory, historical accounts, or a conceptualized ideal.

Similarly, through their description of externalities and marginalization of choice, generated by the conventional food system, it became clear that participants often perceived the reflexive challenges as so powerful that no meaning could be attached to conceptualizations describing the product delivered by that system. With the understanding that the boundary concepts governing food choice were emptied of meaning — and therefore marginalized — by the conventional food system, it becomes easier to see local food choice as a part of the consumer's search for agency. That is, the

ability to provide quality and security where it was lacking, and the powers to grant trust or accept responsibility, also have the potential to deliver *agency* to the local food consumer. All of these powers are marginalized — absent or ‘accepted’, and taken on faith — in the conventional food system.

At the same time, the perception that boundary concepts have been marginalized by the conventional food system often led consumers to re-conceptualize based on their experience of the local food system. Re-interpreted concepts were often associated with local food simply by virtue of the participant’s membership in CSA. Because of the interactions between concepts, and the inference that the participant’s chosen local alternative addressed specific absences identified within the conventional food system, the very qualities that described their CSA — and their membership — were often the same qualities that were seen to assure the stability of the re-interpreted concepts: ‘support’, ‘small’, ‘local’, ‘organic’, ‘farmer’.

### **Linking Externalities and Boundary Concepts**

Awareness of multiple externalities within the conventional food system was high among the participants. On the whole, participants prioritized concepts reflecting the externalities that ‘brought them’ to local food — those that were most persuasive, or resonated with their experience. For some, this was a single factor; for most, multiple factors combined. Participants recognized externalities from the perspective of their roles as parent, nutritionist, environmentalist or doctor; out of concern for sustainability or from risk; searching for a connection to their food, or freshness.

The interactions of externalities, and the resulting linkage of conceptual interpretations, are clear in the manuscript and go beyond the exercise of agency

described above. Security was often seen to deliver quality, because of the latter's association with 'organic', 'healthy', and nutritional value. Similarly, security was achieved through confidence based partly on the practices of the farmer, but more significantly, through the participant's interactions and relationship with this farmer. For many, the latter served as their only connection to 'place' and, as such, situatedness. Support for local farmers, a key element of responsibility identified by participants, also passed through this relationship. Because it was tangential to this research, the potential consequences of producers' differential abilities to capitalize on this relationship of confidence and responsibility — as with their abilities to adapt to economic constraints— was given minimal attention. Further research is required into the factors likely to cause — and the effects of — differential producer adaptation to new economic alternatives and market forms, as well as consumer perception of such alternatives (within the context of the current economic system).

### **Stable Concepts, Stable Boundaries**

Where individual concepts were interpreted with ambiguity or ambivalence, participants tended to de-prioritize their role in boundary formation. Participants showed little uncertainty within their own interpretations; even where many identified unsure information relating to the effects of pesticides, the use of precaution as the basis for their interpretation of security diffused this uncertainty and assured the stability of the reconceptualization. This affirmed the hypothesis that participants would strive to remove uncertainty and ambiguity from their interpretation of these boundary concepts, which serve a stabilizing as well as an interpretive function.

Relativism, on the other hand, was applied widely to the situational interpretation of concepts. All recognized local food as one portion of their diet, and engaged in different interpretations and prioritizations of concepts when negotiating boundaries surrounding their other food choices. This negotiation was clearest in the oft-mentioned uneasy relationship between participants and store-bought organics — both in the interpretation and re-prioritization of security, trust and responsibility. Members of one CSA had the benefit of sourcing supplemental produce through their CSA farmer in winter — a practice that perhaps merits further examination. Who better to provide a trusted source than a local farmer with whom a relationship of confident trust is already established?

What these situational negotiations show is that participants do not have a single interpretation of each concept — with these prioritized to form a predisposition that governs all actions (such as engagement in ethical choices). Rather, they have multiple, relative interpretations of each concept, which are situationally employed in the formation of different boundaries, governing different choices. For example, reducing carbon emissions may be identified as an important benefit of local produce, and given perceived priority. The fact that the local produce is also organic may receive low priority until ‘local organic’ is perceived to be unavailable. In this situation, a different prioritization may govern choice. If responsibility for the security of a child’s diet is given priority (through organic food), emission reductions will be sacrificed — albeit with regret.

This relativism is another stabilizing strategy reinforcing food choice boundaries: ‘as local as possible’ reflects the juggling of interpretations and prioritizations

necessitated by limited access to alternatives, and the need to supplement from the (de-legitimized) conventional system.

### **Recognizing the Limits of Local Food**

Many of the participants self-identified as bell-wethers, using the demonstration of agency to provide an example to others. However, the example of acting virtuously, or with responsibility, was often mediated by an interpretation of this role as narrow and relativistic; applied within a limited sphere of influence, and with an understanding and acceptance that others may interpret or prioritize differently. As stated previously, most of the participants interpreted responsibility as a burden that they chose to carry rather than an obligation for which consumers were accountable. As such, most approached the social negotiation of responsibility using their choice as an example rather than a judgement.

Participants often identified other potential limits to involvement in local food and CSA. Money and awareness were primarily seen as limits to others, including new local food consumers. Several associated the purpose of their example as helping to both raise awareness — of externalities and alternatives — and to alleviate these potential constraints.

Competition for time, from other priorities, was the most commonly mentioned personal limit, primarily affecting situatedness. Many identified ‘active’ involvement as a criterion for engagement in strengthening the ‘community’ bonds to their CSA, but felt that time devoted to other priorities precluded this engagement. This limit, compounded by physical separation from the CSA, meant that, for most, situatedness was de-prioritized to the extent that, whatever interaction occurred served as appropriate

engagement. Exceptions were provided mainly by those who lived 'in place' with their CSA, (in the same local community), or participated on the farm. These links may have been distorted somewhat by the participants' membership in an organic CSA. Further study of non-CSA, non-organic, local food consumers might help to clarify whether these associations 'naturally' accrued to 'local food'.

### ***Reflections: Local Food Reflexivity***

The emerging move to local food is a product of reflexive modernization. Multiple challenges to the legitimacy of the global industrial food system — from unknowable risk to unanticipated effects — are brought by the increased visibility of externalities of that system. At the same time, because of an entrenched production model — based on efficiencies of scale — and a legitimated structure based on technical and policy support for that model, the system itself is seen as ‘unwilling’ or incapable of addressing these externalities. The sense of ‘unwillingness’ is reinforced by the increased marginalization of the factors essential to consumer food choice within the conventional food system.

The changed choices of local food consumers are caused by an exposure to, and awareness of, externalities and marginalization. This awareness leads to unstable food choice boundaries, acceptance of the legitimacy of challenges to the conventional food system, and willingness to adopt an alternative to address those challenges. The diversity of the paths to awareness, and the identification of a variety of externalities and processes of marginalization, indicates that exposure to reflexivity — and the potential for adoption of alternatives — is widespread.

### **Conceptual Assessment of Consumer Motivation**

In order to capture the motivation behind a consumer’s move to local food, it was essential to understand:

- that the food choice factors motivating such a change were perceived as marginalized by the system being replaced;

- that the identification of both marginalization and externalities plays a significant role of in promoting reflexive decisions, and;
- that the conceptual foundation for reflexive decisions provides the motivation for change.

After recognizing the various forms taken by consumer descriptions of externalities, it was necessary to associate these externalities with previously established boundary concepts governing food choices. In this way, it was possible to identify the processes associated with reflexive decisions. That is, by establishing boundary concepts, and relating externalities identified by consumers to the appropriate concepts, it became clear that externalities challenge not simply one choice, but the conceptual interpretations governing many choices.

However, because these boundary concepts also establish stability through legitimacy, the challenge of externalities is measured against the stability (and continuity) provided by unchanged boundary concepts. When the challenge raised by externalities creates a crisis of legitimacy, the consumer is forced to re-assess their interpretation of the associated concepts. This conceptual re-interpretation is, in fact, the motivation behind a change in food choice.

The perception that these boundary concepts are increasingly marginalized by the conventional food system has implications for the move to local food. If the decision to choose local is perceived as a meaningful choice, simultaneously providing meaningful guarantees (of trust, security, etc.) — where the conventional food system offers neither form of meaning — the agency infused in such a choice may attract consumers who were otherwise unconvinced of the challenges to the legitimacy of conventional food.

### **The Palimpsest and the *Local***

In the minds of consumers, the boundary concepts connected to food decisions seem to have some degree of natural affinity with local food. This is enhanced by the perceived interconnection of concepts: quality, delivering security, guaranteed by trust, enhanced by situatedness, etc. While some of these interactions may be peculiarities of organic CSA, this interconnection of conceptual interpretations — and the perception of their guarantee based on personal interactions with a ‘small’ ‘organic’ ‘farmer’ — has dramatic implications for the palimpsest that is the social discourse of the *local*.

[I want to] spread the idea around everything that I do, instead of keeping it in convenient pockets. (Ani)

The more you start to believe in something and do it, the more you find it harder to justify doing something else. (Joan)

Clearly, some local food consumers are creating their own palimpsest, re-writing a personal monograph of ‘quality’, ‘security’, ‘trust’, ‘situatedness’, ‘responsibility’, and ‘agency’. At the same time, they recognize that this monograph is written in the margins of the manuscript of the conventional food system, and represents one of many versions so inscribed. However, while local food is widely accepted as but one portion of the diet, to be supplemented from within the conventional food system, such relativism of practice is seen as born of necessity, rather than hypocrisy or a challenge to the legitimacy of their reconceptualized boundary concepts. Similarly, while their version of local food — an organic or biodynamic CSA — is widely understood as one of many possible alternatives, the same relativism is not extended to the need to raise awareness of, and challenge, the externalities and marginalization identified within the manuscript of the conventional food system.

In this way, these local food consumers give an indication of the constraints and mechanisms of broader food consumer decisions. The realism and relativism contained within food choice decisions imply the taken-for-granted continued dominance of the conventional food system, and the likelihood of widespread adoption of future adaptations advanced by this reactive system. Such consumer realism and relativism are constrained primarily by the consumer's awareness, acceptance and interpretation of challenges to the legitimacy of the conventional food system. These challenges result from representations — in social discourse — of the externalities and marginalization produced by that system, and the resulting re-conceptualization of the boundary concepts that guide food decisions.

While convenience, affordability, adaptability and marketing — the hallmarks of the conventional food system — will continue to play a dominant role in the social discourse surrounding food decisions, local food consumers, and their actions, may have some potential to affect this social discourse. These bell-wethers of 'local food', through their example, their educational efforts, through their communications and proselytizing, through their daily interactions with other food consumers, have an exaggerated potential to establish links in social discourse between best practices, scale, personal interaction, sustainability, the interpretation of boundary concepts, and 'local food'. As a result, broader social discourse — perhaps 'accepted wisdom' and 'common sense' — may come to reflect their perception of what is encompassed by the term 'local food', including an inherent interconnection between 'fresher', 'healthier', 'safer', 'closer', 'greener', 'better', and *local*. That is, the combination of influences on these local bell-wethers — the reflexive challenges of externalities and marginalization, the perception of

imagined absences, and an association of ‘what is missing’ with the inherent characteristics of their version of ‘local food’ (in this case, CSA) — may present ‘local food’ with a natural advantage: its portrayal in social discourse as an alternative that internalizes the externalities and redresses the marginalization both produced and ignored by the conventional food system. As a result, ‘local food’ may be increasingly perceived, by consumers at large, as imbued with all that is absent from the conventional food system, and which that system is incapable of providing.

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### ***Appendix A: Demographic Survey Results***

1. Age:            20-34: (5)            35-49: (11)            50-64: (9)
  
2. What is your educational background?
  - a. Some high school: (1)
  - b. A high school diploma (or equivalent): (2)
  - c. A college diploma: (1)
  - d. A university degree: (7)
  - e. A graduate or professional degree: (14)
  
3. What is your current employment status? (Check all that apply)
  - a. Work full-time: (11)
  - b. Self-employed: (9)
  - c. Work part-time: (3) [+1 'and mother']
  - d. Work multiple jobs: (3)
  - e. Full-time student: (1)
  - f. Part-time student: (1)
  - g. Retired: (2)
  - h. Disabled and not working: (1)
  - i. None of the above: (1) [stay-at-home parent]
  - j. None of the above: (1) [community leave]
  
4. What is your current (total family) annual household income?
  - a. Below \$15,000 (0)
  - b. Between \$15,001 and \$30,000 (4)
  - c. Between \$30,001 and \$50,000 (2)
  - d. Between \$50,001 and \$75,000 (4)
  - e. Between \$75,001 and \$100,000 (5)
  - f. More than \$100,000 (9)
  - g. No response (1)
  
5. On the Federal level, which political party do you usually support?
  - Conservative (3)
  - Green (7)
  - Liberal (2)
  - New Democratic (9)
  - Splits Green / NDP (1)
  - Splits Green / Liberal (1)
  - Strateg. Green / NDP (Liberal) (1)
  - From Conservative to Green (1)

6. On a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), please identify the number that best reflects your general religiosity.

Not at all  
Religious

Extremely  
Religious

1-(3) 2-(4) 3-(2) 4-(3) 5-(4) 6-(1) 7-(3) 8-(2) 9-(0) 10-(1)\*

\*(+2 identified as spiritual)

7. What is your current marital status?

- |  |      |
|--|------|
| a. Married                                 | (13) |
| b. Divorced/Separated                      | (4)  |
| c. Not married<br>but living with somebody | (6)  |
| d. Single                                  | (3)  |

8. Do you have any children?

- |             |            |
|-------------|------------|
| a. Yes (12) | b. No (13) |
|-------------|------------|

9. Mouths in the household:

- |                      |     |
|----------------------|-----|
| 3 adults             | (1) |
| 2 adults             | (7) |
| 1 adult              | (5) |
| 3 adults, 2 children | (1) |
| 2 adults, 4 children | (1) |
| 2 adults, 3 children | (3) |
| 2 adults, 2 children | (5) |
| 2 adults, 1 child    | (1) |
| 1 adult, 1 child     | (1) |