

Making & Belonging: The Philosophy & Poetics of Participation

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ABSTRACT

Making & Belonging: The Philosophy & Poetics of Participation

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This study consists of hosting conversations at the Hermit Lab, an emerging research centre for socially engaged imagination, as well as participating in conversations of everyday community life in a rural Ontario village. The study is grounded in the values and practices of participatory research, ecological learning, and relational epistemologies. The study was conducted in the context of living in the present turbulent world, characterized by rapid socio-ecological change and high uncertainty. The goal of the study was to explore participatory encounter: what happens when people experience themselves as co-participants in the world? The assumption behind this inquiry being that part of today's challenge is to tell the stories of our lives so that we can understand what is happening around us and begin to organize ways forward. Through the conversations that arose out of this study, the experience of participatory encounter was documented through four overlapping themes: conversation, mutual aid, affection for place, and the poetics of space. Each of these themes, written from my perspective and those of Hermit Lab participants, explores the phenomena of participatory encounter through the experience of people making and belonging.

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&

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Contribution of Authors

Megan Hyslop contributed *The Fulcrum*, essay found on page 178.

Billy Keniston contributed *Learning Affection for a Place*, essay found on page 147.

Kathy Lampi contributed *Reviving the Old Typewriter*, essay found on page 145.

Kyra Shaughnessy contributed *On Mutual Aid*, essay found on page 127.

Garth Watterson contributed the illustration, *The Hermit Lab*.

Figure 1 The Hermit Lab, Illustration by Garth Watterson

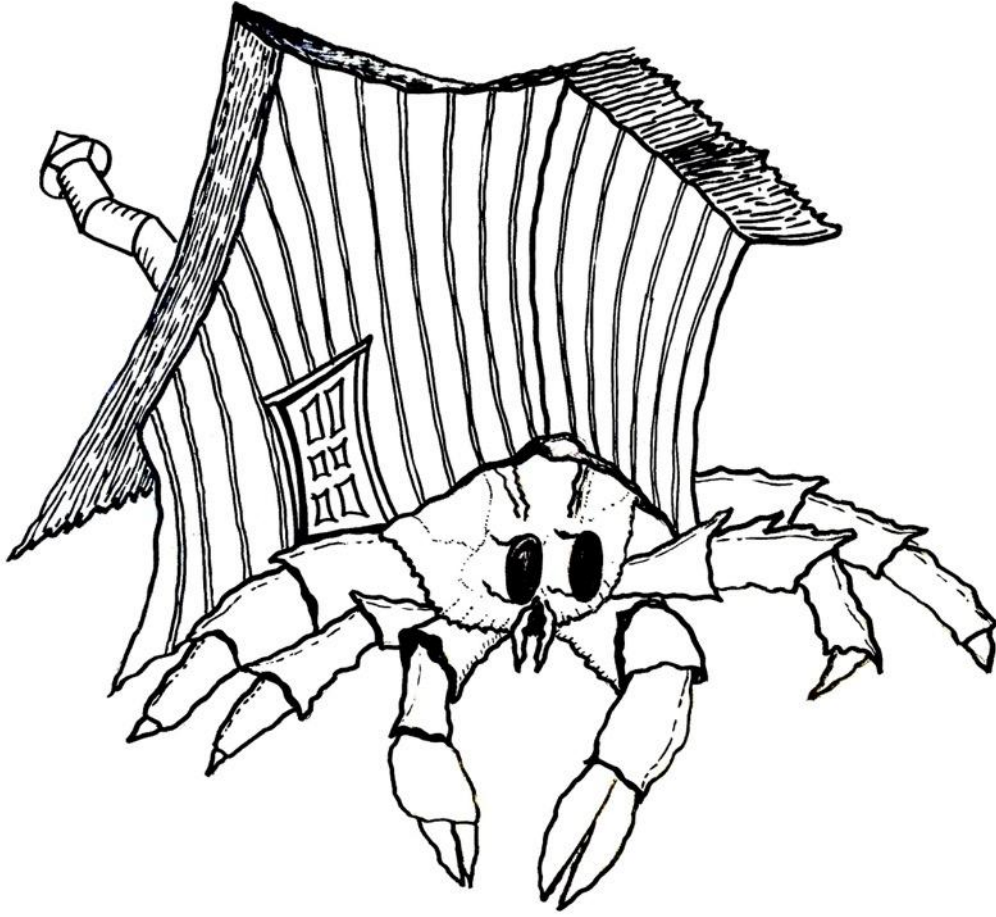


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Making & Belonging: The Philosophy and Poetics of Participation

Prologue: An Invitation to Participatory Encounter

This thesis is about participatory encounter: the lived experience of making and belonging. The text includes references to existing literature from relevant fields of study as well as poems, stories and reflections by myself and others who collaborated on this inquiry. Scholarship, poems and stories are interweaved to encourage associative, embodied thinking. The reader is invited to wander through the experience of reading this thesis, just as I wandered through the experience of researching and writing it. Any story worth its salt offers an orderly procession to understanding. Yet, stories also need to reflect the fact that reality is ordered by circles and spirals as much as by straight lines.

Think of culture as a particular network of conversations conserved over time. People talk. People tell stories, listen, and retell. Culture is a fabric woven by conversations. These conversations are ongoing stories: spoken, written, sung, danced, and etched in all the objects and technologies we continue to use. “If these walls could speak,” the saying goes. Indeed, walls do speak when we know the stories of what has built them, contained them, lived inside them. Each set of hands that sawed lumber, mixed plaster, mined gypsum, drove the delivery truck, designed the wallpaper image. Each of the lives that have lived and worked inside: phone calls, kisses, to-do lists made and scratched off, candle wax, baby tears, chocolate milk, glasses of wine, boots, mud, laughter.

We live stories and live by our stories. While it is unlikely we will ever know any story completely, the more that we are aware of our stories the more we can participate fully in our lives and the world. In its deepest sense this is what I mean by participatory encounter, the principle focus of this study: that we know our stories and the stories of the world we are continuously a part of making.

Conversations Can Change Us

In my early twenties, I worked with small community organizations focused on artful and ecological approaches to social change. During this time I attended the School for Designing Society. The main premise of this school: language is a leverage point for social change. Language matters. A change in language shifts culture.

I remember September 11, 2001. My sister worked a couple blocks away from the World Trade Center. After finding out she stayed home that morning and was safe I went to the Urbana Free Library and looked up the United States Emergency responses to terrorist attacks. I walked back to the little dilapidated building housing my artist-activist friends, my mind filled with images of tanks rolling through the streets. The Martial Guard rolling into town. The next day American flags appeared in front of almost every house and storefront. Overnight something had changed. A friend sent a letter to the editor expressing concern over all the flags. She asked what the American flag meant for people and wanted to hear back so she could understand. Hate messages flooded her answering machine. Enraged letters to the editor demanded she go back to Russia, or worse. There were a few dozen of us who would go every Saturday to the mall and hold out signs for

peace, saying no to war. Some friendly honks. Some furious cursing. Somebody threw a soft drink at a friend's nine-year-old son. It hit him in the head and drenched his clothes. Over months something had changed. The news kept reporting about the bombers and the Taliban. The evidence never seeming completely conclusive. Clearly something had to be done. There was now an enemy.

I went out on the street to interview people about September 11 and find out what they thought about the war we were getting involved in. This was for a news show on our local community radio station. I remember talking to one fellow for almost an hour, standing outside the post office next to the parking garage of the decaying downtown shopping center. He started off laying into the bombers and by extension most of the Middle East. He demanded bombs for those who did this and the countries they came from. I kept asking the same question: but why would someone bomb the World Trade Center?

They hate us.

But, why?

They hate our freedoms.

But, why?

They don't have what we have.

But, why?

Through many rounds, peeling an onion of verbatim news sound bites, we began to talk about war and what would come of it. He talked about his children and how he wanted a safe world for them. He wanted a world of peace and understanding. He wanted a simple,

fair, and just society. “Just as most people in the Middle East want too,” he said. His distrust of the government emerged, wary of people in power and the pursuit of revenge and war ... war Over an hour something had changed. In this one conversation something had changed. I remember shaking hands warmly and walking away. Maybe our responses to September 11 were contextual. Maybe they could change. Maybe the conversation mattered. Was this the difference between war and peace?

Excerpt from a Restatement of Purpose

After taking a leave of absence from PhD studies, I returned in 2011 with a “restatement of purpose” for the project.

People often assume that the world works based on systems of domination. That some special people are “in charge” and able to control others is taken as a given. A society in which all members are responsible for making things happen is understood as an extreme anomaly. Increasingly, people explain their choices in personal terms, based on psychological ideas that place tremendous emphasis on the individual, rather than on broader systems. Worse yet, when the broader society, or the organizations we are a part of, are acknowledged, it is often to emphasize the ways in which people do things because they feel they must, in response to forces of coercion.

In these descriptions, the awareness that all social systems are systems of mutual interdependence gets lost. I want to remind myself, and others, that social systems are run amok with overlapping spheres of influence and mutual interdependence. Every moment of social interaction is driven by the spontaneous interactions of all involved. No job description or policy or identification of roles can account for the moment-to-moment

expression of human agency. Contrary to our own self-descriptions, even within highly constrained, bureaucratized, and hierarchical social systems, people are participating as peers and without regard to formalities. Somewhere, someplace, right now, people are doing deep democracy. I want to draw attention to ways of looking at our society so that consensual patterns of interaction, where people participate in a more or less fully engaged way, are brought to the fore.

My goal is not to offer scientific proof of the persistence of consensual relations in all social systems. I do not intend to outline a program for the future participatory democratic society. Rather, the intent is to playfully, artfully, explore the ways in which people, in all sorts of contexts, co-create the world.

I have thrown myself into a number of different initiatives to imagine, design, and strive towards a desirable society. This has been an incredible immersion into life in full-color, full-on everyday openness to play and thought and language and the various different sides of human beings. I have been surrounded by and collaborating intimately with extremely ambitious, intelligent, charismatic, and caring people. Our work together has spanned the range from wildly experimental art, music, language, living spaces, and ways of meeting human needs to attempts to engage large, powerful institutions with the purpose of instigating a drastic shift in the fundamental design behind their ways of relating.

All of these experiences fed me and overwhelmed me at once. I've been opened up to the beautiful capacities of people to thrive, and I have caught glimpses—too long to be pleasant—of the Pandora's Box of traumas and shortcomings that come into view when

we begin to live fully in each other's presence.

I want to hear and tell stories of people's efforts to design spaces together where consensuality, interdependence, and participation thrive. These stories must be fully elaborated: with all of the stuckness and failures and mistakes expressed and not shied away from. We all know what it is like to try and fail. How beautiful to keep trying, and how important to face the painful fact that something is not working, and so not to have to do it over and over again.

Storytelling is a craft, an art form straddling the arbitrary line meant to separate reality from imagination. In yearning to grapple with my own and others' endeavours of participatory social systems, I embrace storytelling as a medium for exposing certain qualities of our living memories that escape the eye of the traditional methods of social science. I flirt with methods of action research, but I do so from a distance. I invite people to the Hermit Lab, an emerging research centre for socially engaged imagination, to take a step back from the stresses and demands of their daring social work, to share themselves and their work with a small community in rural Ontario. Here they can playfully prod me and others towards improvisation and creative projects in an atmosphere that allows ample room for wandering, wondering, and a reprieve from everyday constraints and deadlines. Here, at the Hermit Lab, I invite myself and others to say something serious in a sideways way, to go deep, to go silly.

Chapter I: The Hermit Lab: A Conversation-based Approach to Social Research



Summary Statement of Research Question

This emergent study contextualizes discreet personal and collective stories within the broader narratives of participatory socioecology.

In 1969 an image of earth from space gave form to an emerging awareness of what it means to be a person alive on earth. This image shows our planet as an oasis in the vast and uninhabitable cosmic sea surrounding us. White (1998) has named this experience the overview effect, where a number of astronauts who have travelled to outer space have returned with an awareness of the interconnectedness of all life on earth and the extraordinary precariousness of our biosphere's conditions in the cosmos. This awareness is increasingly evident in the mainstream of today's thought and is especially remarkable as an epistemological fit to our present socioecological context. Namely that we are living in what geologists are beginning to define as the Anthropogenic Age: an age marked by changing atmospheric and biotic conditions caused primarily by human activity (Bierman, 2012; Zalasiewicz, Williams, Haywood, & Ellis, 2011). We are living in a time when, just as we are becoming more capable of changing our environment, it is becoming apparent that we are in danger of undermining the very support systems of life on earth. In our lifetimes we are going to be increasingly faced with the impacts of two centuries of rapid sociotechnological change and the attending consequences of exponential economic

growth and resource intensive human settlements (Diamond, 2005; Korten, 2006; Kunstler, 2005; McKibben, 2010; Shiva, 2005; Smith, 2010). And, in our lifetimes, we are going to be increasingly faced with questions of what we need to do to survive, what kind of world we can create, and perhaps most importantly what kind of world we want.

In the tradition of social research for social change (Lewin, 2008; Emery, 1993; Greenwood & Levin, 1998), the purpose of this study was to situate questions emerging from the present socioecological context in the lives of participants at the Hermit Lab for participatory encounter over the period 2010-2015. Through ongoing conversations at the Hermit Lab, as well as participating in conversations of everyday community life in a rural Ontario village, participants and I discovered areas of mutual inquiry and developed seminars, workshops, and creative projects to explore these inquiries. The goal was not primarily to generate projects to solve problems, though it is hoped that this is a consequence of activities at the Hermit Lab. Rather, the intent was to provide a physical space and relational context for exploring questions that matter most to participants and me.

As a generative research process, questions emerged from the direct concerns and experience of participants. Yet, the overall research activities are nested in the main question: *How can what happens at the Hermit Lab be a catalyst for participatory encounter?* Participatory encounter is a term meant to get at something both deeper and much more immediately accessible than many recognized forms of participation: voting, political advocacy or activism, voluntary and vocational engagement, family and social life. The emphasis here is when doing any of these things, or in the course of living one's

daily life, how does one come to feel a part of what they are doing? How does one come to understand themselves as connected to other people and the world? In this way, as defined in this study, participatory encounter is the lived experience of making and belonging. Making is the experience of acting in the world. Making is broadly defined to include any activity, paid or unpaid, that provides for the needs and desires of others. Making can take the form of creating, repairing, caring, teaching, speaking, listening: Any activity whereby one senses their influence upon others and the world. Belonging occurs whenever a person senses they are needed or wanted by others and the world. Belonging is the feeling of having a place in the world, with family, work, community, animals, earth, and cosmos. Belonging is how others and the world tell us who we are, why we are here and how we fit into the scheme of things.

As a laboratory for participatory encounter the focus is on exercising imaginative and relational capacities so that participants may better respond to social and environmental changes. In the doing of this research a sub-question arises: *What happens when people come to experience themselves as co-participants in the world?* The assumption behind this inquiry being that part of today's challenge is to tell the stories of our lives so that we can understand what is happening around us and begin to organize ways forward.

These questions become increasingly important in the context of living in the present turbulent world, characterized by rapid socioecological change and "high relevant uncertainty" (Emery & Trist, 1965). In a globalized world of transnational markets and disruptive technologies, traditional values and institutions are shifting underneath people's

feet. People's relationship to the natural world shifts as the move to new places and engage in new occupations. Now with the majority of world's population in urban areas, we have a major shift in humanity's relationship to the natural world. Where and how people live changes faster for each passing generation. This is what Margaret Mead meant when she coined the term "generation gap"; when parents and elders are not able to anticipate what life is going to be like for their children and thus unsure how to guide them into their future (Mead, 1970). Given these extraordinary changes people may find themselves increasingly grappling with existential questions and searching for adaptive personal and cultural strategies. The key to developing any such adaptive strategy is direct participation of people in managing their own affairs (Emery, 1999). This study contributes to the literature on direct participation and adaptive culture through the philosophy and poetics of participation: the lived experience of being a part of something and making a difference.

Grounded in the values and practices of participatory research and practice (Emery, 1999; Greenspan & Coles, 1998; Goldbarb, 2006; High, 2009; Freire & Horton, 1990; Senge, 1990; McNiff, 1998), ecological learning (Benyus, 1997; Emery, 1999; Ferguson, 2013; Fung & Wright, 2003; Ostrom, 1990), and relational epistemologies (Abram, 2011; Cordova, 2007; Deloria, 1999; Hocking, Haskell, & Linds, 2001; Smith, 1999; Torbert & Reason, 2001), this study fits into the context of existing scholarly research as discussed in chapters 2-4, which review the literature that inform this research. Chapter 5 explains the methodology, research setting and activities conducted.

Through the conversations that arose out of this study a number of themes emerged: conversation is the stuff of culture, mutual aid, affection for place, and the poetics of space. These themes were discovered through conversation over time and the result was a philosophy of participation informed by making and belonging. Written from my perspective and those of Hermit Lab participants, these themes compose the body of this dissertation found in chapters 7-10. Four thematic essays answer the research questions and speak to what I have experienced and learned through these years of being at the Hermit Lab and getting to know my community.

Chapter II: Participatory Research and Practice in Socioecological Context



Participatory research, in the context of this study, is a demonstration of participatory democratic practice. These participatory democratic practices emerge out of the characteristics of the current socioecological context (state of the world in a global society). This chapter provides an overview of the current socioecological context and participatory practices emerging therein.

This chapter sets out to accomplish three tasks: to sketch the characteristics of our current socioecological context (state of the world in a global society) and a general schema to account for the practices of participatory democracy emerging from the current socioecological context and to provide an overview of participatory research, as a participatory practice, as enacted in this study.

The first task requires analyzing a vast terrain of social and ecological forces to give a very rough, but usable map of the current state of the world. Drawing from scientists and cultural commentators there is a surprising level of consensus about the basic facts of climate change, migrating populations, species extinction, natural resource allocation, technological innovation, ecological and economic stability, and the probable scenarios emerging from these forces. This study takes into account the limitations of such a general description of global phenomena and the speculative nature of projected future scenarios. However, these limitations are balanced against the fact that people do

have worldviews, which create such general maps of the world (however accurate they may be) and the intent of this chapter is to make explicit the author's understanding based on the best available knowledge.

The second task involves outlining the general forms of participatory democracy currently being practiced in the larger socioecological context. Again, we are fortunate to have a large amount of literature on this subject to draw from. Experiments in civic democracy, the design of organizational structures, corporate culture change initiatives, social movements, voluntary associations, and collective enterprises all provide a wealth of data about participatory democratic practices.

Sketching the Characteristics of the Current Socioecological Context

In order to describe participatory democracy, it is essential to arrive at the actual context in which such practices exist today. These particular practices emerge out of specific and knowable socioecological contexts. The most outstanding characteristic of today's socioecological context is the global nature of our shared world. The image of the earth as seen from space has been identified as a fundamental shift in worldview that captures the essence of this fact: we are human beings who share the same planet earth supporting life as we know it. As far we know yet, we are the only planet that supports complex life. Our unusual and miraculous circumstance makes a world with a staggering diversity of life forms. And we, as human beings, are one form of life on earth and are utterly dependent on the life support systems of our biosphere. We are also utterly interdependent on each other, as fellow people all over the planet, as our actions impact our shared environment. This emerging worldview, crystalized by the satellite images of

1969, is being made more and more evident by each passing year as made evident by each global trade deal, each climate change report, each increasingly powerful natural disaster, each work of art, cinema, music, digital theatre that draws the picture of our mutual interdependence.

Our world as such is defined as a common pool of resources (Ostrom, 1990) allocated through a variety of forms of social organization. The economy, derived from the Greek word *oikos* (meaning home) is the way in which we live together in the home of our global biosphere. The rise of the industrial revolution and global trade has brought our population to seven billion people, with tremendous differences in access to and consumption of natural resources. The maintenance of the current global economy is based on the historical material flow from underdeveloped parts of the world to the powerful nation-states of Europe, the Americas, and more recently the rising states of Asia (Johnston, Gismondi, & Goodman, 2006). This particular pattern of historical-material relations is continuing at an astonishing pace of social change, shifting populations around the world from rural agricultural communities to urban cities generating new and contested forms of social organization and cultural values responding to the emerging socioecology.

Probable scenarios: A future of energy and resource decline.

In the future we are all Mexicans. That's the standard of living towards which globalization is driving us.... Europeans and Americans are soon going to live in the same world as everybody else: the world in which you do not have everything

you want, and sometimes you don't have enough. (Gupta, as cited in Hine & Gupta, 2010, p. 45)

In a conversation between two contemporary philosopher-designers, Hine and Gupta (2012), the question of surviving the future is raised. Gupta, who was raised in India and now consults for the Pentagon as well as anarchist squatters, asks: the future for whom? He points out that most of the world is already living in the future of limited resources towards which affluent industrial societies are headed. Hine then chimes in pointing to the recent glut of apocalyptic visions emerging from Hollywood films as an inability to imagine "life outside of a continuation of American late consumerism" (p. 37). Their talk leads to further questions about the kinds of futures towards which we are headed and the openness that comes from imagining a world beyond progress.

There are many voices calling to our probable and imagined futures. There is a recent surge of popular films and TV shows describing apocalyptic visions: *Battlestar Galactica*, *Jericho*, *Revolution*, *The Walking Dead*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *The Road*, 2012, *Watchmen*, *WALL-E*, and *Avatar*. These visions range from technological/cultural evolution to utter collapse. Meanwhile scientists, designers, and activists have been producing a steady stream of books preparing for a dramatically different future (Diamond, 2005; Korten, 2006; Kunstler, 2005; McKibben, 2010; Shiva, 2005; Smith, 2010). The Shell Corporation (2008) has been engaged in future scenario planning since the early 1970s and their report of the world in 2050 projects two distinct paths to the future: "Scramble" and "Blueprints". "Scramble" is a future of increasing competition for resources amongst powerful nation-states and their economic engines. "Blueprints" is a

decentralizing process of people engaging their communities and institutions in adaptive planning and action. The ecological designer David Holmgren (2009) has produced four probable future scenarios: “Techno-explosion,” “Techno-stability,” “Energy Decent,” and “Collapse.” These scenarios are projected to overlap as technologies and cultural adaptations succeed and fail to address the emerging reality of diminishing resources. Both Holmgren’s and Shell’s scenarios describe a reality of diminishing resources and energy supplies. As Florini (2005) put it, “the difference between the rosy and the gloomy scenarios boils down to a single word: governance. Governance is something more than the familiar processes of governments. Governance refers to all the ways in which groups of people collectively make choices” (p. 5). Whether we may have blueprints or scramble depends on people’s ability to collectively govern in their socioecological contexts.

Holmgren (2004) aptly described our most promising future with a call for “decline with decency.” Living as Mexicans, as Gupta put it, means learning to live with less and imagining such a world as fundamentally desirable. The question of the future is fundamentally about what we can imagine to be a desirable and just world. Might we imagine a world with less to be more likely good and just? Regardless of whether we want this future, it is probable. Perhaps, we may learn to adjust with justice.

Governing the Commons: Emerging Practices of Participatory Democratic

Governance

Governance: the single word that may determine our future. The way that people make decisions, who and how, shapes the world we create. Ultimately, we are all

governed by the earth we live upon and the stars above. May our decisions honour that from which all life flows.

In her book, *The Coming Democracy*, Florini (2005) described the new rules for a new world of emerging global governance. She points out that our current financial and political systems were designed for the industrial revolution, a revolution that we are in the midst of exiting. A new revolution is emerging and we do not yet know what it will be. Yet it is clear that the old rules no longer necessarily serve the coming reality. If the old rules were about the effective leadership of powerful nation-states, the new rules Florini outlines are about participation and transparency. These new rules echo the open source design principles of the new media revolution, which is fundamentally changing the way people relate to each other and come to know about the world. As it turns out these new rules may be tremendously ancient rules.

The key to the origin of the human condition is not to be found in our species exclusively, because the story did not start and end with humanity.

The key is to be found in the evolution of social life in animals as a whole.

(Wilson, 2012, p.112)

Old Rules for A New World. In his most recent work, *The Social Conquest of Earth*, Wilson (2012) outlines an elegant theory of the evolution of complex social organization arising from eusocial insects to human societies. Eusociality is a unique form of animal epigenetic behaviour based on “the condition of multiple generations organized into [cooperative] groups” who “defended a nest from which members could forage enough food to sustain the colony” p. 85. This epigenetic

heritage, which we share with various species of ants, wasps, bees, and mole rats, defines us as intensely tribal animals¹. Yet, we are at a peculiar crossroads with our genetic inheritance as tribal animals in a global society. “We worry. We ask to whom in this shifting global world of countless overlapping groups should we pledge our loyalty” (Wilson, 2012, p. 245). Indeed, to whom do we belong when the airwaves fill with oppositional rhetoric in the race to compete for dwindling resources?

Participatory democracy is any form of social organization that builds on the collaborative nature of human beings. I suggest that our most desirable futures stem from our inheritance as collaborative animals. The oldest rules of cooperative behaviour must adapt to the present circumstance of a complex and interconnected global society.

What follows is a brief schema outlining some of the most promising forms of participatory governance from around the world. This is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of participatory practices, of which there are many all over the world, but the practices referenced are included as guiding influences on the research activities conducted through the Hermit Lab.

¹ Note that this is an issue of considerable scientific debate. Many biologists disagree with Wilson arguing that humans do not fit the criteria as a eusocial species.

Empowered participatory governance: Participatory budgeting and democratic decentralization in Kerala. Fung and Wright (2003) provide a useful framework of Empowered Participatory Governance (EPG) that can be used to evaluate emerging participatory practices. They identify three design principles for participatory institutions: practical orientation, bottom-up participation, and deliberative solution generation. They look in depth at four experiments in EPG: functionally specific neighbourhood councils in Chicago; habitat conservation planning under the U.S. Endangered Species Act; Participatory City Budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil; and democratic decentralization in India, West Bengal and Kerala. The analysis of these experiments provides a rich framework for evaluating participatory practices and the implications for future institutional forms. Particularly encouraging are the results of the Participatory Budget and the long-term reforms in Kerala. There is a wealth of literature on each case showing the emergence of legitimate parallel institutions (Fung & Wright, 2003). While Participatory Budgeting has slowed in Brazil, the experiment has now spread across the globe with projects in every continent underway (Baiocchi, 2005; Daly, Schugurensky, & Lopes, 2009; Jobert & Kohler-Koch, 2008; Smith, 2009). Through this process citizens are engaged in evaluating and allocating public resources for projects, which are collectively agreed upon and locally implemented. The broadening of meaningful participation provides a key template for future practice. The long-term reforms in Kerala have produced impressive results (Williams, 2008). The per capita income of Kerala's 33 million inhabitants is about \$1 a day and yet there is a 94% literacy rate and 74-year life expectancy and it ranked as the least corrupt state in the country.

Perhaps more than any place on earth, Kerala may provide a blueprint for a desirable future, with a nearly sustainable ecological footprint and social wellbeing on par with the affluent industrialized nations. In an era where communism has become politically taboo, it is important to note that Kerala has been a communist-governed state since 1956. In addition to the reforms of the communist party there has been a commitment to local self-government through the Kerala Municipality Act. Perhaps even more significant is the long-standing history of civil action that creates Kerala's unique cultural landscape. While there is not adequate space in this study to do justice to Kerala's socioecology, it is safe to say that there is much to learn.

Social movements and the rise of the third sector. In researching his book *Blessed Unrest*, Paul Hawken (2007) set out to count the number of environmental, social justice, and indigenous people's rights movements active worldwide. Using census tax data he quickly came up with 100,000 social movement organizations. Diving deeper into the records he estimated the total global number to be at least ten times that figure and more likely 2 to 3 million. Hawken calls this the largest social movement in history. If Hawken's estimates are correct, then the number of organizations is astonishing. It means that people all over the world are organizing around local, regional, and global issues of concern, creating a parallel form of governance to national and commercial institutions. It highlights an increasing level of participation of people from all corners of the globe (Amoore, 2005; Della Porta, 2009; Thompson & Tapscott, 2010).

The rise in social movements is occurring alongside a rise in non-governmental advocacy and service organizations (NGOs). This is an equally dramatic shift in social

organization. These organizations are shifting areas of responsibility and social control to local actors. Shragge (2003) points out that this may be an extension of efforts to privatize and professionalize the public sphere. Giddens (1998) sees the rise of NGOs as a strengthening of civic society. There is considerable debate about the long-term role of NGOs, social enterprise, and the emerging third sector (Earles & Australia, 2006). However, it must be acknowledged that the millions of NGOs (3.3 million in India alone in 2009) active worldwide are creating another social force alongside the traditional institutions of the industrial era. While it is unclear how many of these NGOs are structured in a fundamentally participatory way, their presence is resulting in an increase in people who are learning how to manage complex organizations. This is providing valuable knowledge and skills that will be carried forth into the post-industrial era.

Open source organizing and new media. Three recent books project a vision of a decentralizing participatory society based on the Open Source Design principles of new media technologies; *Wiki Government: How technology can make government better democracy stronger, and citizens more powerful* (Noveck, 2009), *The starfish and the spider: The unstoppable power of leaderless organizations* (Brafman, 2006), and *Here comes everybody: The power of organizing without organizations* (Shirky, 2008). The full title of these books has been included to give a sense of the message: new technologies are allowing new forms of organization. While the proposals made in these books are yet to bear out fully, the insight that organizations are changing is quite accurate. Alongside the development of social movements and NGOs are new technologies that theoretically make it possible to run a business, campaign, government initiative, or creative project with access to a laptop and a smartphone. This is remarkable considering a recent World Bank Report indicating that 75% of the world's population has access to a cellphone. While these new media technologies may not be inherently participatory, Obama's Open Government Initiative, the open design of many tech companies (Wikipedia, Google, YouTube), and the proliferation of social business networks all point to a significant pattern of decentralized participation.

Participative organizational design, industrial democracy, and cooperatives.

The Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project of 1962 remains a valuable template for participative organization design (Emery & Thorsud, 1969). Through this joint project between the Norwegian Government, major industry, and the social researchers Eric Trist and Fred Emery (Emery & Trist, 1965), a model was developed for workers to design their own areas of control and responsibility. Emery continued this work through the Participative Design Workshop, which has been used on every continent to create self-managed workplaces in large and small industry with remarkable results. Emery (1993) reports using this type of process resulted in significant increases in productivity and a decrease in labour-management disputes. Recent studies have shown the positive health effects of self-managed organizations (de Guerre, Emery, Aughton, & Trull, 2008) and speculated about the application of organizational design in community life (de Guerre, Fauteux, & Trull, 2009).

Many other experiments in workplace democracy have taken place throughout recent history (Ames, 1995; Faulk, 2008; Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2007; Hunnius, 1971; Mason, 1982; Semler, 2003; Spannos, 2008, Trull & de Guerre, 2009). A significant example followed the economic crisis in Argentina in 2001, when workers recuperated over 180 enterprises after they were closed due to loss of capital (Rannis, 2006). While most of these businesses have since returned to their previous owners, several continue to the present day. More instructive is the response of the Argentine workers to claim ownership and operation of their workplaces in the face of fleeing capital. Argentina's cultural response to the crisis has planted seeds for present-day social

movements, including the Occupy movement (Emery, 2013; Sitrin, 2006; Sánchez & Roelants, 2011).

The present-day success of large-scale cooperatives and worker-owned companies is well documented. The Mondragon Corporation is a business association of cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain. With over 30,000 worker owners it is the largest business enterprise in the Basque region. Aperia (2005) has shown the surprising ubiquity of cooperatives in America, with 120 million Americans involved in citizen-controlled cooperatives, and 11,000 worker-owned companies in the United States.

Self-governed common pool resources. In our final, cursory examination of participatory practices, we turn to Ostrom's (1990) Nobel Prize winning research into the economics of "self-governed common pool resources" (p. 1). Ostrom set out to describe "how a group of principals—a community of citizens—can organize themselves to solve the problems of institutional supply, commitment, and monitoring" (p. 29). She conceptualized these actions outside of the theories of the firm or the state that presume "responsibility for collective action is undertaken by one individual" (p. 41). Ostrom went on to analyze a set of "long enduring, self-organized, and self-governed Common Pool Resources" (p. 58), the youngest of which is 100 years old and the oldest over 1,000, ranging from the Swiss mountain village of Torbel to Zanjera irrigation communities in the Philippines. The result is a series of design principles for long enduring Common Pool Resources (CPRs):

1. Clearly defined boundaries
2. Congruence between appropriation rules and local conditions

3. Collective-choice arrangements
4. Monitoring
5. Graduated sanctions
6. Conflict resolution mechanisms
7. Minimal recognition of rights to organize (the rights of appropriators to devise their own institutions are not challenged by external government authorities)

Again, there is not appropriate space here to do justice to Ostrom's excellent research. For the purposes of this study it is sufficient to highlight the strength of Ostrom's approach, which identifies complex forms of collaborative organization.

Organizing in the Age of Networked Disruptions.

While we live in a time of unprecedented consolidation of power and resources in the hands of the few, we are at the same time witness to the erosion of institutional capacity and public trust for centralized systems of control (Johnston, et al., 2006). From the socioecological perspective these changes are understood as co-implicative between systems-in-environment (de Guerre, 2000). This can also be understood within the dialectics of historical materialism (Dyer-Witford, 1999). As economic inequality (Marmot, 2004; Wilkinson 2005), ecological degradation (Meadows, 1977; Meadows & Meadows, 2004), and climate change (Pachauri & Resinger, 2007) are the defining forces of our times, people will change and adapt to this emerging environment. Humanity's adaptive capacity in the face of these challenges is going to be seriously tested. While there will be a great amount of effort put into controlling these forces through hierarchical dominance there will also be great pressure as these systems continue to crack, fissure,

and eventually breakdown. Whether people will be capable of surviving the coming century with the remnants of a decent social order is, at this point, entirely speculative. However, as Hine (2013) aptly puts it, we do have the power to “stop arguing about a future that is not going to happen” (namely, the current trajectory of never-ending, exponential global economic growth) and begin focusing on a world that is both possible and desirable.

Hine (2013) describes the current socioecological context as one of “networked disruptions” where open source technologies enable networked social organizing. In a networked social environment people lead “by invitation, rather than compulsion” and such leadership is “transient, rather than structural”. In practice this means that people come together by choice and social action diffuses through collaborative relationships. In this environment, social organizations become floating networks of mutual interest. This does not preclude the establishment of stable institutions, but shifts the organizing mode of such institutions to existing and emerging social relationships rather than pre-determined bureaucratic roles.

Hosting conversations. In a networking environment the challenge is to create social contexts for people to come together towards shared action, without presupposing who, what, or how to work together. Some call this the “art of hosting conversations,” where the main focus is on cultivating and maintaining generative conversations. What follows are approaches to generative conversation for ecological learning.

The Open Studio Process. The Open Studio Process is an arts-based technique for engaging people’s intuition to explore personal and collective issues (Allen, 1995). A

very simple structure and process is employed: a physical space with a variety of art-making supplies, beginning with a reflection into participants' intention for a session, a set time for art-making, and a final reflection of the experience. A ground rule is given that encourages a space for people to create without getting too stuck in their heads: avoid comments or judgments about your work or others (e.g. is it good or bad, do you like or not like it). This is a valuable ground rule for hosting conversations in general: rather than espouse one's already established opinions about things, it invites participants to explore how they are feeling in relation to what is happening right now.

The art of hosting. Meg Wheatley's (2002) work bringing people together around conversation has given her a set of guiding principles for people to engage and create together. A few of these principles most useful to this study are:

1. People support what they create.
2. People act most responsibly when they care.
3. Conversation is the way that humans have always thought together.
4. To change the conversation, change who is in the conversation.
5. Expect leadership to come from anywhere.
6. Focus on what's working, ask what's possible, not what's wrong.

Eco-social design approaches. An eco-social design approach is emerging amongst projects and methodologies that share, to varying degrees, a conscious analysis of the results of persistent social conflict and work actively towards participatory, locally managed socio-ecologies. Some of these approaches include Common Pool Resource economic systems (Ostrom, 1990), Biomimicry (Benyus, 1997), Participatory Budgeting and innovations in direct democracy (Fung & Wright, 2003), permaculture design (Ferguson, 2013), Search Conferencing and Participative Organization Design (Emery, 1993), and The Social Work and Research Centre at the Barefoot College (Roy, 2013). These approaches use direct democratic process to bring people together to design innovation solutions to their real-life situations. There are undoubtedly many projects around the world that are aligned with and innovating such approaches; the Hermit Lab is intended to be a place where people can learn more about them.

Sensoriums. A sensorium is a deliberate treatment of physical environments around us so that we may come to notice and experience the natural world. In a sensorium the act of taking a walk through the woods, meadows, or streams becomes an invitation to wonder. The Sensorium at Concordia University describes itself as an “approach to collective learning through walking and eating” (Le Sensorium, 2013). Sensoriums are guided by a person with some intimate knowledge of an ecosystem and help others to notice and learn from their surroundings. Sensoriums are all around us; sometimes we just need help to sense them (Abram, 2011; Howes, 2003; Wolch & Emel, 1998). The Hermit Lab, which is surrounded by gardens, ponds, and forest, has been designed as a sensorium. Participants are invited to walk the land, dig in the dirt, build with timber, or drink tea picked from the gardens. The design intent is for people to feel comforted by the physical environment while being drawn to curiosity about why and how it came to be.

Participatory Research

Grounded in participatory practices as described above, participatory research is about collaborative inquiry and shared interests. Through this project I was able to engage with a variety of approaches to collaborative inquiry. The foundation for each endeavor was based on the quality of the conversation and relationships. I was inspired by the approaches found below.

The history of socially engaged research is broad and rich with a great many theories and practices for working with people to address their real-life issues and concerns. Entire participatory research fields have been developed in the areas of adult education (Freire & Horton, 1990), community organizing (Alinsky, 1971; Shragge,

2003), social movements (Poletta, 2002; Sitrin, 2006), organization development (Argyris, 1990; Burke, Lake, & Paine, 2009; Holman et al., 2007; Senge, 1990), oral history (Greenspan & Coles, 1998; High, 2009), arts-based practices (Goldbarb, 2006; McNiff, 1998; Knowles & Cole, 2008; Yeh, 2011), design approaches (Fuller, 1969; Kelley, 2001; Mollison, 1998), facilitation (Heron, 1999; Schein, 1999), and action research (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Heron & Reason, 1997). While an exhaustive treatment of these fields is outside the bounds of this literature review, particular concepts and practices that support this study will be discussed.

Establishing collaborative relationships. The first step in any participatory research project is to establish collaborative relationships (Trull, 2007). Emery (1999) describes the ABX model (Newcomb, 1953) of co-generative action research as a joint project between A, the researcher, B, those whom the research affects, and X, a field of mutual inquiry. Through the ABX model the formal characteristics of the research setting are co-generated between those involved and driven by a field of mutual inquiry. A participatory research process depends on a genuine and significant interest in all those involved in a collaborative project. A collaborative project requires a process for people to become aware of their individual interests and arrive together at shared interests. In some cases people may be interested in seeking out a skilled researcher to explore and advance their interests. In other cases a researcher may be interested in engaging people to explore and advance the people's interests. In either case the challenge is to find the area of

mutual interest between a researcher and those wishing to create a particular social change.

There are power dynamics implicit in the relationship between researcher and researched. People have direct relational and positional power in their own communities and organizations that is not available to a researcher living outside those communities and organizations. A researcher has relational and positional power that comes from their institutional roles, professional credentials, and practical working experience. Until the researcher-researched divide is narrowed by a mutually shared field of interest (Emery, 1999), these power differentials will go largely unaddressed. The success of a participatory research project requires clarifying power differences so that they become available as a set of skills and experiences that can be engaged through the distinct and shared roles and responsibilities of those involved.

Paradoxical expertise: Expertise at not being an expert. The central guiding principle of participatory research is that of paradoxical expertise, which educator Myles Horton defines as “expertise in not being an expert” (Freire & Horton, 1990, p. 128). People are understood as experts in their own lives who have the capacity to create the changes they seek. It is not the researcher’s job to teach or train people, but to provide a learning context so that people teach and train themselves and each other. Creating the conditions for people to work with their peers on issues of mutual concern became the educational objective of Horton’s Highlander Folk School, a significant site for social organizing in the American South explored further below. With this objective Horton observed that “formally educated staff members have never been as effective in teaching

as the people, once they saw themselves as teachers” (Adams & Horton, 1975, p. 47).

Participatory research aspires to increase the power that people have in their own lives.

The goal of this kind of participatory research is for the people involved to see themselves as the experts needed to identify and create the changes they seek.

Our brokenness that connects. Participatory research seeks to decrease the distance between experts and people in the communities in which they live and work so that power becomes a shared context for collective action. Although I am a highly educated person with extensive formal training my impulse is to connect with people beyond the constraints of academia and professional institutions. In her recent book exploring her journey from a landscape artist to social change artist, Yeh (2011) described how “the surface for my creative activities changed from canvas to the living fabric of community life” (p. 21). Yeh emphasizes how this journey came, not from an impulse to change other people and their communities, but of a deep longing to connect with others. For Yeh, this connection arises from the broken spaces in our lives and communities. Her work as a social change artist comes from her own search for purpose and belonging in connecting with that in others. The Hermit Lab is a space that has emerged from my own broken searching reaching out to others. Like Yeh, I seek to work with our brokenness that connects.

Creativity and uncertainty. People do not need elaborate designs for creative collaboration, but simple ways to connect with each other’s experience and to metabolize the natural anxiety that arises when exploring the unknown. McNiff (2008) describes this challenge from an arts-based framework: “how to create supportive environments that

inspire creative thought, realizing that nothing happens in creative expression unless we show up and start working on a project, even with little sense of where we might ultimately go with it” (p. 32). Throughout this research project I learned as I went, starting from my own questions and meeting those of participants at the Hermit Lab.

Chapter III: Ecological Learning: Ways of Looking at Participatory Research and Practice



People have native intelligence built from their own perception. Getting to know what these perceptions are and paying attention to them is really what this work is about. We are uniquely adapted to understand our environment as we have evolved over millennia to understand our environment. This chapter discusses epistemological reflections on perception as participation and the world as participatory process.

Ecological Learning: The Participation of All Things Makes the World

The socioecological perspective (Emery, 1999) contextualizes social systems within their respective environments. People are understood as purposeful systems, which act on and change their environment. In turn, the environment acts on people. de Guerre (2000) describes this as the codetermination of system and environment. This perspective is consistent with theoretical frameworks that emphasize the reciprocal dynamics between people and the worlds in which they live. The study of Population Ecology (Odum, 1959), for instance, asserts the key correlation between bounded habitats and the populations that they can support. World Systems Theory (Amin, Arrighi, Frank, & Wallerstein, 2006; Wallerstein, 2004) meanwhile asserts the correlation between material resource allocation and social dynamics. From these perspectives, people and their social systems are dynamically bound by the contexts in which they exist.

The epistemology of direct perception recognizes the universe has an informational structure and we are uniquely adapted to it (Gibson, 1966). From this perspective people are understood to extract meaning directly from the environment (Emery, 1999). People learn through their perceptual encounters with the world and are capable of acting to change the environment to meet their needs and desires. de Guerre (2000) defines this as the co-implication of system and environment. Learning is contextual by nature, derived from lived experience in the world. While we are capable of abstraction through conscious conceptualizing, the thinking process never happens outside our bodies living in direct relation to the world. Our evolutionary heritage makes us uniquely adapted to perceiving and acting in our environments. “As the environment contains limitless information any person with an intact perceptual system can access what they need. Access is restricted by habit, lack of confidence and physical or psychological isolation from the informational field” (Emery, 1999, p. 65). The epistemological implications are that we do not need to order an already ordered universe, but rather create optimal conditions for people to learn and adapt to their shared world.

According to Emery (1999) our social organizations function as eco-niches for perceptual encounter and are the main determinant in our ability to learn and act directly with each other and the world. The way social organizations are structured can enable people by providing them with direct and open relationships or inhibit them by restricting their relationships. Emery (1999) defines this distinction as direct democracy (people working together as peers) or dominant hierarchy (managers, bosses, elected

representatives, and despots ruling the day). Scanning the environment we live in today shows dramatic examples of both forms of social organization.

Like natural and cosmological systems, human societies function through highly complex networks of mutual interdependencies (feedback loops, circularities). Social systems are sustainable so long as they maintain coherent networks of mutual interdependencies between people and their environments. As any environment is always more powerful than people, human agency is limited to the capacity to understand and engage with an environment. Participation is about understanding and engaging with each other and our environments. The world as democratic process is a world aswirl with relational interdependence. Participatory democracy is about being a part of the participation of all things making the world.

In addition to it being desirable, participatory democracy may be of dire necessity after two centuries of industrial revolt. We are facing twin crises of climate change and economic inequality. And in the midst of these crises, we are in the absurd position of investment bankers directing social policy. Meanwhile, much work is being done to reanimate the notion of the commons: the resources that are known to be held in common. To be able to see ourselves a part of our world, to include ourselves in the story, is essential to reanimating the commons.

Everyone does research: A native human characteristic. The research at the Hermit Lab aspired to be broad, inclusive, and relevant. The starting point was relating to people as native researchers. Research is a process of pattern seeking and recognition over time. This pattern-seeking process is how people navigate the world. It includes the capacity to learn, relate, and survive. Each person has a unique ways of knowing, perceiving, and relating. By identifying these ways of knowing research, people are seen as innately intelligent, pattern-seeking beings. Further, by cultivating our senses as research modalities we can become more responsible and creative in our thoughts and deeds.

Empirical research using the scientific method is a subset of this broader understanding of research. The error-attenuating functions of controlled experimental method and independent confirmation are highly valuable, but not always appropriate to every situation. In the spontaneously lived world of day-to-day human interactions, other forms of research are employed, many of which resemble the scientific process itself; e.g., Charles Sanders Peirce's (1955) concept of abduction. With such a broad notion of research it can be helpful to recall the wisdom of the oft-attributed quip, "Keep an open mind—but not so open that your brain falls out."

There are many epistemologies that provide context and guidance for using one's perceptual faculties as a primal form of research. In the scholarly literature I am familiar with Open Systems Thinking (Emery & Emery, 1997), the Biology of Cognition

(Maturana & Varela, 1980), and Indigenous Epistemology² (Cordova, 2007; Deloria, 1999; Smith, 1999).

Here are some useful words from Deloria (1999) that seem particularly apt:

[Indigenous people] believed that everything that humans experience has value and instructs us in some aspect of life. The fundamental premise is that we cannot “misexperience” anything; we can only misinterpret what we experience. Therefore, in some instances we can experience something entirely new, and so we must be alert not to classify things too quickly. The world is constantly creating itself because everything is alive and making choices that determine the future. There cannot be such a thing as an anomaly in this kind of framework: Some things are accepted because there is value in the mystery they represent.

Because, in the [indigenous] system, all data must be considered, the task is to find the proper pattern of interpretation for the great variety of ordinary and extraordinary experiences. (p. 46)

² Indigenous epistemologies are referenced within this study, however it is important to note that indigeneity and decolonization are not meant as metaphors to address all forms of social injustice (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Rather, indigeneity and decolonization are about native people reclaiming their land and culture.

Everything is related. DeLoria (1999) articulates an epistemology that “peoples” the universe. Here is a way of understanding the world as fundamentally alive, intelligent, and knowable through animate relations. Deloria distinguishes this epistemology from strains of Western science “based on the idea that humans could abstract themselves from the observational and experimental situation” (p. 64). This epistemological distinction has deep historical roots and has shaped the modern world as we know it, away from the “world we used to live in” (Deloria, 2006, p. 1).

This epistemological distinction was contested at the very turn of the experimental revolution begun in the mid-17th century. Shapin and Schaffer’s (1985) *Leviathan and the air-pump* gives a historical reconstruction of the period that developed the physical and cultural space of the modern experimental laboratory. During this period there were extensive debates between Boyle and Hobbes on the nature of knowledge and, consequently, social order. Through these arguments philosophy and nature were separated into distinct epistemological domains. Hobbes argued that natural science springs from and cannot be removed from philosophical intent. Boyle sought to leave philosophical questions outside of the experimental laboratory and instead focus solely on material properties and mechanisms. In the end Boyle and his colleagues won and, in so doing, ushered in the modern era of techno-industrial revolution and bureaucratic social hierarchies.

Yet today we find ourselves at a turning point, having stubbed our toe on the order of nature, and reeling at “the limits of growth” (Meadows, 1977; Meadows, Meadows, & Randers, 2004). Suddenly, again, the order of nature and our place in the world is an

eminently practical question. We do not have the luxury of leaving such questions aside or claiming philosophical uncertainty.

As Shapin and Schaffer (1985) put it, “the form of life in which we make our scientific knowledge will stand or fall with the way we order our affairs of the state” (p. 344). Thus, let us explore some ways of knowing that allow us to put our affairs in order.

Ecological Learning and Social Organization. After spending his career developing the design of democratic institutions, Fred Emery (1993) came to realize that the obstacles to creating more effective and democratic social institutions was fundamentally epistemological. The notion that people are blank slates to be filled with knowledge and experience provides the ideological justification for the “hierarchies of dominance” upon which our modern, bureaucratic institutions are founded. Because the environment is considered a chaotic mess of stimuli, the role of education and social institutions is seen to be that of ordering information and social roles to manage the environment. Yet, Emery, based on the work of Gibson (1979), postulated an alternative epistemology of ecological perception: “Our perceptual systems have evolved so that we, and other animals, are, at birth, attuned to detect invariances in the flow of energy and particles that are ecologically significant sources of information” (Emery, 1993, p. 81). Rather than being fundamentally chaotic, our environment is understood to be ecologically ordered, and that we have evolved in direct adaptation to our world.

Merelyn Emery (1999) further explicated this epistemology, which “starts, therefore, from a unitary perceptual system adapted to its world [...] As the environment contains limitless information any person with an intact perceptual system can access

what they need. Access is restricted by habit, lack of confidence and physical or psychological isolation from the informational field” (p.65). The epistemological implications are that we do not need to order an already ordered universe, but rather create optimal conditions for people to learn and adapt to their shared world. This lead Emery to explicate a model for the design of democratic social structures and its importance.

The regulatory function of group life and conversation, as econiche and response function, are essential elements in the process of managing consciousness. These will be shown... to have a biological basis. Unity or adaptation which is used in its sense of meaningful order, is established by the set of invariances, both ecologically and culturally determined, which define the common world. As manifestations of a system principle, group life and conversation function as the moderators of consciousness, preserving the set of directive correlations and orienting its orderly growth. This emphasizes the importance of structuring all our organizations or econiches for group life and conversation on [the democratic design principle]. Without such a transformation, we will continue to experience the growth of societal and cultural disorder. (p. 77)

Life rules. Ellen LaConte (2010) articulates an epistemology of participation based on “life’s hard won, relative orderliness” (p. 210). She sees the biosphere as structurally democratic, or what she aptly calls “biocratic.” For LaConte, “life built democracy in. Living systems are radically, directly-organically-democratic systems” (p. 212). After studying the social organization of bacteria and other natural systems, LaConte came to the realization that life self-organizes in functional networks of interdependence. While it is true to say that life eats life, life also makes the conditions that make life possible. This amounts to a shift from seeing the natural world, our biological inheritance, and ecological relations as antithetical to desirable social order. Rather, the natural world provides the very design templates to create effective, sustainable social institutions. Drawing on Janine Benyus’s (1997) work of biomimicry, LaConte describes how we may create our governing instructions based on nature’s design principles. The function of governing bodies

would be to facilitate the constant exchange of accurate information among human communities, to act as genuine central intelligence agencies as the brain and immune system do for the body and the rain forest as a whole does for the vine-based communities hanging from its branches.... Natural communities build in redundancy: Several or even many species fulfill roles necessary to the communities well-being. Our communities should also build in redundancy by giving many skillful leaders the opportunity to contribute their gifts to the community and prospective leaders the opportunity to become more skillful. Leaders and representatives of ecological communities would be chosen on the

basis of their familiarity with their human and natural communities, with many of their members, and with Life's Rules—ecoliteracy—and for their flexibility, fairness and fidelity, rather than for wealth, influence, power or political acumen. (pp. 217-219)

LaConte's (2010) epistemological stance may not be merely poetic, but the pragmatic poetry of what David Bohm (1996) calls the "implicate order." Such an order sees the universe and our perception of it as a necessarily whole. This leads to what Bohm calls participatory thought. "Participatory thought sees that everything partakes of everything. It sees that its own being partakes of the earth—it does not have an independent being" (p. 99).

Living in the ethnosphere: Coming home to the senses.

You might think of this social web of life as an "ethnosphere," a term perhaps best defined as the sum total of all thoughts and intuitions, myths and beliefs, ideas and inspirations brought into being by the human imagination since the dawn of consciousness. The ethnosphere is humanity's greatest legacy. It is the product of our dreams, the embodiments of our hopes, the symbol of all we are and all that we, as a wildly inquisitive and astonishingly adaptive species, have created.

(Davis, 2009, pp. 1-2)

Following the epistemological insights above we can begin to see that we have a tremendous biological and ethnospheric inheritance. As Emery (1999) points out, our only obstacles to drawing on this inheritance are the limitations of our social organization. By accessing knowledge from our perceptual senses to draw on all our relations, we may

come to see ourselves as full participants in the web of life. This does not require a huge amount of resources or complicated training, but rather by simply opening to the world in which we are already living. Abram (2011) states:

While the intensely participatory, or animistic, frame of mind common to oral cultures may seem odd to us, it is hardly alien: it is the very form of awareness that shaped all human communication for better than 95 percent of our cultured presence within the biosphere. It is the modality of experience to which the human organism is most closely adapted, the mode of consciousness that has most deeply defined our imagination and our intelligence. We could never have survived, as a species, without our propensity for animistic engagement with every aspect of our earthly habitat. And yet this highly adaptive style of experience has lain mostly dormant in the modern era. (p. 267)

Coming home to the senses means awakening to the stories etched into the animals and plants and weather and buildings and microwaves and toaster ovens all around us. The world is speaking if only we may listen. Social research, as such, may be an animate engagement as we tinker and listen and insist, peopling the world as we come to know the patterns of relationships through which the order of living unfolds.

“Humanity can learn from nature. This requires coming to terms with the natural world’s capacity to know. We are a young species, and we are just beginning to understand” (Narby, 2005, p. 148). Perhaps we are just beginning to understand, again.

Bringing Participatory Democracy to Life

Ecological learning is about people learning in direct relation to their environment. Participatory ecological learning means doing things affect the real issues people are facing in their lives (Bookchin, 1980). The Hermit Lab aspires to participatory ecological learning by providing a context for people to explore and be creative about the issues that are most affecting them. Two examples will now be examined that demonstrate participatory ecological learning: Highlander Folk School and The Dark Mountain Project. The role of the Hermit Lab, which draws from the context set by these two examples, will also be further explained.

The Highlander Folk School.

“I don’t believe in this training of people. You liberate people and they train themselves” (Horton, 2003, p. 129).

The Highlander Folk School began in 1932 when Myles Horton and Don West rented a house in Grundy County, Tennessee; furnished the attic with beds for a dormitory; and prepared the living room “as a place for classes, meetings, square dancing and dining” (Adams & Horton, 1975, p. 27). While they did not intend to teach from books they did “mail out requests for books to start a library and took \$50.00 from their meager treasury to publish a collection of West’s poems, *Between the Plow Handles*. They sold poetry and mistletoe, which they gathered, in order to buy groceries” (Adams & Horton, 1975, p. 27). And thus on the fuel of poetry and mistletoe was born one of the 20th century’s most significant forces for social change. Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, John Lewis, Ralph Abernathy, Ella Baker, Pete Seeger, Julian Bond, Stokely Carmichael, Fannie Lou Hamer, Eleanor Roosevelt, AFL-CIO, SCLC, and SNCC are some of the

names of people and organizations associated with Highlander. Highlander became a major training centre for both the labour and civil rights movements in the South and a legend for many of those who have studied and worked towards social change in the 20th century. Highlander began from a brown clapboard-sided house turned revolutionary training ground. And this revolutionary training ground came from educating, and not organizing, people. By education, Horton really meant liberation, for once liberated, it was understood that people organize themselves. If one wishes to pursue these premises, then the question becomes: how does one go about liberating others?

Rooted in an understanding of “expertise in not being an expert” (Freire & Horton, 1990, p. 128), Horton and Highlander educators came to realize that telling someone what will liberate them is counterproductive. The role of the educator is to create the conditions for reflection, analysis, understanding, and action to emerge from one’s own experience and dreams. This work is best not done alone, but in the natural communities in which one exists and with the voice of many rather than one. “If the people invited to Highlander were those who were learning to define their interests and who were already committed to struggle against oppression, then, Horton reasoned, education at Highlander would be more effective” (Adams & Horton, 1975, p. 70). Creating the conditions for people to work with their peers on issues of mutual concern became the educational objective of Highlander. And with this objective, set Horton observed that “formally educated staff members have never been as effective in teaching as the people, once they saw themselves as teachers” (Adams & Horton, 1975, p. 47).

Above all, Horton understood people as fundamentally creative beings and that education should serve the purpose of fuelling that creativity. What is particularly remarkable about Highlander is that all of these words do not just sound good but were put into practice. For Horton, the reason Highlander was so effective was that “struggling with the real problems growing out of conflict situations and our participation in community life kept the school from becoming a detached colony” (Adams and Horton, 1975, p. 45). Working with poor people struggling against oppressive conditions meant working with the base reality that these people’s lives were embedded in conflict and only would change through conflict. While Highlander never advocated for the use of violence, the staff and participants did use conflict as a primary educational and organizational tool. And alongside the focus on conflict, geared towards opposing and changing oppressive structures and social relations, Highlander workshops used music, poetry, and theatre. Adams and Horton (1975) explain:

Singing together and giving plays had equal importance at Highlander residential workshops with courses on contract negotiation, parliamentary law, public speaking, or union problems. Nearly one hundred labor plays were written by Highlander staff members or students between 1935 and 1952, and countless songs about working class struggle were compiled. (p. 72)

From its beginnings in a simple, two-story house, Highlander moved several times and yet maintained the importance of keeping a simple, home-like atmosphere:

plain, well-used furniture, no desks or folding chairs, no bell, no cafeteria line, no tin trays, nothing to suggest an institution. Discussions are as likely to take place

in the dining room as in the meeting room. Furniture is light and can be moved around. Food is served family style. (Adams & Horton, 1975, p. 211)

The home-like roots of Highlander can be traced through its success and highlight the significance of weaving people's art and sense of place through the capacity to understand experience and work creatively to change the world. When people came to Highlander, they knew enough to want to learn more, knowing what they were working towards but not knowing how to get there.

It can be important to recognize that conflict is a context for collective action. Horton worked primarily within the context of labour organizing and civil rights, where those he worked with faced the daily violence of class and race, as well as the dangers of confronting these systems of power. In this context it was extremely clear to people what they were struggling against and the liberation they were struggling for. Later in life Horton reflected on the challenge faced by people organizing in the non-revolutionary context of the 1980s-90s where people did not recognize the conflict situations in which they were living. From the vantage point of today, it seems we are certainly facing a revolutionary context, namely, the twin crises of inequality and ecological degradation. The term *unsustainability* characterizes our time. By definition this means that things cannot continue as they are. Part of today's challenge is to tell the stories of our lives so that we can understand what is really happening around us and begin to organize ways forward. The Hermit Lab is one node in a growing network of people telling stories that address this challenge.

Collaborative design: Where has all the conflict gone? “There’s been a lot of buzz about creativity and how it’s going to make everything okay, so why does all this chit-chat make me feel so fucking nervous?” (O’Donnell, 2006, p. 12).

In the 21st century, there is a lot of talk about participation, collaboration, creativity, and innovation. While these themes are central to this doctoral study, I find myself echoing O’Donnell’s sentiment above. Perhaps, this is a reaction to an unspoken assumption that everything is going to be okay, that people will find sustainable solutions to our unsustainable problems, and that everyone can become an upper-middle class person. Ecological limits necessitate sustainable eco-social relations within our biosphere, and, thus, there is no sustainable future of 7+ billion North American-style consumers. Along with many others who are looking at social and ecological indicators, I do not foresee a future of increased material prosperity and economic growth. Rather, the data points to the opposite future: one of constricting markets arising from diminishing natural resources. Yet, even were we to find green-technological solutions to all our problems, perhaps we should pause to ask: would this be a desirable future and for whom?

It is with these questions and concerns that I approach some of the most exciting and well-resourced projects in the field of sustainable design: TED, The Banff Centre, and IDEO. Each of these projects includes the use of the following characteristics:

- Curating conversations
- Creativity in immersive learning environments
- Design: applied systems thinking

These three characteristics are key to the emerging field of collaborative design, which spans and integrates the domains of education, markets, governance, social change, science, and the arts. The above projects are exemplary of this emerging field of design, which has nearly become a household word. The vision emerging from this design field is of openly transparent and holistic social institutions capable of adapting to rapid change based on the resource of people's creativity. This vision is compelling, and I find myself often compelled by it. There is a contagious optimism built into the language and intent of these projects. Yet, I cannot get over a concern that these projects are often in denial about the nature of our current eco-social crisis and the sort of change we are facing in the coming century.

The design field has much to contribute to the enduring and shifting conflicts in today's world. However, it can best do so when conflict is accounted for in the methods used towards sustainable social ecologies. This requires conscious analysis of the results of persistent social conflict and work actively towards participatory, locally managed socioecologies. People's creativity is understood to be an outcome of both dignity and opportunity in the face of the real and immediate concerns of their lives.

The Dark Mountain Project. During my background research, I stumbled upon a video conversation between the writers Dougald Hine and David Abram (2010) that echoed many of questions and concerns I was grappling with, namely, the question of how to provide epistemic antidotes to our rising eco-social crisis. Amongst other things, Hine and Abram offered a way to step aside the notion of progress and collapse as a particular, inevitable historical timeline. The future is not yet set, and the way we get there is through what we are doing and sensing right now. Or as put by Hine and Kingsnorth (2009), “the end of the world is not the end of the world full stop” (p. 19). Their discussion piqued my curiosity, as I wanted to be there with them and join in. I then found that Hine had co-founded the Dark Mountain Project to further explore these ideas:

The Dark Mountain Project is a network of writers, artists and thinkers who have stopped believing the stories our civilization tells itself. We see that the world is entering an age of ecological collapse, material contraction and social and political unravelling, and we want our cultural responses to reflect this reality rather than denying it. The Project grew out of a feeling that contemporary art and literature were failing to respond honestly or adequately to the scale of our entwined ecological, economic and social crises. We believe that writing and art have a crucial role to play in coming to terms with this reality, and in questioning its foundations. New stories are needed for darker, more uncertain times. Older ones need to be rediscovered. The Dark Mountain Project was created to help this happen. (The Dark Mountain Project, 2013)

The Dark Mountain Project publishes online and in print and organizes gatherings and conversations to explore and inspire other creative projects. In this project, I found a close ally to what I was endeavoring to do at the Hermit Lab. The starting point is our uncertain future, and the work is to gather and converse towards stories that may shape the way forward. By focusing on working with artists, philosophers, and writers, the Dark Mountain Project highlights the social function of art. It also understands that the way to art is through gathering and conversing as well as introspection. In this way, the Dark Mountain Project is both a platform and process for emerging stories. The project began by accident, when Hine and Kingsnorth published the Dark Mountain Manifesto as a reflective essay and received a surprisingly positive response. People began to connect with Hine and Kingsnorth, which led to organizing the Dark Mountain Project as a collaborative community platform. Hine and Kingsnorth serve as editors with the support of a small team and encourage visual and written contributions as well as collaborations in organizing events. Hine and Kingsnorth's backgrounds in writing, social and environmental activism, and open source practices seem to have provided a context for emergent collaborations.

The Dark Mountain Project is a work-in-progress that I have been learning from as a platform for conversation-based social research. The function of this project is not research, per se; rather it is a conversation-based network for art as a social catalyst. From a distance, it appears that the way it is organized and the way that people are participating is an exciting model worthy of future study.

The Hermit Lab for Participatory Encounter.

We cannot put forth physical energy unless we stoke our body with fuel in the form of food. We cannot hope to utter anything worth saying, unless we read and inwardly digest the utterance of our betters... We must draw in the goods of eternity in order to be able to give out the goods of time. But the goods of eternity cannot be had except by giving up at least a little of our time to silently waiting for them. This means that the life, in which ethical expenditure is balanced by spiritual income, must be a life in which action alternates with repose, speech with alertly passive silence. (Huxley, 1944, p. 300)

During the inquiry of my research I asked myself, “What kind of laboratory is this?” A pine building with windows looking out on the gardens and woods. A wood stove in the corner, tables on wheels, paper, pencils, scraps of wood, paint, books, words, and images on the walls. At the end of a dirt road in a town of 700. Often silent, punctuated with periods of intense activity, people coming and going (see figure 2). A laboratory for study, a studio for creating. And what? And why? And so what?

Figure 2 Workshop Break at the Hermit Lab



Our best available knowledge tells us that we are running out of clean air, water, and soil; running out of fish in the sea, cheap oil, and electricity; running out of language that is advertising free. The news is strewn with stories of alarm as we worry that our cultural fabric has become, somehow, irredeemably torn. It feels like we are in a storm of our own making. And the more we try to fix this mess, the more obsessed with success, we find ourselves pulling harder and harder in these Chinese finger-cuffs. Can it be that we need to learn how to slow down, and do so very fast? The Hermit Lab is a suggestion to this maybe, yes.

“During the discussion
we will NOT refer to
our revolutionary plans,

but we will look at each other

deep in the eyes

and we will know

who we are.

And we will exchange

email addresses.

And we will build

the future.

I love you.”

(O’Donnell, 2006, p. 32)

Organization and organizing. I once was quite concerned with ways of dispelling authority, creating non-hierarchical systems, and creating community. I am beginning to realize that these impulses are in some ways misdirected. Rather than dispelling illegitimate authority, I’ve grown concerned with legitimating people’s native and emergent authority. I now wonder if there is any such thing as non-hierarchy; what I once saw as such, I now recognize as highly dispersive and interdependent networks of hierarchy and order. And I have begun to doubt that we can ever create community, but rather acknowledge and build upon the ways in which we already belong to each other and the world. A friend once asked me whether I was really interested in organizations or forms of organizing. She was hinting that I may be truly leaning towards the patterns and processes that underlie what we come to name “organization.” For how can we attempt to

organize a world that is already ordered? When our mind's eye spells organization with a big O, we may obscure the organizing that is happening all around us. "The map is not the territory," as Korzybski (1931) once said. As organizations may be better understood as patterns of conversation, may the big O turn little as we come home to our words in each other's presence.

The Hermit Lab is intended as one organizing node of little songs for dreams of whatever size. During the process of its development, I returned to my interest in the many forms of influence each unique individual has and in groups as temporal environments for collective action.

*

starting points

anywhere

which is to say where we are here and now

getting to it

this doing

as we do it

make the road by walking

*

Chapter IV: Relational Organizations and Relational Epistemologies



As many people scatter to the winds of globalization and colonial legacy, there comes much forgetting. Buried pasts bring forgotten burial places. Yet, we all come from particular places and relations. Relational organizations and epistemologies are about connecting with our particular places and relations that call us home to the earth and stars.

While there is great value in distinguishing particular epistemic approaches to social research and potential dangers in what Pepper (1942) warns as irrational eclecticism, the focus of this literature review has been to highlight the common characteristics of concepts and practices that can be used in the design of collaborative projects at the Hermit Lab. The thread that connects these concepts and practices is through relational epistemologies, where social organization is understood to be formed through direct relational encounter with the world.

Rational and Relational Organizations

Many people espouse the principles and goals of freedom as rationalizations for their actions. Very few people these days espouse the principles and goals of domination as rationalizations for their actions. Yet, if so few are espousing a logic of domination, how is that people are dominating and being dominated?

The perceived rationality of human beings is often used as an argument for the domination of nature (which, inevitably is a domination of people as natural beings).

When nature is separate from the human, the rules of human freedoms and values do not apply to other organisms or biophysical processes.

Rational organizations as environments for domination. Organizations and people are often seen as things separate from the world and each other. Here ‘rationality’ is not meant to disparage thinking or reason, but to identify when human centric consciousness and its attending goals separate oneself or one’s social organization from the matrix of co-existence. Distinguishing between the rational and irrational often disregards particular ways of being and knowing, while privileging others. A rational organization is characterized by inflated worth (supremacy or domination) or devalued worth (alienation and oppression). Rather than being mutually exclusive, supremacy and alienation are often co-implicated among individuals and groups.

Relational organizations as environments for liberation. Organizations, like organisms, are processes of co-production open to their environments. Relational organizations are characterized by behaviours that demonstrate that, even when in conflict, we are ‘in it together’. Further, ‘we’ is an expansive concept; the participation of all makes the world. As much as we are a part of the cosmos, the cosmos is a part of us. *No one likes being eaten by a shark, but there is freedom in accepting we are a part of the cycle of life.*

Organizations are relational processes and not things. While we may come to see our most stable and long lasting institutions (government, religion, education, family) as permanent entities, they are in fact, entirely contingent on people behaving them into existence. As such organizations are open to change and capable of radical

transformations given shifting social and environmental conditions. Organizational stability, however, arises from relatively constant social and environmental conditions.

Organizations are environmental niches for people and their manners of relating. In the field of ecology a niche relates to the behaviour of a species living under specific environmental conditions. Human social organizations function analogously to ecological niches, encouraging and discouraging specific behaviours and relational patterns. The characteristics and qualities of any social organization create unique conditions for how people think, sense and act.

Relational organizations are made out of people participating. Participation is made out of (1) making and (2) belonging. Making is a human need. People become a part of the world by making the world. This is a biological phenomenon through the co-production of life processes between organism and environment. This is also a social phenomenon through the co-production of relational processes between individuals, groups and their environment. There is an essential pleasure of seeing one's actions reflected in the world around them: 'I did that' or 'I made that'. Belonging is the equally essential pleasure of people feeling included in the world around them; 'I belong here' or 'I'm a part of this'.

Curiosity is the engine of relational organizations as Open Systems. Curiosity is a capacity for wonder, which allows people to experience and explore. Curiosity is a navigational compass that is each person's own way of being in the world. Knowing is the unfolding of oneself in any moment and situation. Learning happens through the constant improvisation we call memory.

Who's in Charge? Who's in charge is the question we may ask in any social situation. In relational organizations the question is answered in a contextual and temporal way. In other words, who is in charge shifts, moment to moment, according to the needs and requirements of a people-in-environment. Leadership in relational organizations is a group and environmental phenomenon, more than a set of individual characteristics.

Implications for Research: Relational Epistemologies. What does it mean when you do research in a relational way? The most significant aspect of a relational approach to research is to acknowledge that by seeking to study and learn about other people and the world, one is becoming a part of those people and the world. This means that there is no superstitious distance between the observer and the observed. We are indeed, acting in the world together, and research can be considered each person's unique way of engaging, participating and enacting the capacity for wonder.

Epistemological Reflections

During the early period of my research, over a couple of months in the summer and autumn of 2011, I wrote and recorded audio sketches about ways of looking participatory democracy. While working on these projects, I continued to return to a pattern of thinking about, well ... about thinking. Into this fray swept a phrase, recurrently mumbled, frequently jotted down on crumpled notes: "epistemology, epistemological frameworks." This is a phrase with some history. From a young age I have been preoccupied with the way people talk and think: each person, like a jack-in-the-box, with different realities springing from their moods, minds, accents. Looking up at warbling adult bodies, I would wonder how people seem so variously certain or uncertain. And so,

from a childhood preoccupation emerged a wandering vocation for asking why people think, believe, and act as they do. Here I still am, meeting my three-foot self asking, “where does knowing come from?”

Where Knowing Comes From: Reflections from Seattle, Washington, 2004.

I’m looking at a book on the other side of the room. There are a lot of books over there. One is a volume of essays (Bateson, 1991) edited by Rodney Donaldson, my teacher at the Crazy Tiger Institute for the Cultivation of Living Systemic Understanding and Design. This Institute was housed in the basement of a bungalow-style house in a quiet suburb of Seattle, Washington. Rodney had started to teach here about half-a-dozen years ago after working in the Whole Systems Design program at Antioch University. Antioch University, a bastion of progressive, free thinking, turned out to be a bit too restrictive for Rodney and so he set out his own shingle as a one-man school.

I had learned about Rodney’s school through my involvement in the American Society for Cybernetics (ASC). The ASC has its roots in the 1940-50s Macy Conferences, which brought together leading experts across the scientific disciplines to create a common language across the physical, mathematic, and social sciences. A list of the Macy Conference attendees will point to many people responsible for a significant part in the development of numerous technologies and concepts that have shaped the current globalized society (from computers to the generation gap). What brought these scientists together was: a) an interest in the pan-disciplinary concepts of “feedback” and “circularity” (the conceptual seeds for contemporary “systems thinking”) and b) following the devastation of two world wars, a concern for the role of scientists in society. As the

late 20th century brought breakneck speed to the specialization of scientific knowledge, the attempts of the early Macy Conferences did not directly produce a powerful pan-scientific community. However, the ASC was formed in the mid-60s to carry on this legacy and continues to meet to this day. In many ways the ASC is a home for the second-generation of scientists associated with the Macy Conferences: students of influential and inspiring mentors who bring with them a profound personal and professional dedication.

Rodney Donaldson was a student of one the founding members of the Macy Conferences, Gregory Bateson (1972). Gregory Bateson came from a lineage of evolutionary biologists and had made a career of making innovations in a scientific field, then quickly moving on to the next: schismogenesis in cultural anthropology, film analysis in field ethnography, the double-bind theory of schizophrenia and creativity, family systems therapy, deuterolearning in education theory, somatic change in evolution, dolphin-human communication, and in his later years working towards an ecology of mind. Rodney got to know Gregory who was an instructor on a Harvard University year-at-sea program and became his student for the duration of Bateson's life (a period of about a dozen years). When Rodney spoke of Bateson he expressed his affection through a fierce dedication to conceptual rigor. In this rigor was an understanding of the mind as pervasively sacred. Without this rigor, the sloppiness of epistemological error writ into a culture at war with its world. At the Crazy Tiger Institute, in this small basement study, there was no mercy for sloppiness of mind. I left Seattle after a year of studying with Rodney. I wondered if he was lonely. I walked away with words and ideas not easy to share with others. Yet, I felt full, a new kind of lucid. Many of these ideas sprung from

epistemology and how the foundations of knowing come to structure reality (or reality in parentheses to distinguish phenomena, experience and interpretation). Wrong-headedness often causes trouble. Yet trouble may not be the cause of wrong-headedness. Indeed, the surprising success rate of bad ideas can be hard to grock. Grock, a favourite word of Rodney's, describes a combination of wonder and understanding. I enjoyed grocking with Rodney.

I'm remembering all this while looking at Rodney's book across the room. Remembering a feeling of great kinship with Rodney and the cast of characters revolving around the early cybernetics ideas. Cybernetics is about healing our culture and society. A reaction to the fractured nature of knowledge and an attempt to create a coherent story about how our world works. Through this cast of characters I got a peculiar window into the 20th century. It began to occur to me that all these technological and cultural changes came from a specific trail of interactions and relationships between people over time. This notion relates to the study of epistemic communities (Dobusch & Quack, 2008) and Burke's (1978) insights on the overlapping histories of technological development. The trails of technology and culture are meandering and filled with human dramas: needs, desires, love affairs, intrigues, and betrayals. Perhaps this is self-evident. But for me it was a tremendous revelation. I had found a tangible and thoughtful way of seeing the connections of the world. The world is made out of everything that has happened and is happening. Every feeling, question, doubt, worry, smile, and tenderness. Every conversation, project, organization, institution. Every gamma ray. Every cloudy day. Every rain drop, solar flare, nebula, dragonfly, moth, mould, virus, ash, birch, walnut,

pebble, ocean, dream, first date, lichen, moss, grandma, grandpa, algae bloom. Every flint, spear, text message, transom sail, diesel engine, ceramic bowl, quill, quiver, sheep wool sweater, vinyl pant leg, and vending machine.

Epistemology and Story.

Every time a person opens their mouth to speak, a world falls out. Sometimes many worlds fall out at once. Intelligence is the ability to hold more than one story at a time.

I was listening to the radio a few months ago and someone was discussing the notion of “epistemic closure”: when a person’s certainty about how the world works closes them to other understandings. For some reason the word, “epistemic” stuck in my mind. I began to ask myself what my epistemology is: How do I understand the way the world works? How do I know what I know?

Knowing is a relational dynamic. Knowing happens betwixt. For people, our knowing comes from our interactions with each other and the world. Sometimes we tell stories about what we know; we talk. Sometimes our stories get in the way of what we know. Self-consciousness is a peculiar business. Yet, there are many ways of knowing. My cat, Kamir, has a way of knowing that is particular to his interactions with the world. It could also be said that a rock has a way of knowing particular to its interactions with the world. Or the wind, or the moon, or the earth as a whole, or a blender, or a toaster oven even. These are stories about how the world works. Seeing everything and every force in

the world as a unique way of knowing is an animist story. I like this story. I aspire to be open to other stories.

I'm interested in stories. People make sense. Each person has stories made from their lived experience as well as their biological, social, and spiritual inheritance. While we are all complex and life is often confusing, there is coherence to who and how we are. Our stories do not determine what we do, but they are what we bring to every spontaneously lived interaction. Likewise, social systems have stories made from the history of interactions between people and their environment. My intent is to develop a research process that will elicit stories of people as unique individuals and the social systems we live in. And further to seek patterns between these stories to highlight the relational and interdependent nature of our world.

The epistemological approach of any research fundamentally shapes a project, beginning with what is deemed worthy of researching, what questions are asked, how they are asked, and how the “data” are analyzed. (Lavallée, 2009, p. 22)

The stated intention of this research is to support emerging participatory democratic practices. The research goal is not to determine the efficacy or viability of participatory democratic practices vis-a-vis alternative forms of social organization. Rather, the goal is to support participatory democratic practices because I find them desirable. That is to say, I want to live in a participatory democratic society and intend to put my talents and resources to work for such a society. Research in this context becomes about the ongoing learning process of being engaged in participatory democratic practices. As a reflection on

practice, such research is valuable to the development of knowledge about engagement in social systems in general as well as for those specifically interested in participatory democracy.

Community Arts and Cultural Mythmaking.

Community arts and cultural mythmaking are ways for people to create and share their stories. Over the life of this project I found myself more and more drawn into making collaborative art and story. This started off with my own introspective inquiry, then adding those of other Hermit Lab participants, and eventually into public art and storytelling projects in the local community. The process of creating art and story together is deeply relational and relies on people's tapping into their own ways of knowing. This is relational epistemology in practice.

“Culture is an effective crucible for social transformation, and one that can be less polarizing and create deeper connections than other social-change arenas” (Goldbard, 2006, p. 52).

Goldbard (2006) has shown the power of people making and sharing art as tool for community and cultural development. She sees the artistic process as:

A cultural container for dialogue [that] can give people the chance to encounter each other as human beings, to consider before they speak the effect their words may have on the listener, to speak from the heart. Not all differences can be resolved this way, of course. But this path almost always leads to the possibility of

a world that can contain real differences without bursting apart at the seams.

(Goldbard, 2006, p. 52)

The goal is not to resolve differences or take action on conflict situations, but to expand the cultural container to include different people's experiences and ideas. Community cultural development is generally a large group community arts engagement process. This involves inviting people (usually with a focus on marginalized voices) into highly participatory public forums for making and sharing art. This kind of work is powered by imaginal learning (Heron, 1999), which gives people's experience metaphorical and narrative meaning. Doing this kind of work requires significant skill and experience in both community organizing and facilitating creative expression. Goldbard identifies the need to train people for these specialized skills by providing the context for training in community. This means creating opportunities for people to practice and make a living in the field while recognizing the risks of training community artists in institutional settings.

Goldbard (2006) quotes a community artist defining the core insight behind her work who states: "artistic practice in combination with almost any human activity increases the possibility of having depth in that human activity" (p. 240). Art has the function of deepening any human activity. For this reason, we see art embedded in human culture. And for this reason, we can see art arising in any context of enduring social change. This insight is also reflected in Joseph Campbell's (1988) four operational levels of myth:

1. Mystical. Realizing what a wonder the universe is and what a wonder you are, and experiencing awe before the mystery. Myth opens the world to the dimension of mystery, to the realization of the mystery that underlies all forms.
2. Cosmological. This is the dimension with which science is concerned—showing you what the shape of the universe is, but showing it in such a way that the mystery comes through.
3. Sociological. This supports and validates a certain social order. These myths vary from place to place.
4. Pedagogical. How to live a human life under any circumstances. (p. 31)

Myths provide guidance for how to live. Every culture has its myths, and these myths are made resonant through artistic process and artistic works. Campbell points out that myths are embedded in particular sociohistorical contexts but function to position any given people and time within the greater story of humanity and the cosmos. In writing about James Joyce, Campbell (2003) states, “he escapes (so to speak) from his own spiritual provincialism into the total humanity which is our deep shared heritage” (p. 9). For this reason, we need to make myths that are of our times and are oriented to all times.

Choices and Truisms Today

Learning by doing... Sustainable solutions... The end of the world...

Design, design, design... Everybody matters

There's no equivalency today to any of those [early Highlander] programs. What is it that would provide the basis for people having the motivation to learn? How would you use that group process today? ... They're at a disadvantage in that we

were working in a really revolutionary situation... Now to get from that level to a place where you have some kind of group motivation seems to be the challenge of the day here in this period. How would you deal with that? (Freire & Horton, 1990, p. 92)

Perhaps my generation, so deeply disappointed at the loss of both its youthful optimism and the public subvention that sustained pioneering community cultural development work, has to make way for a younger cohort born into a time of reduced expectations but just as determined to make its way despite obstacles. (Goldbard, 2006, p. 169)

Somewhere between Horton's loss of revolutionary context and the stubbed toe of Goldbard's 60s generation, we are here, and it is 2015. Horton (1990) points out that one of today's challenges is a perceived lack of shared context for collective action. If global markets begin to significantly constrict with diminishing natural resources, we shall likely see increasing need for collective action. While many forms of cultural development, community planning processes, and curated conversations may help to engender a sense of shared world, people are most likely to take action when they themselves perceive that change is necessary and unavoidable.

"All my life I've been sick and tired. Now I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired." – Fannie Lou Hamer (Demuth, 1964)

As McNiff (1992) observes, "when the soul is lost, art comes spontaneously to its assistance. When the soul is depressed, isolated, mad and distraught, artistic images appear" (p. 16). So as we ask where we are heading, what do we know about this kind of

lost journey? Horton points out the crucial importance of people focusing on their own problems arising from conflict situations. The Dark Mountain Project invites us to stop arguing about a future that won't exist and focus on stories that will fit our times. The emerging field of collaborative design uses principles and practices from across the arts and sciences towards sustainable solutions. Community arts and cultural mythmaking encourages the expansion of collective imaginal space (Linds & Vettraino, 2008) to include new perspectives from embodied forms of knowing. The Hermit Lab is one node of conscious participation in this web of approaches to cultural change. Consistent throughout all of these approaches is the insight that cultural change occurs by encouraging people's creativity.

There are many reasons to feel overwhelmed and powerless in today's world. Yet, in each small creative act the world is born. Beneath the impulse to change the world is the wisdom to enjoy it. The Hermit Lab is intended to be a place where people come to enjoy our shared world: to be real and honest about the circumstances of our lives, the shapes of our dreams, and the road in between. In such a place, there is an effort to make space for reason and spirit, for planning and song, for design and chores, for labour and rest. In this way, cultural change is approached, with a careful eye on both whimsy and serious practical need.

~

i dunno i dunno i dunno

whattodo whattodo whattodo

the hermit lab is when we don't know

and that is just fine

the hermit lab is for those

whose daring social work has left them atilt

unsure how to proceed

it is also for those who wish to dare to work socially and are not sure how

trying to make a change with people

the shape of organization

the way we relate

our own self-descriptions tell us who and how we are

for, if the world is made out of the participation of all things

and words are the songs our imagination sings

we can see the results our stories bring

upon each other

as buildings, markets, school,

prisons, parties, tools

all the garden the world

in somebody's image

we tinkering creatures

earth movers and schmoozers and snoozers

what are we mucking about

and when we are stuck

what luck do we have

to get moonstruck

to be reminded of the home in which we live

and etch the sketch

our words dreams and deeds

are doing

~

The research setting: People and Place.

Relational organizations are about people and place. Specific places. Specific people. Research can be a way deepen relationships to people and place. In this project I was able to deepen the relationship to the land I live on and the local community in which it exists. When I began I didn't know where to start. But I showed up to things happening in my neighborhood and worked with

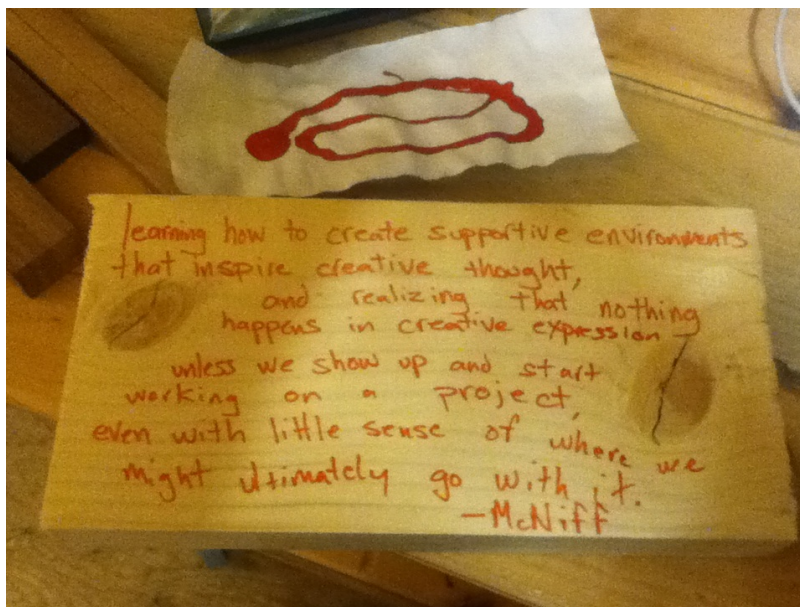
collaborators at the lab to invite people here. Through the process I came to appreciate where I live and many of the people who are here.

By approaching social research from a land-based form of creative inquiry (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015), I sought to include others in the exploration of our shared world. I brought others to my home, to its gardens, to the Hermit Lab as a form of collaborative encounter. The research was orientated towards conversation and aimed to create conditions conducive to open, lingering, shared inquiry. In the years since the Hermit Lab began construction in the autumn of 2010, a number of guests have come and helped build the buildings, garden the gardens, meet the neighbourhood, explore the concepts I have been working on, share their own work, and design emergent projects. The emergent research method can be described as “conversation over time.” This involved getting to know people by working together on projects of mutual interest. Some conversations and projects were more fruitful than others, but I have been surprised by the quality of mutual support and the variety of social actions emerging from this method. At the same time I was exploring parallel methods alongside site-specific research with Hermit Lab participants.

Participatory research is as a domain of joint action, when people act to accomplish things together. In such settings the outcomes are important to those involved, even when there is uncertainty about what the outcome may be. Developing such collaborative relationships requires specific conditions. McNiff (2008) describes this from an art-based perspective (see Figure 3) as, “learning how to create supportive

environments that inspire creative thought, and realizing that nothing happens in creative expression unless we show up and start working on a project, even with little sense of where we might ultimately go with it” (p. 32). It is precisely this sort of learning that I sought in the development of method for the work of Hermit Lab. Thus far, I have observed the importance of having a shared field of inquiry and overlapping attention to projects. The goal may not need to be the same, but an attention to each other’s endeavours creates a fabric for conversation.

Figure 3 Learning How to Create Supportive Environments



Hermit Lab research has taken two main forms: 1) the exploration of an already established project and 2) the search for areas of mutual inquiry and collaboration. In either case it has been my intent to establish relationships where we are collectively concerned with outcomes. I also have observed that research becomes particularly meaningful when we can relate our personal stories to commonly shared political contexts. However, when things become too personal or too abstract, meaning tends to

decrease. As McNiff (2008) points out, “I have discovered how easily art-based researchers can become lost and ineffective when inquiries become overly personal and lose focus or a larger purpose, or when they get too complex and try to do too many things” (p. 33). There are also ethical considerations to deep, introspective work. Literature on the field of community arts has become increasingly helpful as research projects developed in these directions.

In her excellent book recording her development as an artist and unfolding methodology of community based *Creative Awakening*, Lily Yeh (2011) describes her journey to find home in a strange place. Chinese born and classically trained in Taiwan as a landscape artist, Yeh found herself drawn to American art and culture in the 1960s. Enchanted by abstraction and colour she eventually found herself yearning for home and, oddly, found home in inner-city North Philadelphia where “the surface for my creative activities changed from canvas to the living fabric of community life” (p. 21). For Yeh, the canvas became community life and in reflecting upon her work, she comes to describe community life as an art-based research site. Her work in Philadelphia at the Village for Arts and Humanities is a sort of masterpiece in undermining masterpieces. That is to say, the Village for Arts and Humanities was made by the people who live in their own neighbourhood and not from a singular artistic vision. Having visited the project a number of years ago, I was inspired by a mosaic of mosaic sculptures rising from surrounding vacant lots. As a work of art it is breathtaking and as a community development project it is inspiring. I felt this way as an outsider and do not know the reality for the people who live there. Yet according to Yeh, this work has not been about an intervention into the

community, but an introduction for herself as a co-celebrant of community life. To this I can relate and seek to find ways to participate with people in the communities in which I live and aspire to connect.

From a critical social perspective power is suspect and rightly so. Yet, the question of how to share power raises the real possibility for collective action. As Yeh (2011) has shown, it is possible to involve ourselves with others and create positive, beautiful change, even if for some. But, the intent here is not to create change but to be a part of the fabric of community life. From this perspective, everyone is a potential researcher and co-celebrant, and power is a shared resource. If this is the intent, how does one put it into practice? For Goldbarb (2006), “community cultural development is an art, not a science. The most skilled practitioners rely on qualities of sensitivity and intuition that cannot be quantified or standardized. Indeed, those who focus too closely on ‘models,’ ‘replacability’ and ‘best practices’ tend to produce dull work, lacking depth and heart” (p. 101). Goldbard (2006) goes on to give a picture of what is involved in learning to do this work:

The people who work most directly on each project are deepening their community knowledge while they build working relationships, navigating sometimes treacherous interpersonal and inter-community terrain. [...]. This also yields considerable learning about group processes. Team leaders must be skilled to maintain awareness of all levels of interaction as group members get to know each other: how are people doing on the practical, technical level? Is the pace of learning appropriate and stimulating? Are there emotional issues beneath the surface that

need attention, or even problems that have already erupted and need healing? Do people have a grasp of important information about the community and the project? Have they taken part in the conversations necessary to explore its larger meaning, its political and spiritual significance? Community cultural development projects engage the whole person in all dimensions; none of them can be ignored. (pp. 94-95)

Indeed, there is much to learn in working directly with communities. And, the only way to learn is by doing it.

Participatory community processes: a contested domain.

Relational organizations happen in community. Yet community is a contested domain, with different interests and voices often recognized and others suppressed. What are some ways that can help power be recognized, challenged and encouraged?

“If community is multiple, contingent, and contested, how might we usefully think of ‘community’ in the context of collaborative processes?” (High, Ndejuru & O'Hare, 2009, p. 14).

High et al. (2009) ask us to complicate our notions of community. Communities do not often speak with a single voice, nor are they necessarily collaborative environments for the people who live in them (Edensor, Leslie, Millington, & Rantisi, 2010). Communities are dangerous places for many. Meanwhile relations between communities are rife with tensions and historical transgressions. As a researcher one steps into communities and becomes a part of these many power dynamics.

The emerging field of participatory community processes meets many of these power differences head on. Participatory Budgeting, for example, developed from the Freirian tradition of politicizing inequality, requires people to work together in their communities to articulate their interests and vote upon proposed projects. “The decision to open the process to individuals generally excluded from political participation arenas, is clearly understood by the Municipality as a political stance on the necessary inclusion of all the traditionally marginalised fringes of the population” (Talpin, 2011, p. 56). In working on such a project it would be a troubling sign if there were not open disagreement and conflict.

Emery (1999) describes a process for the “rationalization of conflict” in community planning processes. The goal here is to articulate people’s disagreements so that they be publicly acknowledged, recognized as not yet areas for collective action, but perhaps worked on in the future. The focus for collective action is only on the areas of common agreement, of which there are always enough to work on. Talpin (2011) describes a similar approach to conflict in the participatory budgeting process:

Sometimes, especially when the notes on the discussions are taken by one of the facilitators, before writing down a proposal, he/she asks: “Do we agree on that?” If no disagreement is voiced, the proposal is written down; if there is some disagreement it is further discussed. Then, either a compromise is found or the discussion is merely postponed. Very few proposals are actually rejected, unless the participant who voiced it explicitly recognizes the he/she was wrong, which seldom happens. (p. 57)

Participatory budgeting may well be the most consciously political of the currently emerging participatory processes. The stated aim is to include people traditionally marginalized from political processes. Other methods (Bunker & Alban, 2006) of civic dialogue, community strategic planning (Future Search, World Café, Appreciative Inquiry, Open Space) do not necessarily acknowledge the historical inequalities at work in community dynamics. While these processes are effective means of engaging in open and inclusive processes, there may be not be attention to that fact that people do not have equal access to resources, education, or political voice.

Ethical considerations & conclusion

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Not everyone gets to write a book. At least not yet. But, the world is opening again. Perhaps more than ever people have access to new media communications contributing to the flow of public discourse. Or, perhaps we are just catching up to an old way of being where people's words came from their tongues and lived in each other's ears. It is hard to say where we are at, relative to where we come from. Before the modern era, the world was peopled by the many forms of life heard in the bush, meadows, dunes, oceans, skies. Now many of us only see people in the form of two-legged walkers and talkers. May the world open up the great creatures of the algae world, of the sky world, of the rocks and lichen and furry skinned four legged ones. The asphalt is shaking and we can make a break in this torn weird screen. Power is on a tilt-a-whirl and on the other side is mutual respect for the many different ways of being in which we co-exist.

~

In his book, *Research is Ceremony*, Wilson (2008) writes of the accountability of storytelling and listening from an indigenous perspective:

Accountability is built into the relationships that are formed in storytelling within an oral tradition. As a storyteller, I am responsible for who I share information with, as well as for ensuring that it is shared in an appropriate way, at the right time and place. In receiving the story, you as an active listener are responsible for putting the story into relational context that makes sense for you and for listening with an open heart and open mind. If you choose to pass along the story of my words, you also take on the responsibilities of the storyteller yourself. The relationships that we build with an Indigenous research paradigm shape and redefine the concept. In your joint ownership of this concept, you are also accountable for how you use it (pp. 126-127).

These ethics emphasize the power of people as storytellers and storyreceivers. Wilson (2008) addresses the responsibility we have to the stories we tell and how we hear them. This is not only a concern for scholarly academic researchers, but a part of what it means to be an ethical human being. To tell one's own story or someone else's involves a sort of tacit social contract that university's research ethics protocols attempt to make explicit. Yet, the ethics are to be found in the doing of how we speak and how we listen in each unique relational encounter (Linds & Trull, 2012; Varela, 1999). Words on the page go somewhere. To whom is this electronic message in a bottle typing? On what distant shore shall it wash up and what will it say to the person who removes the cork and unfurls the

paper's thin, faded body. In attuning ourselves to one another, to our communities, may we learn to hear how we tell what we've heard.

Chapter V: Method



Conversation Over Time

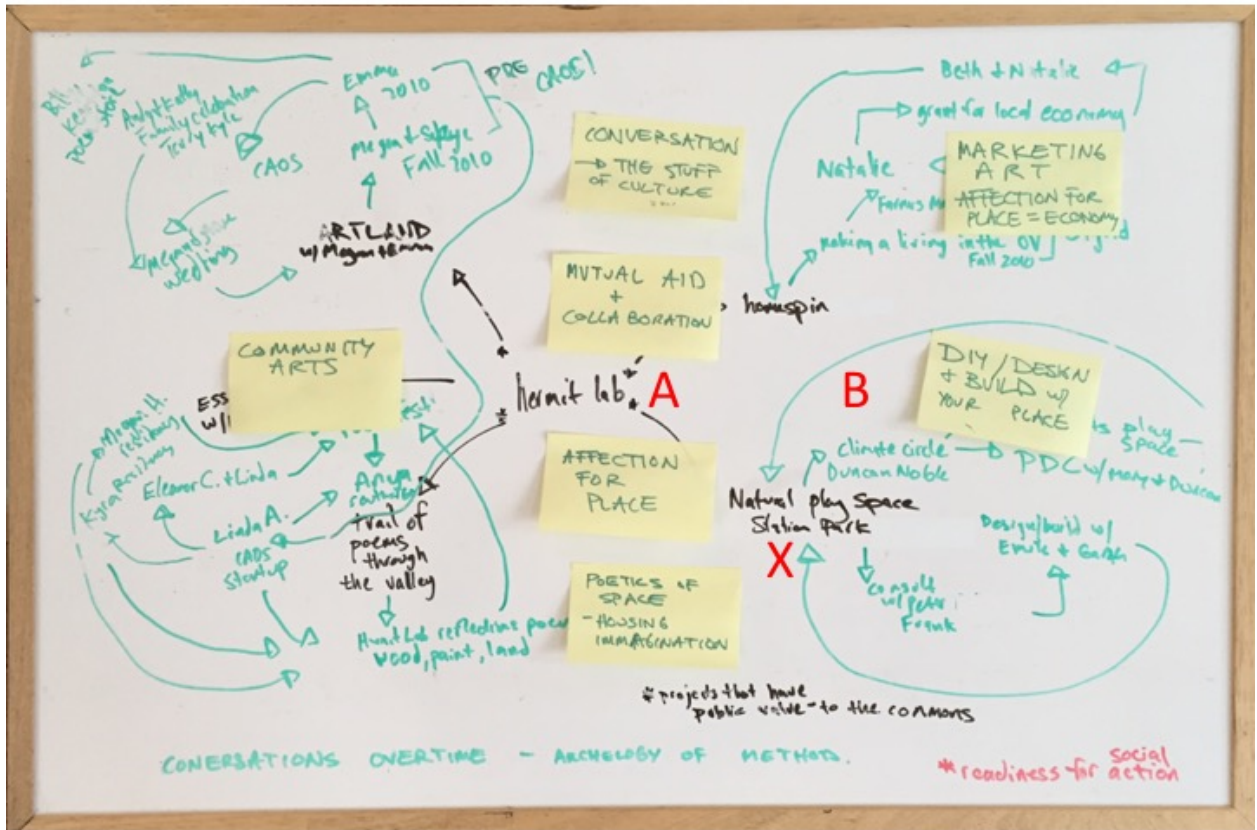
We do not start with the answers, but learn as we go, over time. As social beings living in language (Brün, 1990; 2003a; 2003b; 2004; Parenti, 2000), people are continuously making the world by weaving words and deeds. Following the conversational turn in organizational and social change research (Block, 2000, 2008; Bohm, 1996; Ford, 1999; Herda, 1999; Macy & Brown, 1998; Shaw, 2002; Wheatley, 2002), the Hermit Lab is grounded in a conversation-based approach to social research. This emerging methodology recognizes that “open-ended, exploratory conversation amongst attentive, engaged humans is the source of both continuity and change in the patterning of interaction of culture and society” (Shaw, 2002, p. 162). Rather than intending to implement a plan or ideal vision of society, the Hermit Lab has sought to engage people in conversation about our shared world. From this perspective, social actions became a thread weaving through these conversations over time.

Conversation is defined as an iterative process between two or more people actively engaged in reciprocal relationships of mutual influence (Maturana & Poerksen, 2004; Richards, 2007; Richards, 2013). Conversations include verbal and embodied (physical, gestural, aural, and emphatic) linguistic acts. As defined above, conversations between peers are a generative operational domain of social life. The governing

assumption behind this research method: each person has unique forms of knowledge, perception, and social influence and conversation is an effective way to get to know them.

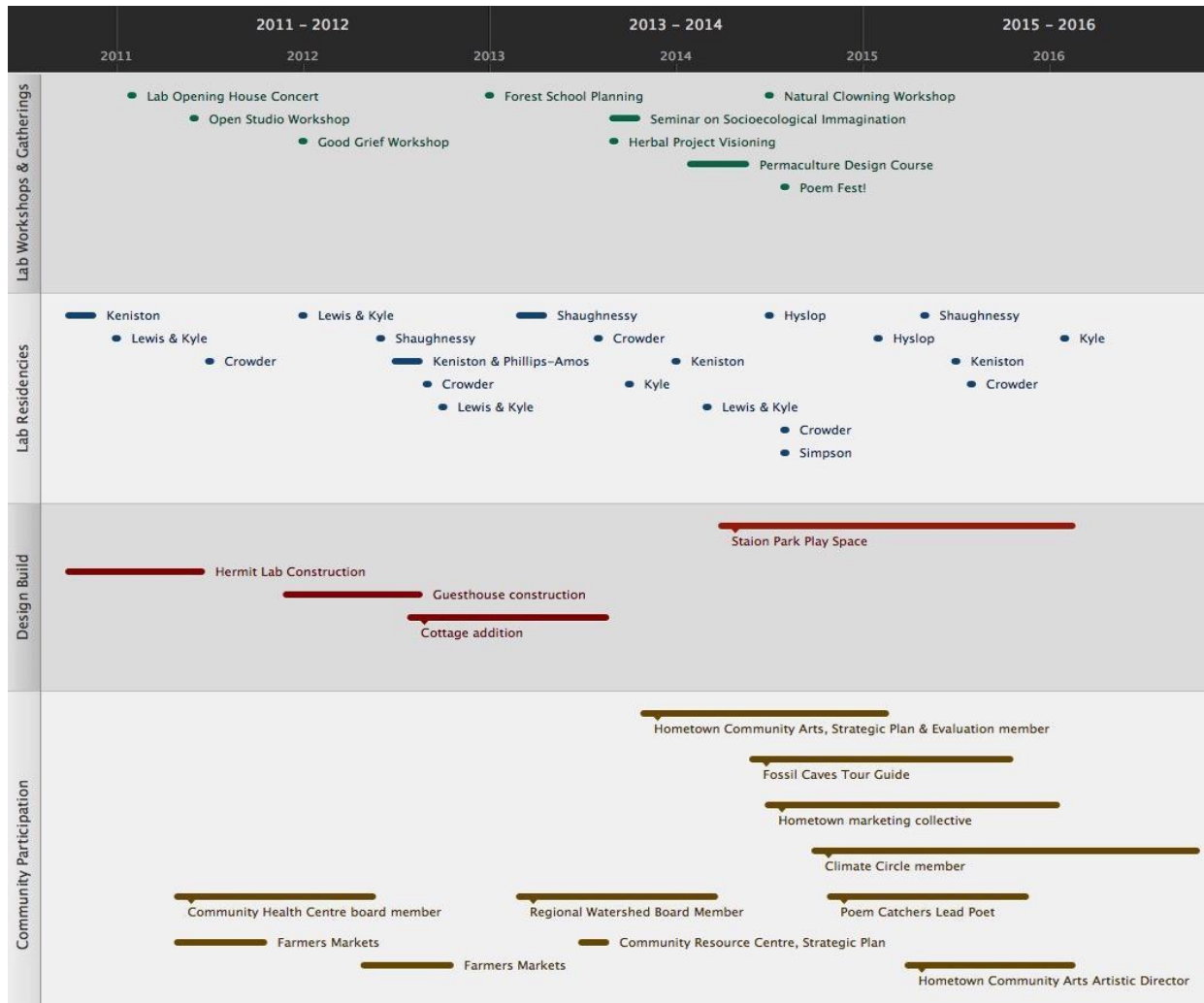
The focus of this study is on the lived experience of participatory encounter (making and belonging) and conversation was the main form of research practice. These conversations occurred over the period of study (2010-2105) with fellow participants at the Hermit Lab and through engaging with my local community. Conversation was engaged as a method to arrive at collaborative relationships. As described in Newcomb's (1953) ABX model a collaborative relationship is established between two people or groups (A & B) and a field of mutual inquiry (X). The illustration below shows the network of conversations between myself (A in the center as the principal researcher at the Hermit Lab) and the people with whom I got to work (B shown in green) and emergent fields of mutual inquiry (X shown in black clusters and post-it notes).

Figure 4 Network of Hermit Lab Conversations



The image above (Figure 4) shows the network of conversations and collaborative relationships at the Hermit Lab. Missing from this image is the element of time. Conversations happen over time. It takes time to build relationships, mutual understanding, and support. The table below shows various research activities over time.

Figure 5 Conversations Over Time at the Hermit Lab



Research Setting and Participants

The Hermit Lab for participatory encounter is located on an 11-acre site in rural Hometown,³ Ontario (population 700) consisting of a 300 sq. ft. workshop for conversation and collaborative projects, guesthouse/library for residencies and introspective work, gardens for food/medicine production, ecological learning, and

³ The name of the town has been changed to Hometown for the documentation of this study. See below.

exercise (See Figures 6-7). The 11 acres are surrounded by over 100 acres of accessible forest, ponds, and meadows. The infrastructure of the site is best suited for small groups of up to 12 people.

Figure 6 Hermit Lab & Gardens



Figure 7 Guesthouse & Library



Participants in the study were invited based on existing familiarity and interest in the Hermit Lab. Participants were also recommended by past participants.

- Attention was given to those who were actively working towards cultural change in their communities.
- Attention was also given to artists and designers working on creative projects and methodologies.
- Workshops and residencies were designed in collaboration with participants based on the emerging themes in conversation over time.
- Research themes were taken from the conversations that occurred at the Hermit Lab during the period of study, 2010 to 2015. Participants and I, as principal researcher, jointly determined the research themes.

Co-Creation

Participants who chose to be involved with the Hermit Lab were invited to open-ended conversations to discover areas of mutual inquiry and develop seminars, workshops and creative projects to explore these inquiries. This process was co-generative and people were encouraged to participate as much or little as their interest arose and ebbed. The only major requirement for participation beyond one's already established involvement in community life was an openness to the spontaneous flow of interactions that happened when people arrived at the lab. Based on what happened between participants at the lab, potential areas of inquiry led to further collaborative projects. When a conversation led to sustained interaction, participants were occasionally invited to reflect on the process and asked to share their stories in the media of their choosing. Media included writing, visual art, digital media, and live and recorded performance. Traces of participants' stories were the core data of the study.

Research Activities

Research was conducted through “conversation over time” with Hermit Lab participants and the local community taking four different forms: community engagement, residencies, workshops and group conversations, and design/build (see tables 1-5).

Community engagement. Throughout this study I participated in everyday life along with my neighbours, showed up to community events, and tried to be helpful whenever I could. Through this process I got to know my neighbours and find ways to connect to the place that I now call home. I did this to be a part of my community and find

ways I could fully participate. I did not research the community per se, but sought to understand my own personal experience within community.

Place names, organizations, and projects that would identify this particular community have been anonymized. Anonymizing the community is not to protect its identity⁴, but to allow the reader to imagine any number of places like the one described. While I have grown very fond of my home community and do think it is special, it puts the focus on community as a general phenomenon and not one single place. People's names have only been included where there has been formal consent.

Hermit Lab residencies. Hermit Lab residencies were conducted with visiting artists and scholars who used the Hermit Lab to develop their own projects. Residencies lasted between 3 and 21 days depending on the nature of the project and mutually agreeable timing. Hermit Lab residents also engaged in projects I was involved in, whether on the land or in the local community. Often workshops or group conversations were held with visiting residents and local community members. Through community engagement and hosting workshops, Hermit Lab residents and local community members were often able to get to know one another and learn from each other's experience.

Workshops. Workshops and group conversations regularly took place at the Hermit Lab studio. Some of these were workshops planned with visiting residents, some were group conversations with local community members working on specific projects, and some were spontaneous gatherings that occurred when people wished to explore ideas

⁴ The name of the community is Killaloe, Ontario located in the Ottawa Valley. Neighboring communities include Wilno, Brudnell, Rockingham, Barry's Bay, Eganville, Round Lake, Golden Lake, and Algonquins of Pikwakanagan First Nation.

or potential projects. Over time a number of people have gotten to know the Hermit Lab as hospitable to certain kinds of collaborative inquiry and have come to use the space for that purpose.

Design/build. Design/build refers to integrated design and construction of buildings and landscapes. The design and construction of the Hermit Lab, guesthouse, and surrounding gardens and landscape has been an ongoing activity. This has been a form of research into the interplay between people and space, the ways that physical space can shape experience, how to balance different kinds of activities (rest, play, planning, solitude, and collaboration), and the process of getting to know different building materials and their qualities. Hermit Lab residents engaged in various parts of the design/build process along with a number of people from the local community who helped to design and build the Hermit Lab environment. Design/build also took the form of a natural play space design for a local park and a series of poem installations in a neighbouring village.

Table 1 Hermit Lab residencies, workshops, and design/build		
Hermit Lab Residencies	Hermit Lab Workshops	Design/Build
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eleanor Crowder • Megan Hyslop • Leah Lewis • Billy Keniston 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open Studio Process with Linda • Good Grief with Leah Lewis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hermit Lab studio • Guesthouse & library • Gardens and landscape

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artem Kopelev • Terry Kyle • Marc Luchs • David Nigel Lloyd • Georgia Phillips-Amos • Kyra Shaughnessy • Elizabeth Simpson 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making a living rural Ontario • 3-part seminar on The Social Ecological Imagination • Herbal Project visioning • Natural Clowning Workshop with Megan Hyslop • Forest School project planning • Poem Fest! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meadow and forest paths • Hometown Natural Playspace • Poem installations for local Arts Centre
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<p>Table 2</p> <p>Community Participation</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional Watershed Project – Volunteer board member • Hometown Climate Circle – Co-organizer • Hometown Sustainability – Local economic development strategy • Hometown Community Arts – Evaluation & strategic plan • Community Resource Centre – Strategic plan consulting • Community Health Centre – Volunteer advisory board member • Community Café – Planning consultant

- Farm & Ecology Centre - Farmers Market – Volunteer
- Herbal Project – Visioning consultant
- Forest School – Meeting facilitation
- Hometown Park Natural Playspace – Landscape and playspace design
- Hometown Library – Weekly volunteer at circulation desk

Table 3
External Courses & Workshops
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Permaculture Design Certificate – Oregon State University• Introduction to Creative Arts Expression Arts – Haliburton School of the Arts, Fleming College• New England Workshop for Science and Social Change

Table 4
Reflective Practice: Essays and Poems
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A way in• What Happens to Us?• Worker Cooperatives in rural Ontario• A squirrel just visited me• Saltines• Making & Belonging

- When is the Hermit Lab, with Billy Keniston and Georgia Phillips-Amos

Table 5

Emergent Projects: Collaborations with Hermit Lab Participants and Local Community

- Permaculture Design for Hermit Lab site
- Hometown Park – Natural Play Space Design
- Hometown Community Arts – Strategic Plan
- Poem Fest! – 3-day experiential poetry festival
- Public Poetry – with local Arts Centre
- Hometown Marketing Collective for local homespun businesses

Creative Synthesis and Heuristic Inquiry

As described above, conversations leading to collaborative relationships and projects were the main research activity for the study. Over the course of the research, themes from these conversations were explored in episodic periods of reflection between Hermit Lab participants and me. These reflective sessions with Hermit Lab fellows used a heuristic research process much like that used by artists, writers, and philosophers when creating new works. Heuristic inquiry is a method for investigating lived experience (Van Manen, 1997), where the researcher asks, “What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely?” (Patton, 2002, p. 132). Heuristic inquiry employs the concepts of “research process as

dialogue” (Kleining & Witt, 2000) and “narrative as participatory knowing” (Hiles, 2002) to engage deeply into questions that matter to the people asking them.

Hiles (2001) gives an overview of the heuristic research process as described by Moustakas (1990, pp. 27-37).

Moustakas’s phases of heuristic inquiry

Initial engagement

The task of the first phase is to discover an intense interest, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher, one that holds important social meanings and personal, compelling implications. The research question that emerges lingers with the researcher, awaiting the disciplined commitment that will reveal its underlying meanings.

Immersion

The research question is lived in waking, sleeping and even dream states. This requires alertness, concentration and self-searching. Virtually anything connected with the question becomes raw material for immersion.

Incubation

This involves a retreat from the intense, concentrated focus, allowing the expansion of knowledge to take place at a more

subtle level, enabling the inner tacit dimension and intuition to clarify and extend understanding.

Illumination

This involves a breakthrough, a process of awakening that occurs naturally when the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition. It involves opening a door to new awareness, a modification of an old understanding, a synthesis of fragmented knowledge, or new discovery.

Explication

This involves a full examination of what has been awakened in consciousness. What is required is organization and a comprehensive depiction of the core themes.

Creative synthesis

Thoroughly familiar with the data, and following a preparatory phase of solitude and meditation, the researcher puts the components and core themes usually into the form of creative synthesis expressed as a narrative account, a report, a thesis, a poem, story, drawing, painting, etc.

Validation of the heuristic inquiry

The question of validity is one of meaning. Does the synthesis present comprehensively, vividly, and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience? Returning

again and again to the data to check whether they embrace the necessary and sufficient meanings. Finally, feedback is obtained through participant validation, and receiving responses from others.

As described above, a heuristic research process was used as a form of engagement and creative synthesis to explore the lived experience and making and belonging.

Between the winter of 2015 and the spring of 2016 several Hermit Lab fellows (Crowder, Hyslop, Keniston, Kyle, and Shaughnessy) returned to the Hermit Lab specifically to explore the traces of all conversations that occurred (projects, writing, images, workshops, and ephemera) in order to identify and document key themes. Themes were identified based on the following criteria:

- Overlapping relevance: Was each them present as a main thread through the conversations and projects at the Hermit Lab?
- The quality of conversations had at the Hermit Lab: Do the themes reflect what the experience of the conversations was like?
- Where the conversations were leading us: Do the themes express what emerged from our conversations that resonates and is insightful?
- Poetic resonance (Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009): Are themes playful in their description? Do they spark the imagination by saying something in a different or curious way (Herzog, 2010)?

A session with Shaughnessy in the spring of 2015 condensed the overarching themes:

- Conversation: The Stuff of Culture

- It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Mutual Aid
- Affection for Place: The Economics of Coming Home to the Senses
- Housing Imaginations: The Poetics of Space

These themes were then shared with other Hermit Lab participants as people inquired into the work. Feedback at this stage was not formally documented, but it was clear that people's faces lit up at the themes and were curious to explore more. Ongoing visits from Hermit Lab fellows over the next year produced the series of reflective essays found in the following chapters. These writings were then shared, as an earlier draft of this document, with all the Hermit Lab participants whose names and work appear herein.

Twenty-six participants were sent the document as an electronic file by email and through Google Docs. Each participant was asked to review the document, find their names, and express their approval (or not) to publish. Participants were also asked to share any reflections or thoughts about the document. Each person did express their approval via email and several gave detailed feedback supporting the work. The positive response of participants to approve the document is a form of validation of the work, and its meaning to participants.

Summary of Findings

The main findings of the study are a series of reflective essays about being with people at the Hermit Lab and our explorations of our shared world. The Hermit Lab as a context for participatory encounter raised the following questions:

- What do we need to do to adapt to our rapidly changing world?

- What kind of world can we create in the present circumstances with the resources we have?
- What kind of world do we want and what do we need to do and stop doing now to get there?

The manner of exploring the research questions was collaborative, exploratory, and driven by two related themes:

- How changes in the present socioecological context are triggering new ways of relating with and imagining our world.
- How the new ways we relate with and imagine our world are triggering changes in our socioecological context.

Chapter VI: Thematic Essays: Introduction



What I'm really interested in is the philosophy of participation. Not what technique or tool is best to get people to have control over their own lives but, what do you value? What makes you feel like a participant in the world? What is it that you do that makes you feel that you are a part of this world just as much as the world is a part of you? You're in a dialogue with existence. This project is about being a large enough container to bring our full selves, and the sharing of that, and our hopes and our dreams and our worries and our failures. I think that builds a hugely strong fabric for social change, for collaborative action, for all sorts of things.

Trull, 2015, interviewed by Megan Hyslop at the Hermit Lab

This thesis is concerned with the philosophy and poetics of participation. What does it mean to be a participant in the world, in society, in an organization or community, in one's life?

The study is about the life of the Hermit Lab, a rural studio for hosting conversations with fellow interested people. What follows are a series of essays as studies of conversations held at the Hermit Lab and in participating in the daily life a small, rural community in Ontario. There are interjections and contributions from the extended social field, from visitors sleeping in the Hermit Lab guesthouse and library, from the voices of movies and TV shows streaming from the satellite dish atop our woodshed, from

neighbours who search and cultivate the good life, from local businesses and community organizations and municipal politics and global trade agreements, from the woods and ponds that shelter this little southeast-facing home for the imagination. There are rocks that speak. There are restless people who grow quiet. There are projects dreamed up that go nowhere and some that take seed and give fruit (though often hard to tell which is which). There are musings from the darker shadows of myself. There are moments of collective whimsy and delight. All the things that happen in a home, that happened in this particular space created to host people's imagination and make rooms for new thoughts and feelings, possibilities, and social action.

Figure 8 Four Themes

I
Conversation:
The Stuff of
Culture

II
It's a Bird, It's a
Plane, It's
Mutual Aid



III
Affection for Place:
The Economics of
Coming Home to
the Senses

IV
Housing
Imaginations: The
Poetics of Space

Chapter VII: Conversation: The Stuff of Culture



Phenomenology: the study of lived experience.

Conversation is a phenomenological fabric weaved through the ongoing spontaneously lived interactions between people and their environments. This phenomenological fabric is the catalytic medium for all social organization and tangible human activities. The fabric is made out of ideas and moods and impressions and the way that people become in each other's presence. Once one comes to see this phenomenological fabric as ever so real as physical objects (the tenor of the conversation just as real as the chair you are sitting in while talking), one becomes able to engage in the social field as domain for possibilities, choicemaking, and actions.

Engaging the social field

As one becomes aware of the phenomenological fabric, one may begin to consciously act to participate in the spontaneous interactions in which one is embedded. This presents a whole series of challenges: as one becomes conscious of who one is relative to any particular social interaction and how one is in that interaction, a new set of responsibilities and freedoms becomes available. While we often spontaneously and unconsciously master an enormous repertoire of social behaviours and attitudes, we are not necessarily aware of this repertoire as a domain for choice making. Additionally, being phenomenologically conscious, doesn't necessarily translate into being afforded the

skill or experiential knowledge of how to put this awareness into action. Mastery of the phenomenological fabric requires practice and that is one reason for spaces like the Hermit Lab.

The Hermit Lab is intended to provide a context for interaction and curiosity in which participants may become skillfully aware of the phenomenological fabric in which they coexist. Yet, it is important to point out that rational articulation of the phenomenological field is not necessarily the most effective pedagogical method for people to learn in it. Rational awareness without embedded emotional and relational knowledge can become a hindrance to learning. Thus at the Hermit Lab people are invited to follow their own curiosity and interests based on the current circumstances of one's life.

As whole people we become as we live, as we notice, do, and imagine. The ability to notice the phenomenological fabric in which one is embedded requires in some sense stepping out of time and context (what we call self-consciousness). But in reality there is no stepping outside of our lives. We can only step in and walk through the ongoing current that is our world. Yet, a peculiar aspect of reflective awareness is a sort of removal process from the current of one's life. The seeming paradox of a Hermit Lab for participatory encounter, where the goal is collective social action through the process of hermiting or co-hermiting (wandering alone, or wandering alone in each other's company) is not lost on participants, but found when one catches a glimpse of themselves as they are and could be (see Figure 9).

Three points of contact between reality & imagination

1. Concrete social change flows from the quality of the political imagination (our understanding and dreams of society).
2. We live in political moments. What inspires: the terrain changes.
3. The emerging image of society (how society operates, how we want it to, what we are capable of) will shape the policies, programs, and institutions that we continuously make.

Figure 9 Invitation to the Hermit Lab



So the idea is that the Hermit Lab is a place for people to come and wander in the hills with the birch and milkweed stare at lichen for a long time talk about the unknown, yet desirable future shape of our world pick a bit of basil make an animated film about whatever is on one's mind do some improv theatre try to make a piece of furniture in 5 minutes drink some tea without any particular expectations except that we aspire to enjoy ourselves and each other and our shared world

So the Hermit Lab is in the spirit of hermetic traditions reaching out into our mad, cracked society offering tender bits from a craggy shell

How I Came to the Lab and the Conversations that Flowed

In 2010 I moved to live full time in a small village in rural Ontario. At this time, I had begun PhD studies at Concordia University in Montreal and having completed the required coursework began to frame a research project to explore “emerging practices in

participatory democracy.” My scholarly background to this point was in cultural studies, art and social change, and participatory democracy. I had also been a member of an experimental arts community in central Illinois, a rural eco-village in West Virginia, and an urban sustainability project in Montreal. I had worked as a waiter, janitor, farmhand, home-care provider, librarian, editor, research assistant, and most recently as a consultant for participatory planning and organization design. I come from a white, middle-class family from a small town in New Jersey where my father was an Episcopalian minister and my mother a social housing expert. I grew up with the values of community participation, social justice, art, and science. As an adolescent I moved to suburban New Jersey where I had the benefits of a good education and comfortable home along with the struggles of a confused and alienated teenager. As a young adult I was able to attend small liberal arts schools that fostered a sense of intellectual curiosity and social responsibility. I spent my early twenties working with experimental arts and ecological projects while studying systems thinking and the politics of language. My later twenties and early thirties were spent learning how to put participatory democratic values into practice through group process management and organizational structure.

By the time I began this study I had learned a lot about myself, philosophy, art, social theory, and group process. I had been humbled by how hard it can be to create social change. I had learned some of the pitfalls of idealism while maintaining a deep and abiding respect for the power of the imagination. I had become somewhat agnostic about political ideology, epistemology, research, and group process methodology. I knew that I

wanted to explore more deeply the meaning of participatory democracy (the joyful underbelly of organizational life) and that I needed a simple way to begin.

Building the Hermit Lab. So it was that in the fall of 2010 I found myself building a building. I already had a longstanding affection for vernacular architecture and DIY buildings. I love seeing homes that people build for themselves. I remember being so excited the first time I read Hundertwasser's (1958) Mouldiness Manifesto, which proclaimed people's ability to build their own houses as a human right. And here I was in a small rural village with a long history of self-built homes. A history that goes all the way back at least 12,000 years to Algonquin ancestors (Whiteduck, 2002). A landscape dotted with still-standing barns of stacked, whole round logs built by Polish, Irish, and German settlers. A neighbourhood with a surprising amount of experimental modern houses and natural buildings imported by back-to-the-landers and urban refugees: passive solar, earthship, cordwood, strawbale, and cob. A neighbourhood of pickup trucks carrying circular saws and scrap lumber to chop up for kindling.

When I began building I had very little carpentry experience, but I had time and a big pile of rough sawn lumber from a local mill. I would drive around the area on errands and look at all the houses, barns, and garages studying foundations, walls, roofs, and chimneys. Noticing the way each structure stood in its particular landscape among hills, fields, lakes, or ponds. How building materials appeared to reflect or reject their surroundings. Watching the seasons change and the way homes are weathered.

I started with a small shed that turned out square and solid. Then watching a neighbour's cottage under construction next door I began the foundation for a studio on

our land. Up went piers and beams and joists and a floor. Up went walls and rafters and a roof. In went windows and doors, a wood stove and a chimney. Each step of the way I would consult local builders and books and videos from YouTube. I would fall asleep wondering about the next day's project and wake up with an idea of how to do it.

When the building was finished enough to keep warm and make it comfortable, hermit lab fellow Kyra Shaughnessy came to do a house concert to which our neighbours were invited. We squeezed 30 people into the little 20'x16' studio and toasted to its new name and purpose: The Hermit Lab. This was a place to host conversations: to listen, learn, imagine, and create.

In building the Hermit Lab a conversation had begun. I had learned to listen to the very materials out of which a building is made. The long straight pine sawn down the road taught me to look at the trees all around and see how each grows differently. Each tree its own particular way of being, with just as much character as you or me. The stones, which abound in the ground here hinting at their history – epic drama of geology. Looking out the windows of this new building, realizing that everything we make is made of earth stuff.

For a kid from New Jersey this was heady business. To learn that my bones are made of earth and sky, that my body is not a separate thing, but one specific form of everything.

Every age has its challenges. In the modern world it can be easy to forget where we come from. We are elemental. No better or worse than the dust on the floor.

This was the conversation in which I was immersed while learning to build a building. So many of my neighbours knew so much about this land. So many people here listen to the sounds around, put their hands in the dirt, haul wood from the bush, swim in the lakes, and spend their weekends outside in the winter. This was a conversation I had begun to write about again and again in my notes about “coming home to the senses.”

Making a Living in Rural Ontario: Autumn 2012. After building through the winter I turned my attention to gardens in the spring and summer. Many people in this area tend their own gardens. It is a delight to see the many ways each person makes their own garden. A drive around the neighbourhood will show a bounty of unique approaches to gardening. Where there is the occasional flat field you can see a ploughed garden plot planted in potatoes, cabbage, and onions. Since rocks are the major crop here, many people are creative with stonewalls. Ornamental flowers and trees can be found, but many people leave the birch and maple forests to show their natural beauty and focus their cultivating efforts on produce. Some people use heavy hay mulch to cover their gardens to slow weeds and reduce the need for irrigation. There are many ways to make a garden and I now had the opportunity to get to know our unique plot of land and learn what will grow well.

When I turned my attention to market gardening for the summers of 2011 and 2012, I'd already been working our plot of land for about 5 years. I also had previous experience working on a number of small farms as well as in landscape construction. I found our land an inviting challenge. Several acres of meadow sloping southeast down to ponds below. I dug terraced gardens and planted all sorts of vegetables, including quite a

few exotic varieties to entertain potential customers. The gardens grew well, or well enough to bring to market.

By good fortune there happened to be two different farmer's markets within 10 minutes of our land: one in Hometown and one in the neighbouring town. Both are small villages with fewer than 1000 people, so it was a welcome surprise to have markets in such small places. I spent my Saturdays and Sundays for the next two summers bringing fresh vegetables to market, chatting with my fellow vendors and getting to know the people who came to shop and visit. It wasn't unusual for someone to buy just one of my exotic cucumbers so they could save the seeds for their own garden next year. Many local people had their own gardens and came to chat about gardening methods rather than to shop. Meanwhile cottagers from Toronto and Ottawa would come by and marvel at the country life and often talk of dreams to move out here one day.

The farmer's markets enabled me to get know a lot of my neighbours, join in the local gossip, and get a crash course in the practicalities of market gardening. It also brought in enough money to cover the costs of the garden and fed us well all season. Since my intent was to learn about market gardening and get to know my neighbours, it was time well spent. However, after many hours of conversation with my neighbours and fellow market gardener/farmers I became even more aware of the practical challenges of making a living off the land.

These thoughts led to a gathering in the Hermit Lab in the fall of 2012 with ten local artists, farmers, and food and community enthusiasts to discuss making a living in our corner of rural Ontario. It was a lively meeting where people introduced themselves,

their projects, skills, and desires for collaboration. During the discussion three things were identified as useful for such gatherings:

- A forum to communicate with each other and have purposeful, reflective conversations.
- A chance to focus on each person's work/projects and to get feedback.
- Developing a cooperative model for income-generating projects.

After establishing these goals and beginning with great enthusiasm this group met on a couple more occasions and then drifted away. Several group members were already planning new businesses and went on to start them up (a café and a food truck business). Other ideas mentioned in these meetings have, several years later, been realised by people independent of these discussions (a new local brewing company, a community arts organization, a cob oven bread company, and revival of the Hometown Craft Fair).

Looking back on these notes I am struck by how quickly the conversation turned to taking action. I remember how quickly people jumped to talking about what they wanted to do given the chance. I also remember being uneasy about how fast the conversation turned to identifying practical projects and how to make them happen. I remember longing for more time to get to know each other while deciding what to do together. It was this urge to linger, to find out more about what people wanted and why. As a result I began to formulate the research approach of conversation over time.

Today, a marketplace is often thought of as a purely commercial space. However, a marketplace is more than a place to buy and sell. The model for the modern marketplace is the ancient Greek *agora*, which was the centre of civic life. The root of the word *agora*

means “to gather.” The essential function of a marketplace is to gather people together. People gather to trade goods and services, as well as, ideas and gossip.

A good gathering place allows people to meet for a purpose and then linger for as long as possible. There is an intelligence that exists in informal (unplanned, unscripted) interactions. People figure out what they need to do, why, and how, given the opportunity for open-ended conversations in consensual interactions. Gathering places are catalysts for personal, community, and political organizing.

Figure 10 We Don't Have to Agree



Over the course of my research I found myself increasingly drawn to moments of seemingly spontaneous organizing that emerge from gathering places. I began to see the Hermit Lab as a gathering place, at the same time as reaching out into the gathering places of my local community. The farmers market is a wonderful example of a modern *agora*. A farmers market is a busy place with plenty of space and time to linger. It encourages certain kinds of interaction that allow people to get to know one another over time. The process of getting to know each other over time allows for informed trust, mutual regard, and interdependence to develop. Of course, such gathering places also allow for conflict and discord (see Figure 10). Yet, a good gathering place brings disagreements and competing interests to public scrutiny rather than locked away behind closed doors. A gathering place is a bridge between the private and public domains.

The Socioecological Imagination: Autumn 2013.

“The ability to situate personal troubles within an informed framework of social issues.”

- C Wright Mills on the sociological imagination

In the autumn of 2013, I was asked by Sigrid, a local social entrepreneur and Hermit Lab collaborator, to host a workshop series on sociology. Sigrid had come to call me “the professor” while working together at the Wilno Farmers Market, which she organized. I laughed, a little flattered, a little uncomfortable at being called a “professor” while presiding over cucumbers and basil along the provincial Highway. Sigrid told me sociology courses were her favourite when she attended college in Toronto and that she’d be excited to have a sociology seminar right down the road from her home. So we talked

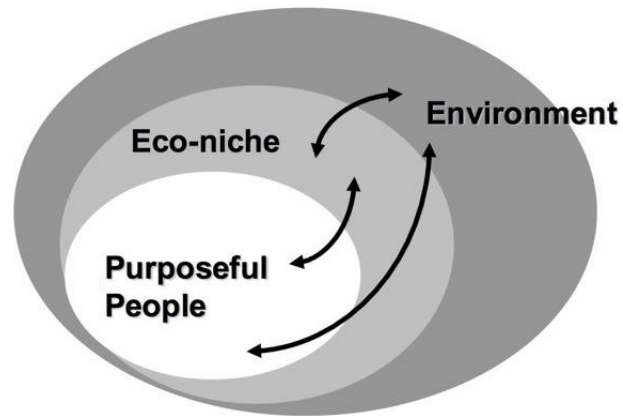
to some of our friends and colleagues and invited them to come to the Hermit Lab for a three-part seminar.

I dusted off my sociology texts and went back to C. Wright Mills's notion of the sociological imagination, which allows one to understand their personal experience as a part of a larger social fabric. The power of the sociological imagination comes from realizing how our own lives are constrained and liberated by the social forces in which we are embedded. Yet, living in the bush it becomes quite obvious that our lives are formed by more than social forces. We live in relation to all the living forces. Living in the boreal forest amongst lakes and stones (or drylands, or prairie, or rainforest, or tundra) informs who and how we are. We are made out of what surrounds us. Likewise, any human society exists within its ecosystems. Every society is made out of biological and elemental relationships expressed through its culture, technology, and economy ("eco" from the Greek *oikos* meaning home). This line of thinking led to the seminar title: The Socioecological Imagination.

A helpful image here is de Guerre's (1996) illustration of Emery & Emery's (1976, 1999) systems-environment relation.

Figure 11 System-Environment Relation

ORGANISATIONS AS SYSTEMS



Eco-niche = Organization, organizing
Purposeful people = groups

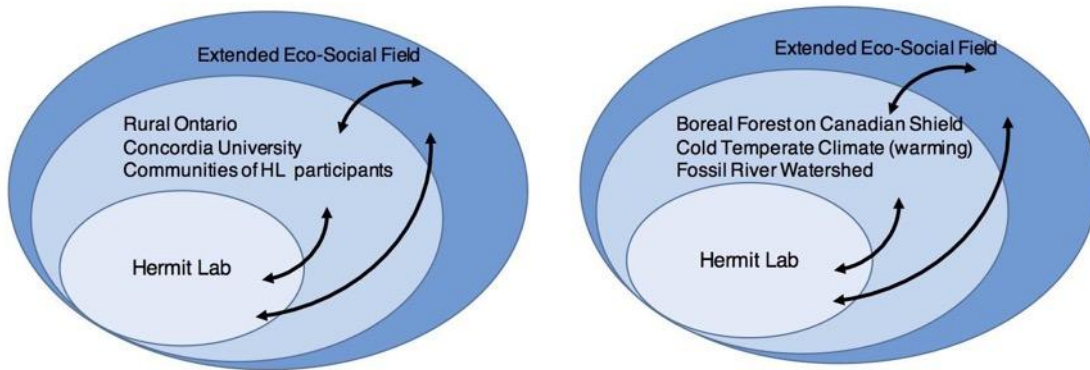
We can see in the image above how people live in organizations that exist in relation to their environment. Emery and Emery (1976) define the environment as an “extended social field” “to explain the influence of individuals, groups, organizations, events values and ideas existing beyond the immediate life span of a given individual” (p.33). The system-environment relation is determined through “directive correlations”: the influence of system on the environment (planning) and environment on the system (learning)⁵. de Guerre describes the socioecological as people-in-environment to capture the idea of open, jointly optimized sociotechnical (including sociopsychological) systems.

⁵ The notion of making and belonging found in the Conclusion chapter is adapted from Emery’s model of planning and learning.

Using the socioecological approach (Gloster, 2000) has allowed me to conceptualize the relation between people and our environments. Living and working closer to the land has allowed me to experience another sort of understanding between people and environment. While developing the seminar on the socioecological imagination I was beginning to imagine how these concepts and experiences could be brought together as illustrated below.

Figure 12 Characteristics of Eco-niches for Hermit Lab

Characteristics of Eco-Niches for Hermit Lab



One of the things that amazes me about rural life is the direct connection many people have to the names of places and their history. There are people whose family name is the same as the road they live on. A creek runs right below the beaver ponds I can see out my window. The creek is named after Nicole's family. And there was Nicole sitting in on our little seminar on the socioecological imagination. Nicole's family goes back

several generations to the building of the German Baptist Church for which my road is named (Old Church Road). I may be a latecomer to the party of realizing that places are actually named after real people, but the thought is not lost on me now. I am amazed to look over at my friend Nicole, who runs our local library with both efficiency and grace, and marvel at the stories she tells about mowing the lawn at the Old Church cemetery with her dad as a kid: the same cemetery that her family has been tending since the late 1800s.

And yet as I marvel about history a couple hundred years old, I am reminded that I stand on Algonquin land. Nearly every other placename around here has Algonquin roots. Every place around here does have Algonquin roots.

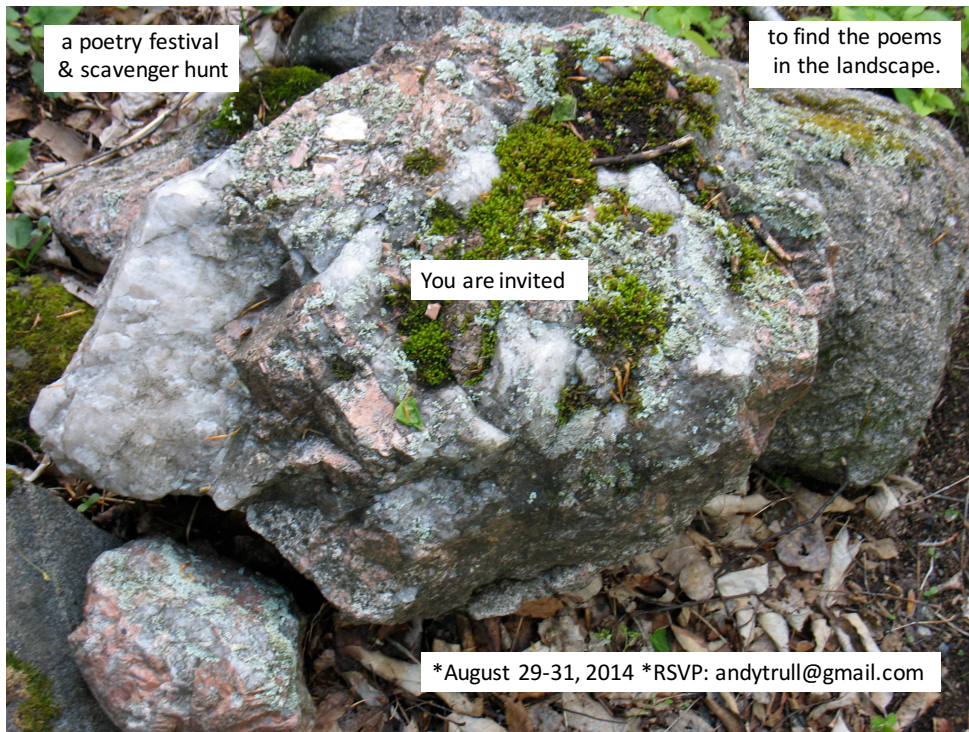
But here we are in this seminar in 2013 looking back at the histories of those in this room. How did we get here to this place? Who brought us here and what brought them? These are stories that explain our origins: immigrants, settlers, and unsettlers. Historical process through biography. Understanding what Caroline Casey calls “our temporary race, gender and class assignments” (2016). And what do we make of the world we find ourselves in? What do we long for and where to begin?

Ecology and society: Projects, poems, people, and places. Or, I’m only in it for the poetry. Winter 2013-Winter 2016. Winter is a fine time to daydream and make plans. Between the winter of 2013 and the winter of 2016 the Hermit Lab hosted many dreams and many plans were made. Hermit Lab residents came and dreamt. Neighbours and community organizers came and dreamt. Over these years we talked about climate

change, local economic development, art we love and art we want to make, ecological design, science and spirit, group process, colonization and decolonization, getting away from it all, and connecting to a sense of purpose.

I got to be a part of new projects: a Climate Circle, Hometown Park Natural Play Space, Public Poetry, Hometown Marketing Collective, and Hometown Community Arts. All these projects nurtured connections between ecology and society in a small rural community. Throughout these projects poetry and art making became the main vein through which my curiosity and skills were flowing (see Figure 13).

Figure 13 Invitation to Poem Festival



There is a note hanging on the Hermit Lab walls which reads, “I’m only in it for the poetry.” In this note I considered the possibility that all the work I had done, organizing at the Hermit Lab and showing up in my local community, was for the sake of

poetry. To experience poetry that exists around me and to make things happen so that there be poetry. There is the poetry of a moment that remains with us as a memory. There is the poetry that is spoken, written, and sung. There is the poetry of the pregnant possible, the present promise, and the paused past. There is the poetry of a job well done: a fundraising supper at the Lions Hall, a celebration in the town square, gatherings of people to talk and plan, the book or play or choir that takes form from motley crews of curious people, the final nail and screw in the roof/floor/window/door, feeling so exhausted from hard work and planning to do it all again once more.

Chapter VIII: It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Mutual Aid!



Sun is here. After an extra long winter this year, it is now spring. May 5th and the birch and poplar leaves are florescent green. Hermit Lab Fellow Kyra Shaughnessy is also here. I've asked her to come and help me write this thesis. We met in Ottawa yesterday around the kitchen table of Eleanor Crowder, another Hermit Lab fellow. Kyra, Eleanor, and I talked about our lives and what we've been up to and what we're coming up to. Kyra, a musician, is in the midst of recording a new album and attending to all the business that comes with it. Eleanor, a popular theatre actor and director, is getting ready for this summer's outdoor staging of *The Tempest* (which will include a fire thrower). I have suddenly found myself as the new Artistic Director of the community arts organization, weaving creative arts into the life of my rural community. So we ended up talking about the strange scale of independent and community arts funding. Eleanor talked about writing a 35-page grant to ask for \$5,000 to put on a play, while her partner wrote up a 3-page brief to ask for a million dollars for an international relief program. We all laughed at the odd math of scratching for small dollars. We also commiserated about not-for-profit boards of directors run amok. How challenging it can be to have a group of volunteers legally responsible for a project they may have little time for or daily contact with. And, of course we talked about the spring and the Solomon Seal, which was popping up tall and upright in Eleanor's garden about to burst with flowers. Eleanor was

off to New York City for a week, so Kyra and I left her to pack her suitcases and walked out into the sun and sounds of Ottawa coming back to life, after a long winter.

On the drive back to the Hermit Lab from Ottawa, Kyra and I sang out, “Lean on Me”:

“When you’re not strong and I’ll help you carry on. For, it won’t be long, till I’m gonna need somebody to lean on.”

So here I am this morning, Kyra waking me up and giving me assignments to get this writing out. I can hear her singing down below, from the guesthouse where she is staying, and can’t wait to hear her new songs composed over the winter. Winter is a good time to write and create. This winter I have been mostly percolating. After four years of working on the Hermit Lab project, I’m ready to write about it and complete this chapter of my life. It has been a meandering path, these last four years. The moving target of Hermit Lab research, going from “emerging practices in participatory democracy” to “why building matters - building the Hermit Lab studio” to “making a living in the rural Ontario” to “the socioecological imagination” to “local solutions to climate change” to “regenerative ecological design” to “a poem festival and scavenger hunt to find the poems in the landscape” to “a natural play space design for a park in Hometown” to “making and belonging” to “marketing for local business and the function of beauty and story to tell a message” to “weaving creative arts into rural community life.”

Along this meandering route my notion of research itself has begun to shift as I realize how to work with other people and create what we want to together. When I initially started my PhD studies the focus was on “emerging practices in participatory

democracy” and I was looking at the large-scale social and ecological forces that were driving people to work together to take charge of their own communities and organizations (and the forces of people taking collective action that were driving large scale social and ecological change). Today, I sit here in my little studio, thinking about all the ways I’ve gotten to work with people over the last four years. It is a bit odd to remember the starting point above, as I’ve been knee deep in getting to know and work with people in very immediate and personal ways. But it is all here and the task before me is to write and weave these strands together. So here goes...

When I was a kid I had a superman outfit. My mom sewed me a cape and I had these red rubber boots. I wore that outfit everyday for about 2 years (between ages 5-7). I also spent a lot of time underneath my porch making mud pies.

Saltines

I spent a lot of time as a kid playing under the porch, making mud pies. Not sure why, but here I am all these years later drawing words in the sky.

In my mud pie days I dreamed of Ghandi and John Lennon and world peace. Under the porch the air was cool and the earth was warm.

My dad was a preacher and we lived in a big white house behind the church, St Mary’s By the Sea. We were only 9 blocks away from the ocean. I remember walking back from a day of swimming in the wicked Jersey Shore tides. Crossing back over the sand dunes. Walking across the salty neon twang of the boardwalk arcade and amusement rides. Onto the sidewalks gray and white cement squares each stamped with the year it was poured. Quaint bungalows standing next to elaborate seaside mansions—

for each man his castle. And as the houses grew thicker and the streets crisscrossed I looked back at the sea and wondered how this all came to be. How did people decide to divide all this land up into little squares and put their names on their mailboxes and flags on their front porches?

The sea just keeps going when you look out at it. The occasional dot of a boat or dinghy beyond. Just waves and sky all the way to the other side. I was told England and Ireland were on the “other side,” which is where my ancestors came from. Looking at the globe in my brother’s room I could see Africa over there too. My mom said that is where we all came from if you go back far enough. But floating in the ocean, you can’t see any of those lines that are on a map. All you see is blue up, blue down, and white tufts all along.

Walking on that sidewalk home, the heat rises up from the road tar on one side and the stone gardens on the other. Little gnomes and flamingoes and old lobster traps, and driftwood in people’s yards. The electric lines rise up from chipped wooden poles. Different sized roofs; asphalt shingles, and antennas and chimneys. I knew who lived in some of the houses and it felt good to walk by where my friends lived. Looking at the cars parked outside their drives, people often had company in the summer; barbeques and clambakes, popsicles and steaks.

But why do we draw these lines on the map? Draw fences around each house? My family still tells the story of how, when I was little, I used to walk into neighbours’ houses unannounced. As if each house were my own. My sister finding me sitting on the floor in

the next-door neighbour's kitchen, helping myself to their saltines. Guess I didn't know the difference for quite a while.

Years later, while looking over a highway overpass in New York City, a poet friend told me how he came to see all our roads everywhere as "rivers of unconscious violence." Wow, how those words settled down in my heart. To feel the sadness of all this carved madness. Each road a gauntlet for animals to get to the other side. Why did the chicken cross the road? Why wouldn't it?

Then, when I lived in Illinois for a few years I would stare out the car window at miles and miles of cornfields and soybeans. Another friend told me that 60% of Illinois used to be tall grass prairie. Now less than 1% of 1% prairie remained. In the tall grass prairie you could see all the way to the horizon; like an ocean of flowers and grasses. The prairie was maintained by fire and bison, which kept shrubs and trees from growing thick and shading the soil. Ecologists describe the tall grass prairie as an upside down rainforest, because of the massively thick and deep root network of the prairie plants. Anyhow it's mostly gone now. Sometimes, looking out the car I'd imagine it all without cornrows, culverts and roads; bison still roaming. Then I would imagine a bison rutting its horns on a busted vending machine, leaning against the remains of a crumbling, vine-covered gas station.

Today I sit in a little pine studio teetering on hills in the Canadian Shield. This is where I live and have come to love this land. Yesterday I sat here, reading a book on "Catastrophism" about the ubiquity of end-of-the-world scenarios in today's culture and politics. In the book Eddie Yuen points out that though we are facing humanities worst-

ever catastrophe in the spectre of human-induced climate change the clarion call of fear is only going to make things worse. Rather, we must “make a positive appeal for community and solidarity, rather than a moralistic plea for austerity and discipline” (Yuen 2012, p. 42).

Hmmn, somehow to be a child and dreaming of a world without borders, without nations and guns and napalm and nuclear weapons seems quite natural. Yet as an adult these same dreams begin to smell like old cheese; naïve when ripened. But what if all our supposed realism of economics and politics is what has got us into our current mess? The little boy holding his beach towel and dripping seawater sees another kind of reality. Is it time for me to grow up to be the person that kid dreamed of? Is it time to invite ourselves into our neighbours’ kitchens? Is it time to take seriously our need to take care of each other and our shared world beyond the bounds of backyard barbeques and waving flags?

To this end, the Nobel Prize winning economist Elinor Ostrom (1990), in her work on “governing the commons,” did extensive research in to how people practically go about taking care of their shared worlds. Ostrom analyzes a set of “long enduring, self-organized, and self-governed Common Pool Resources” (p. 58), the youngest of which is 100 years old and the oldest over 1,000—ranging from the Swiss mountain village of Torbel to Zanjera irrigation communities in the Philippines. In each of these systems the people who use their land act to collectively manage and improve their common resources. Fantastic, what a great idea! Totally recommend you read her book.

Cause, geez, the United Nations isn’t cutting it.

So what kind of collective governance arrangements can we actually make to take care of our shared world?

We all live in places.

Those places have people's faces, and water and air and food. What if we all had a way to be directly involved in how our things are made, food is raised, water saved? I believe this is what is needed for world peace. Or, at least, a chance for our great-grandkids to get into their birthday suits.

So let's take a walk around our neighbourhoods and take stock of what is here.

Who is in charge of what and how can we take care of what is ours?

lakes

streams

stormdrains

dreams

stars

jam jars

winds

paths

currents

rules

tools

fools

animal

vegetable

mineral

free to be you and me

So yeah, I wore that superman outfit when I was a kid. When my friends Mike and Garth opened a Burrito Truck in Hometown, I gave them a little superman doll that had made its way into my hands. The Burrito Truck now sits on Mike's land on the highway and Garth now runs a restaurant in town. The poet Kate Tempest (2013) writes, "the gods are all here because the gods are in us." The gods are in the burrito truck, the gods are in the Garth's shop. The gods in us are what Tempest calls, "the brand new ancients." All the ages rolling through us, all the time of evolution's ladder, climbed by our bodies, reaching up to grasp the next rung and feet searching for their hold on the way down. All the pages of history turned by our hands while washing dishes, stirring spoons, flipping spatulas. The superheroics of simply living. Because living is magical when you stop to think about it. Magical and fraught. As Tempest says:

These gods have got no oracles to translate their requests,
these gods have got a headache and a payment plan and

stress about
when next they'll see their kids,
they are not fighting over favourites—
they're just getting on with it.

They are the Brand New Ancients (2013, p.6.)

So when I stop to think about my friends, my neighbours, far-flung strangers, the madding crowds outside my little village, there is a great respect for the act of getting out of bed and getting dressed. The community artist, Lily Yeh (2013) speaks of “our brokenness that connects.” Yeh says, “beauty is intimately engaged with darkness, with chaos, with destruction. You need to walk into the darkness and hold it in your arms.” The beauty, godliness, and superheroics of life is part of the same sentence as pain, desperation, boredom.

The Hermit Lab as a Place for Shadow

The Hermit Lab was built in the shadow of my own personal and professional disillusionment. Being stuck, unsure how to proceed I simply began work on a building. That work has been slowly building into a larger space to connect with people through creativity. The shadow work at the inception of this laboratory has continued in the work of others who have taken on the invitation to work here. In each instance of a lab residency people have taken the time to voice their fears, angers, and blockages; parts of themselves and the world that do not often receive careful scrutiny and open attention. While I have not been purposefully seeking out the shadow, I am beginning to notice a pattern of shadow work happening here. When this begins to happen, when someone's

shadow begins to emerge, I often get a feeling of intense calm and attention. Something feels very powerful about the most vulnerable parts of ourselves. And yet, I am also aware of my limitations in doing such work. I still struggle with my own shadows. I get afraid and want to run away. Yet I am beginning to sense that there is tremendous creative potential in staying present with what has been hidden, unseen, unspoken. Working with some fellow social arts researchers last week, we came to connect with each other's brokenness. We were able to share deeply our personal lives and struggles and find a tremendous feeling of connectedness in hearing each other's dis-ease. As Lily Yeh (2013) points out, "our weaknesses are just the other side of the coin of our strength and power." By working openly with the shadow we get more direct access to the nature of our power.

On Mutual Aid, by Kyra Shaughnessy, January 14, 2012

Mutual aid is essentially a "natural" way of being and interacting within, and as part, of the world. When we look at the way certain societies and cultures today are being organized and run, many seem not to reflect this basic reality. There are far too many things that we have to explain away with the cliché phrase "that's just how it is..." These are often the things that don't make sense to our hearts and to the deeper "sensing" parts of ourselves because they go contrary to the principles and flow of "mutual aid" that are anchored somewhere in our cells.

Borders, dividing lines, all forms of imposed and contrived separation don't feel "right" or "true" or "good" to the healthy, balanced being because they cut us off from feeling free to reach out, to exchange, to share... to be interconnected, the way a forest is connected through a woven mat of roots and

mycorrhiza, invisible yet essential. By learning and accepting to be afraid of and to “protect” ourselves from the “Other” we cut ourselves off from one of our main sources of nourishment: mutual aid.

Basing our cultural fabric on myths that no longer include mutual aid creates blocks in the flow of energy between people the way damming a river blocks its natural path. To give and receive fully, and to value both equally, is a key part of what we call “culture,” “humanity,” and “life.” As dammed rivers flood dammed humans also eventually overflow, be it through anger and violence, depression (anger and violence turned inwards) or other forms of physical, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual distress signals. We are all seeking to flow towards the Whole. To do so we need to be connected—to each other, to the places that nurture us, to the cycles that ground our actions in a sense of belonging that resembles, somewhat uncannily ... love.”

(Shaughnessy, May 6, 2015)

A Spontaneous Gathering

The stars have aligned this evening to bring an intriguing constellation of people together to share their projects and explore their thoughts. Jonathan is visiting from Montreal and writing up his Master’s thesis on working with Occupy Montreal. Natalie is sharing her work on sustainability education to the president of a regional college. Alex is discussing his studies on Thomas Aquinas’ philosophy of the passions. Billy is editing his book on the South African philosopher and white anti-apartheid activist, Rick Turner. And Georgia is finishing her Master’s thesis work on community development in

Medellin, Columbia. Blair rural MD, Kathy rural RN, and me are all joining in with curiosity and enthusiastic support. We hadn't really planned this meeting, but here we are rallying around our various projects. Each person has some time to discuss their work, to pose questions to the group, and to receive feedback and ideas of how to move forward. Jonathan gets the chance to air his questions about diffuse authority and power dynamics in the Occupy social movement. Natalie gets an action plan for her meeting with the president of the college. Alex peppers us with conceptual frameworks for cognition and the senses. Billy gets ideas about how to order his chapters and introduce the voices of the main people he interviewed in his historical research. Georgia figures out what to do with the photo-voice project she undertook with women from the Comuna 13 neighbourhood of Medellin.

It was a magical evening for me where I begin to see the Hermit Lab in full gear. On the way out the door Natalie says, "We can start our own university here!" Indeed, we have, at least for this evening. I marvel at how Alex's articulate musings of Aquinas' philosophy added rigor and spice to the action-oriented research presented. While the action-oriented researchers added context and immediate sense of purpose to the ideas we were each swirling around. I also marvel at how this gathering wasn't planned, but was the result of a confluence of people visiting and meeting each other through various trips we were making around town that week. Above all, I marvel at the spirit of mutual aid where we each came with our various frames of reference and preoccupations and somehow had the time and space to enter each other's worlds and offer something for

each person to walk out the door with. Yeah, this is my kind of university—in an evening (Hermit Lab, 2013).

There is something about planning for the serendipitous. Making houses for the unexpected to arise and affirm our deepest values.

There is something about finding oneself in a tiny little town in rural Ontario and being surrounded by people working with big ideas.

There is something about not expecting anything in particular to happen, but gamely rising to the possibility that something will indeed happen.

There is something about getting perspective on what one is doing from the other side of the room where someone else is coming from.

There is something about wanting people to do the best possible work they can do, by recognizing that only they can do what they do they way they do.

There is something about feeling like everyone in the room has something to contribute. Even if that something is quiet enthusiastic attention.

There is something about not having to fix someone else's problem, or know the answers, but be able to share in quandary and make suggestions.

There is something in this little Hermit Lab studio and it is all the lingering traces of the people who have been here and will continue to come.

I sweep the floor and rearrange the Hermit Lab space every time before a new gathering or visit. I think about what last happened here as I sweep and move around the tables and chairs. The stereo is pumping out music from the iPod on shuffle. Sometimes

I'll smudge some sage getting ready for a new day. Welcoming the newcomers and oldtimers, let's see what happens.

A Way In

Where to start? Well, a starting point seems to imply a destination of some sort. What if we are already here?

*

We sit here together. There is a tentative pulse to our not knowing what to do next. Sometimes the mood is sour and dull and I just want to get out of here. Do something else. Not sure what though. Dreams last night were so twisted and haunting. The sun is going down now.

Stay with it. With what? What are we even doing here?

We are finding out.

*

The crucible of intimacy.

The world is made out of the participation of all. What we are doing right now is enmeshed in the great web of coexistence.

So what?

If the world is made out of the participation of all then no one is in charge. Only, everyone is.

Let us take a note from the novelist, Ursula K. Le Guin:

We've been pretending that Europe was the center of the world for too long. With

the help of anthropologists, and now historians, we are finding that there is no center, or that there are many centers. Nobody has “the answer.” It’s amazing how much resistance there is to this. Everybody wants to be “the people,” everybody wants to be “the center.” And everybody is the center, if only they’d realize it and not sneer at all the other centers. (As cited in Freedman, 2008, p. 95)

And so we are in a centre right now and right here.

Conversation: The cradle of civilization

About 50,000 years ago a group of San Bushmen walked out of Central Africa following flora and fauna and away from drought. This is a story.

Today, we are watching movies about giant blue aliens fighting for liberation and justice. Indeed, many of us are avatars living in a touch screen. This is a story.

A forest is a touch screen. Touch the moss and trees. Touch the poison ivy and bees (no don’t touch these!).

There are five story buildings and parking lots. While stories build our world, forests grow trees trunks with gnarly knots.

We listen and dream and scheme and speak.

Floors creak.

Oceans break waves.

We count days and mark time zones.

Drawing maps as lassos around the wind.

Bulldozers bulldoze.

Ledgers lend and borrow.

Somewhere in the talk of tomorrow civilization got born, wed, and raised a family.
Yet there has not been much talk of retirement. Or, heaven forbid, burial.

Where are we going and why are we in such a hurry?

*

And so we sit here together. The gaping maw of uncertainty casts shadows on the wall of our nascent mind. For consciousness is a network; strands of lived memory and imagined potential. Into this cauldron we dip alchemically. This is getting to know each other.

FeAr and dOuBt

boUt CuRiosIty

play wonder whispers

to touching

belonging

and being each differently

bound

to what we care for in our unique ways of noticing

The cave in which our ancestors hung out during the last ice age

echoes in our throats

etched in the hem of your jeans

made in china

shipped by sea and air
as all materials ever are
dandelion fluff taken flight
space shuttle seeds
that land
on the distant planet
of the tea cup
resting on your lap
as woolly mammoths rear
from char drawings
near and far

*

To slow down
and do it fast
is the challenge of our age

From mass mechanical process

We must calm our industry

And do it so

Each person can lay claim to their own labour in our shared world: a common pool
of resources

Living within limits

Means remembering that we are guests

in the

bio-electric nest

of all living systems

*

And so we sit here together. Wood stove fire. Billy Holliday on the stereo:

“The snow is snowing

the wind is blowing

but we can weather the storm

what do I care how much it may storm?

I’ve got my love to keep me warm.”

We are each talking about battling loneliness in our way. And in this we are not alone.

The craziness of living in a world split. Our native home of community is confused when we live in institutions hostile to our basic social and psychological needs. We spend so much energy protecting ourselves from commercial assault, meaningless work, and interpersonal stress. At least, that is what we tell ourselves today about the challenge of having the freedom to notice what we are missing. May we join forces, the special forces of people who wish to make connections between our mad, fast culture and the need to slowly, gingerly, drink tea, read good books, and take long walks.

Listening for a way in

and

coming home

to

the senses

* Thanks to Artem for listening and making space for this to emerge.

Chapter IX: Affection for Place: The Economics of Coming Home to the Senses



“I will say, from my own belief and experience, that imagination thrives on contact, on tangible connection. For humans to have a responsible relationship to the world, they must imagine their places in it. To have a place, to live and belong in a place, to live from a place without destroying it, we must imagine it. By imagination we see it illuminated by its own unique character and by our love for it. By imagination we recognize with sympathy the fellow members, human and nonhuman, with whom we share our place. By that local experience we see the need to grant a sort of pre-emptive sympathy to all the fellow members, the neighbors, with whom we share the world. As imagination enables sympathy, sympathy enables affection. And it is in affection that we find the possibility of a neighborly, kind, and conserving economy.”

Wendell Berry “It All Turns On Affection”

*

I’m looking at photo of boy, maybe five years old, he’s holding an oversize zucchini in his arms. It’s nearly half his size and his smile is just as big as the curved neck of the ubiquitous summer vegetable. Around here people sneak onto their neighbours’ front porches and leave caches of these extra big zucchinis. Then steal away like a thief in

the night, in a friendly, teasing gesture to free themselves of too much food. But the photo of the boy with the huge zucchini smile was taken at our local farmer's market where I was selling fresh veggies and handmade wooden crafts. Outside of the frame of the photo is my little table covered with a colourful cloth, tomatoes, greens, squash, peppers, cucumbers, beans, basil, and wooden laptop stands. On either side of my table sat Fred and Christine at their farm stand and Andy (big Andy as he was known – and me little Andy) selling his own spicy rendition of traditional Polish pickles. Down the row of stands various people displayed their wares as people drove in from the highway to see what they could see. In front of the old farm barn there was breakfast and coffee on offer while a bluegrass trio strummed and hummed along.

This was the summer of 2010, when I moved back to Hometown from Montreal, having stubbed my toe on attempts at big systems change, and coming home to my partner Kathy and our gardens and hand-made buildings. I can't say I ever made much money at the market. I was just learning to grow vegetables in earnest and hone my carpentry skills. Still there were other kinds of exchange at work in this market. Older and more persistent market forces were at play. Forces of the hand-made and neighbourly said. Today we often hear of the marketplace of ideas in the globalized shift to service delivery, innovation, and user experience. But at the farmer's market there is something different happening. People are showing up and bringing their homes to market, and taking the market back home.

Our present-day word *economy* has its roots in the Greek word *oikos*, meaning household or home. We would be wise to remember where our economy comes from in

the mad dash to free trade from the tether of local bounds. And while I sometimes grow embarrassed at the seemingly impossible task of creating new forms of home-grown economies of scale, I look back at the photo of the boy proudly cradling that zany zucchini in his arms. In his smile is the imagination that will curve the way back to the future.

Home, Hometown – Montreal, 2005-2010

I arrived here restless. My mind running wild and my body a relative stranger. I would spend my days searching for answers online. Back then we only had dial-up internet, which slowed me down a bit, but only enough to pause a few seconds between searches. I read everything I could find on organizational design, participatory democracy, and systems change. Then I'd head off to Montreal for a weekend a month to study "Human Systems Intervention" at Concordia University. This was an M.A. program designed as an immersive "learning community" with 20 fellow students getting practice in designing interventions in human systems. A "human systems intervention" can be as simple as reorganizing furniture in a room or asking a thoughtful question and can be as complex as redesigning the organizational structure of a city or large corporation. While in the immersive M.A. program we were given opportunities to design interventions for our own student cohort and work with outside organizations to practice our emerging skills in everyday settings.

Through this M.A. program I was able to put my restlessness to work. I was busy honing my intervention skills: practicing the art of the right question, learning to slow my speech down and speak more simply, observing group dynamics and what kinds of

behaviour seemed to inhibit or encourage people's participation. I wanted so much to learn how to create deeply participatory environments for people. I was also skeptical of much of what I was learning and experiencing. There were a lot of political and ethical questions swirling. Many of the participatory techniques we were learning could be used as a sophisticated way to manipulate people into thinking they had power and choice, when in fact there was little to none on offer. Meanwhile, much confusion was made around how to actually do an intervention, because one cannot impose participation on people. This distinction, when lost, sent us spinning in circles for hours, days, weeks. And there were just plain old bad trips, where people opened their minds and hearts and everything just spilled on the floor.

I would come back to Hometown from these intensive weekend sessions and dive into construction projects, madly trying to ready our house for the approaching winter. Over time I came to learn basic carpentry skills and then how to build a foundation, frame a house, do roofing, install windows and doors and insulation, put in a wood stove and chimney, eventually do electrical and plumbing work. Just as I was learning how to build participatory organizations, I was learning how to build a house. Little did I realize then how important it was for any of these things to be more than organizations or houses, but homes.

But when I got here, I was restless. I was anything but at home in Hometown. I was frightened by the cold harsh winters and terrorized by buggy humid summers. I couldn't imagine how I could fit into a small town like this. Who would I talk to about the crisis of capitalism in the anthropogenic age? Who would want to make experimental art

and theatre together? What use would systems change be in a place that seems so slow to do anything different? Those were years spent trying to convince my partner Kathy to move out of here. We tried Montreal, but that didn't sit well for long. There were notions of moving to a small town closer to a university, somewhere with more culture, restaurants, concerts, lectures. But time passed and, alas, after running out of gas in Montreal I moved out here for real in 2010. For the first time without plans to be somewhere else instead.

Into Hometown

Coming from downtown Montreal, drive south past the murals and graffiti on St. Laurent. Turn west onto Rue Sherbrooke, buildings go up, up, up on all sides. Café, office space, museum, university, shawarma, depanneur. Onto the ramp to the 720, the highways begin. 15 North to 40 West out past the city to the Trans-Canada heading through Ottawa. Ottawa appears slowly on the horizon. Traffic merges. Shopping centres rise side by side. Ode to office buildings, the great gravity of a government town in the nation's capitol. More traffic merges and then slides onto various neighbourhood roads, until the double lane turns into a single lane and there are just a few cars in the rear view mirror. Blink, and an hour has elapsed. Turn on to another smaller highway into another small rural town. Past downtown everything slows down. Now the road curves and the trees open to lakes on either side. Welcome to the rural Ontario.

This is traditional Algonquin territory. There is a land claim currently being negotiated here. There is a reserve that holds an annual pow wow every summer. Visitors are welcome and asked to remember that this is a ceremony and a celebration.

Turning onto the final highway toward Hometown, catch yourself bracing to race out of the flashing yellow light, gripping the steering wheel to turn left. Then a pickup truck just dribbles on by at 40km/hr and your hands loosen their grip on the wheel, foot lets up a bit on the gas. Now you are getting here. Where there just isn't going to be a traffic jam anywhere. Though sometimes there is another car pulling out of where you are pulling into. Through more small towns, familiar lakes and rivers into Hometown. All the roads follow the watershed. The notion of a watershed was always a bit vague to me. But watching water flow into a newly dug foundation in a thunderstorm taught me a number of lessons about watersheds.

All along this valley came a great flood of timber through the watershed. Each spring during the 19th century, the snow melt would send vast portions of cut forest down the log drive into Ottawa. European settlers arrived to work the lumber trade, most from Ireland, Germany, and Poland. These settlers worked hard to break open rocky, marginal land for farming in the summer while working the lumber camps in the winter. The lumber barons grew rich. To this day there is great nostalgia for this time. Many people remember when horses worked the soil and people planted potatoes by hand. Electricity came relatively late and it is not uncommon for people to still have an outhouse on their land. In the winter you can look up and see house after house is burning wood. Still cutting and stacking wood to keep warm in the winter. Each fall it is common to hear people ask each other, "how's the woodpile coming?"

Winter is Coming

It is mid-November 2014 and snow is piled outside the Lab front door. Shovelled to the side in great white piles. That is one thing about the country that is nice: snow piles up white and doesn't turn to trashy, gray humps like the city. Wendy is coming to visit me to talk about doctoral research in our little community. She received her PhD in 2003, studying how people use energy in rural Ontario. Prior to her arrival she forwarded me a link to a chapter of her dissertation on wood heat. It includes the stories of 24 people, their woodpiles and stoves. One of the major themes is how people get security and confidence by being able to produce and manage their own fuel supply from local resources. A subheading reads, "Learning about Energy: Everyday Life and a Sense of Place." I'm musing on these words and stories as I bring in wood to heat the stove for our meeting. As I place paper under kindling, light a match, and add small logs, the warmth is immediate and tangible—feeling it on my skin. By the time Wendy pulls in the fire is roaring and I crack a window to let some fresh air in.

Welcoming Wendy to the Hermit Lab I show her around as we ask each other questions about how we came to this area and how we've balanced academic work with rural living. It is so nice to hear from someone else who has done community-based research in our area. I tell her how it makes me realize the challenge of valuing intellectual work in an area where most work is in trades or services. She tells me how encouraging it is to see that I am doing community-embedded work, as she has stepped back from all that to take care of her health and simplify life. I show her a large whiteboard with a map of conversations had at the Hermit Lab and in my community

service work. This is one of my favourite things to do as I unpack research activities beside questions and concepts. I burrow into files from years of research and show her poems, essays, flip charts filled with notes from various group meetings, architectural, and landscape designs. I also stumble over my words, unsure what to say about how on earth I am going to write all this up into a dissertation. She reassures me that it takes time and encourages me saying, “writing is the art of applying the seat of your pants to the seat of the chair.”

After Wendy leaves I fly into a flurry of activity, drawing arrows and notes all over my whiteboard map. As I draw, realizing, that the story is in the network of conversations: how one personal relationship, or idea, or group connects with and builds the possible. Imagination arises between people as they get to know and rely on each other. That is what I want to write about in my dissertation. But, how?

A Summertime Visit.

Hermit Lab Fellow Billy is visiting for a week to keep me company and help me write what you are now reading. Billy was one of the first Hermit Lab visitors and a regular collaborator in the early days. It has been a few years since he was last here and we’ve been busy catching up as we each share our lives and thoughts. In between writing sessions Billy has been accompanying me on trips to town for this and that. The morning after he arrived we went to help set up tents at the Hometown farmers market. As we walk into the old barn where the tents are stored Sabrina comes in from the other side and says a big, friendly “Hi” to Billy and asks if he is coming back to the Hometown Community Fair this year. Billy looks happily dumbstruck, living in New York City for the last few

years, he talks about barely ever running into his closest friends and when that does happen, it is usually a fleeting affair. But here he is back in Hometown for the first time in three years and the first person he sees in town remembers who he is and is hoping he'll stick around for the community fair. Perhaps Billy is particularly memorable because when he was last at the community fair, he set up a "poem store" where people could ask for a poem on whatever they like and he would type it up on an old typewriter right there. Before he arrived for this current visit, I asked Kathy, a fellow volunteer at the Hometown Library, to cover my shift so I could pick him up from the bus in Ottawa. Kathy remembered Billy too and has a poem he wrote for her at the fair framed on her wall. Kathy writes for the local paper and wrote a piece about Billy's poem store, "Reviving the old typewriter" in which she describes the encounter.

"No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money." Samuel Johnson
(1709-1784)

I was sitting on a log at the side of a path watching people walk by at the Hometown Craft Fair reunion on Saturday, when a young man carrying a typewriter stopped. He set his portable typewriter on a table on the dusty grass, pulled out a chair and sat down. He began typing. I haven't heard the clickety-clack of a manual typewriter for 25 years or more and it was a delightful sound on the summer air.

I got up off the log and wandered over to see what he was doing. "It's a poetry store," he explained. "If you give me the title, I will write you a poem."

"How much do you charge?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It's not about the money. It's about the poetry..."

"I'll be back when I think of a title," I said. "I'm taking this seriously."

The operator of the poetry store said, "So am I."

I left my tip before I read the poem, so he would know the size of my donation did not reflect on the worth of his poem. I had come with very little cash and I needed most of it to buy a plate of rice and beans from Andy's food booth.

I sat on the log and thought a while. Then I went back to the poetry store and said, "Years. That is the title of my poem."

He said, "I like that. It will be ready in a while."

The finished poem was a charming reflection on the passing of time, about 100 words in 20 lines on a four by five inch piece of heavy paper, with the title typed in red. "...tracing a path back/to who we were before/and why we are here now/..."

I was well pleased and passed it around to the other people sitting on the log.

"It's a good poem," my daughter said. "Did you see that he typed the whole thing with no mistakes, except for that one little spot where the key jumped in the last line?"

I took the poem and examined it. I'd forgotten in these days of word processing how hard it is to produce a perfect copy with no delete key. By the end of the afternoon, I noted his hat held five dollar bills and lots of people were

walking around with his poems in their hands. That young man is no blockhead (Lampi, 2013.).

Now Billy, no blockhead, sits across from me typing away on that same typewriter. He is writing for me, he is writing for free, he is writing for the next passage in this chapter. Or is he writing for free? What of the economy of coming home to the senses? Of coming to be a part of a community, of mutual aid, and reciprocity?

Learning Affection for a Place, by Billy Keniston

My first image of this place is as a type of refuge. I had just finished an MA program in South Africa, and returned to North America, entirely lost & confused about where I belonged & what I ought to be doing with myself. I reached out to all of my friends, many of whom I had become estranged from by living 10,000 miles away for years. I asked everyone for advice about where to go and why. Only Andy made an invitation in reply. The kinds of existential questions I was grappling with at the time are not really the kind that your friends can much answer for you. But Andy needed help, and so he was able to invite me to help him in a way that I could reasonably well do.

Andy had begun construction on a building, erected the frame on top of a foundation, and then a family emergency had pulled him away for a month. So, the project was running out of time. The building needed a roof and walls, and it had to happen before snow started falling in earnest. I could be of assistance by agreeing to wear myself out everyday doing carpentry work (which I was far less than skilled in) and therefore Andy could be spared from having to build a whole

building by himself, under rushed conditions. In the kind of delirium that accompanied completing graduate studies, being invited to do hard work for weeks, with a very tangible goal in sight, was ideal for me.

At the time, the guest accommodations were meager: a plywood shack in the woods, very similar to what one might find in the townships of Soweto or favelas of Rio, except much prettier—with a curved plexi-glass wall-to-ceiling, which allowed for magnificent sleeping under the stars. The late fall weather, the lack of insulation, and the leaky old wood stove meant that the nights were plenty cold. So, I slept under a gigantic pile of sleeping bags. Showers were done in the greenhouse, with water run through a hose connected to the kitchen sink. The water was warm enough, and in the heat of the day the greenhouse would be, too. But after a hard day's work, showering in an extremely cold room was definitely something to get used to.

Whatever the material hardships of life here, it was still a refuge for me. I felt proud of the work we were doing, and was grateful to be of assistance. It was deeply gratifying to be in Andy's presence in the aftermath of my MA program, as I felt that he could relate on a deep level to the emotional, psychological & political space that I was occupying at the time.

During a few snowy days in a row, I was able to complete an essay, building on my graduate work, and making sense of the political and ethical shift that I was undergoing at the time. In the conclusion for that piece, I marked "Hometown, 2010" as my location. It was a small symbolic choice, given no

context or explanation within the essay. But the deeper significance is definitely there. The writing I did then was a product not only of my own journey as a thinker and as someone who wants fundamental social change; it was also a document of our dialogues during these weeks spent together working hard, and reuniting after years spent on parallel but separate paths. My perspective, and my capacity to articulate it, were absolutely shaped by my experience here in Hometown.

In that first visit, refuge was the key feeling.

For me, it was a refuge in that I was given an opportunity to do meaningful work in the world that was neither reading nor writing. And, at the same time, I was provided with enough stability, safety, and space for reflection, that I was able to return to my writing desk to produce something that I still feel proud of, half a decade later.

Andy was also in need of refuge. In those weeks together, I saw this side of Andy that was very small, that had been made weary by the world & by his own ambition to dream big & to make big changes. He was exhausted by social life, and went out of his way to avoid people. In nearly a month here, we rarely had a reason to go into town.

The town of Hometown is no metropolis—not by any stretch. A small little downtown area, with less than five intersections, nothing resembling traffic—and it's perfectly reasonable to leave your keys inside the car when you park. The hardware store doubles as the license registration office and the Greyhound bus

stop. There's a grocery store, and also a health food store. There's a chip truck and a restaurant where the menu is set based on the chef's whims and everyone eats at big communal tables. There's a shoe store, a pharmacy, and a second hand clothing store. There's a radio station that plays recorded programs on loop most of the time. There's a library that's staffed mostly by volunteers, a community hall for big events, a once-train-station that is now a park, home-health services for the elderly, and a toy truck that brings toys to rural areas. There's a flea market ("make an offer" is the pricing system) and a Saturday farmers market.

That's roughly the shape of it. Hometown is an awfully small place. It is something akin to the really old rhythms of life that human beings used to take for granted, for centuries (plus a fair sprinkling of modern conveniences, and being within one of the wealthiest industrialized nations in the world). Before coming here, I had never been to such a small place.

So, at first, I was puzzled by Andy's hermit reflexes here. What was it about? Certainly it couldn't have been a fear of big crowds or any such.

Over time, I came to see that the smallness of this place makes the socializing much more intense. Living in New York City, or other such places, it's perfectly normal to never talk to your neighbours, or to any of the other thousands of people you encounter on the subways and sidewalks. In a place like Hometown, you not only must speak to your neighbours, but will likely see them repeatedly on each trip to town, and each time you will chat a bit more. If you bump into someone at the library, you'll probably also see them at the grocery store, or the chip truck, or

the hardware. And, if you're going to make all that effort to go all the way into town (a 7-minute drive) you might as well stop at all of the places while you're there.

So, for my first month here, Andy needed to minimize all of this socializing, so we spent the bulk of the days on the land, avoiding the hustle & bustle of Hometown. What other refuge did my friend Andy need? I can't claim to know entirely, but I know that at least some of it was this building that we were putting a roof on top of, which we now call the Hermit Lab, and which has developed a whole independent life for itself. But when we were building it, I doubt we could have guessed at most of what has unfolded since then. Perhaps Andy had a secret imagination about it all, but all I could glean from him was that he needed space. Just space. Some kind of a space, where he could do some kind of work. A "workshop" he always answered when I asked what it was that we were building.

And what work will be done in that workshop?

In most societies, spaces of refuge are relatively rare. It is a vocation that is taken up by only a few people, at the margins. Monasteries have often offered refuge to outcasts of all stripes—orphans and pregnant teens, addicts and widows, destitute & desperate people of all ages. People that need quiet, safety, room for reflection. Pilgrims, wanderers, and the spiritually adrift. Where else does one find refuge? Thinking of an answer, your mind conjures imagery of severe situations: runaway slaves, Jews hiding in basements to escape the gas chamber, teams of

people fleeing civil war, people committed to the armed overthrow of a regime— people who need to become invisible, to fade into the landscape in order to survive.

And so, the Hermit Lab comes to life, built by people who were themselves seeking refuge, and then offering others refuge, just the same. The concept demands no explanation. The reasons why people might find inspiration to journey all the way out to Hometown, in search of the refuge that a Hermit Lab can offer, are quite varied. What peace we each might find once we get here might be wildly different from other people's experience, on the surface. There is no forced unity amongst refugees.

But this space is, first & foremost, a refuge, all the same. Five years later, it is remarkable to see that the space continues to serve that function for people, even as so many other layers of life & work have been crafted on top...

*

Since the building was constructed, I have returned to the Hermit Lab three times. On each successive visit, I have felt the level of connection to the broader community here deepening. Thinking about it now, Hometown seems like an ideal location for a hermit lab. Many of the people who live out here have hermit tendencies of some kind, living out in what they affectionately call "the bush," with limited resources, and only this small town as the center of commerce and social life. The more time I spend here, the more I see that what makes the space work so well is that it is embedded in a larger community.

I remember I used to worry about Andy living in Hometown, as a secular intellectual within a community with very few college graduates and a great many believers in god, the spirit world, and star charts. But over the years, he has developed an affection for this place, and has found ways that he fits here. He has succeeded in wearing many different hats, in developing multi-faceted connections with folks here. With an increased confidence in construction, Andy has been able to build a kitchen for one friend, a porch for another, and soon a lake-side cabin for a third. His garden has been bountiful enough to bring organic, gourmet veggies to market every week for years, and to be on display at the horticultural society's "garden tour." Andy has provided direct, tangible support (sometimes his own labour, sometimes by being able to employ others, other times just by listening & caring) to people in the community who are trying to make a viable economic life here in the rural Ontario. This has been an ongoing process of developing conversations and structures to encourage innovative thinking around what a decent way of life might mean out here.

All of these acts of community service (work done so that there be community) now provide for a unique framework for an artistic & intellectual life, both for Andy personally, and for the hermit lab and its guests. Through his various efforts in other domains, Andy's presence here as a poet philosopher and PhD candidate in participatory philosophy is understood and embraced by the community as a gift, and an invitation, rather than as a reason to be alienated from one another.

My time at the Hermit Lab has always been, at Andy's invitation, as an artist in residence—with a clear set of goals in terms of my writing. The first residency, I was working on writing a book proposal for a biography of a radical South African philosopher named Rick Turner. A year later, I returned to the Hermit Lab, having completed roughly half of my manuscript.

As an artist in residency program, the Hermit Lab is ideal. The lab itself—the workshop Andy & I built back in 2010—provides sufficient infrastructure, privacy and beauty (it matters that the building looks out onto a beautiful garden, meadow and forest) to concentrate on the work of thinking, reading and writing. Andy's capacity to be both emotionally and intellectually supportive, to be both a good friend and also a thoughtful respondent to the art-work being undertaken are of course essential ingredients in the Hermit Lab experience. But what makes the residency really unique is that a Hermit Lab resident is being hosted by—and giving back to—not only Andy & Kathy, but also by the community as a whole. Each time I come back to Hometown, I feel more welcome here, and my affection for the people and the place grows. When I show up at the farmers market or at community events, people are curious about me and my work, and want to get to know me, as a friend and as a neighbour; they want to know my story, and they want to share theirs. Once, I arrived at a concert in town with Andy, and we were 30 minutes late, so the musician started over so that we could hear all of the songs that we had missed! There is a basic open-ness that folks here have offered me, and I am deeply grateful, in kind.

Thinking back on my experiences here, my interactions with folks here are fond memories, and critical to my sense of what it means to come to the Hermit Lab. Being an artist in residence at the Hermit Lab is as much about the creative and intellectual work as it is about moving a friend's refrigerator, or sharing lunch and chatting at the community cafe, or frolicking in an eccentric summer parade, or swimming in the lake together on hot, sticky days. (Keniston, 2015)

The Future Present Rural Economy

Walking into Sigrid's shop up from the Tavern parking lot, through an enchanted little garden and up the bright yellow stairs to a bright pink porch. On the porch there are pictures of the wild herbs that Sigrid turns into salves and creams for skin. There are also pictures of her many friends and neighbours who she works with. I'm drawn right away to a picture of an artist colleague Emma standing next to me while holding onto another one of those giant zucchinis. Big smiles. I head into Sigrid's shop where there are beautiful posters all over the walls: more people in the natural landscape. Sigrid is in and we catch up on our lives. Sigrid had just run a workshop with Hometown Community Arts on the "Emotional Improv Orchestra" with a fellow artist Megan. She had a great time and it really worked, a reminder of how creative arts process can allow one to work through whatever one is living: to be vulnerable and honest and playful, without having to turn on the floodlights of self-consciousness.

We also talk about the hard work of business. She has come a long way in the last 5 years since buying the shop in Wilno. She has more people to work with and is learning to work less hard to make more money. We've been in this conversation for years, since

she invited me to be a vendor at a farmers market she hosted in front of her shop. She's been a regular collaborator at the Hermit Lab where she's been a part of many gatherings: Making a living in the Rural Economy Collaborative (2012), Herbal Project founding meeting (2013), a three-part seminar on the Socioecological Imagination (2013), Poem Fest! (2014), a Natural Clowning Workshop (2014). All along the while we've gotten to talk about our projects and our lives. One of the major themes has been our affection for this place and the people here. Sigrid grew up in the area and has many lifelong friends. She's been off to Toronto and travelled the world. And we both agree that Hometown and surrounding area is one of the best places to be. But, how can we make a living out here? Part of what makes this place so loveable to us is the comparatively unexploited landscape, down-to-earth people and lack of big money. Some rural areas are dotted with big fancy homes, golf courses, and plenty of boutique shops. We love that our neighbourhood is not fancy. And we love art, culture and local, fresh food. So we want more of those things. But we don't want to live in fancy land. While we want to create more economic opportunities, we don't want our creative efforts to lead to the kind of development that prices us out of the home we are making.

While talking to Sigrid I've developed a line of thinking that I often share with other people: the strength of this area, in rural Ontario, is people's respect for living simply. There are memories alive here. Of the Anishinaabe way of life (12,000 years old), the hard scrabble European settlers (1850-1950), the back-to-the-lander wave of urban-suburbanites seeking a simple way of life (1970-present). These cultures clash, and yet often overlap in a respect for the land, of using what one needs, of doing more with less.

Of course, it is 2015 and we are all called to the freedom of modern conveniences and cheap, high-quality things for whatever you could need or want. But, this is one of the few places I know of (in Canada or the United States) that you can tell someone you don't have indoor plumbing and they will respond with "Oh, I remember when..." rather than "Oh my gosh, that sounds so hard, I just can't imagine." The thing is people can imagine living here without electricity. They remember. And that means, many people here can imagine a future that looks quite different than the one most of our political and business leaders are planning for. What if, in our future, we live with less stuff rather than more? What if that future could be even more desirable than one of continuous economic growth? What might that future look like? In many ways I can see that future present in the local socioecology of rural Ontario. A phrase has been rolling around in my head all these years for this possibility, "Back to the Future." Where we can go back to simpler ways of live and forward with the kinds of freedom and innovation we've come to dream of.

So these thoughts have been a part years of talks with Sigrid and others in my community and here at the Hermit Lab. Another Hermit Lab collaborator, Natalie, has taken these thoughts even further. Natalie is extraordinarily passionate about economics and sustainability. She also grew up in the rural Ontario, has been off to live in Toronto and British Columbia and travelled the world. I've gotten to work closely with Natalie over the years and we now run a marketing collaborative together, Hometown Marketing Collective with fellow partner Beth. Our early conversations were focused on how to organize with the many amazingly creative and socially conscious people we know in our

area. We riffed on the theme of sustainability meaning more than recycling, something much more that is integration of social, ecological, and economic justice. Justice, meaning, to live ethically with our fellow human beings, the oh-so many other species and elemental forces (water, wind, rock, earth, fire) that make up our world. Oh, and that to be sustainable, all this needs culture: to be artful and playful and reverent and celebratory and fun.

So we came to create Hometown Marketing Collective, which is about telling the stories that will magnetize the economy we want by promoting our local, sustainable businesses. On the way to Hometown Marketing Collective, a few years ago, Natalie gave me the book, *What Then Must We Do*, by political economist Gar Aperllovitz. The book describes locally designed models that give people the power to run their own economic institutions. These models are cooperatives, where people cooperate to own and run their own business. Inspired by this book I wrote the following essay, to say, “hey, what if?”...

Worker Cooperatives in Rural Ontario, Heck Yes!

Capital. It’s at the root of this ism. If it isn’t yours it is somebody else’s. Either you own your own or you don’t. So who owns your house? Who owns your workplace? Who owns your kids’ school? The electric lines along your road? Your road by which you come and go home?

The means of production is how things get made. And who owns the way your clothes are made? Your table and sofa and bed? Your refrigerator and sink and stove? Your car and the scented tree therein? The screws inside your TV and the valve inside

your garden hose? The glasses perched atop your nose? Your sweaters and pantyhose? The plastic toys strewn on your floor and the software embedded in your smartphones core? Well, indeed who owns the way these many things are made? And who decides you much you'll pay?

*

So here with live in this valley. The Canadian Shield, milkweed fields, sumac hills and lots of little lakes. Pickup trucks and Tim Hortons cups. Lumber and tourism. Aging population and marijuana cultivation. Algonquins, settlers, and newbies.

For those of us who live here, this is our land. Yet who owns it? Who owns the mills and shops and summer cottages? And what kind of jobs are here for us as the service sector balloons and old tractors rust? Greeting customers at the Walmart, stocking shelves at the Rexall Pharma Plus. Road work and chainsawing pine. Some are teachers and nurses and managers and directors. Others sit idly unsure of their future.

What kind of jobs do we wish for our kids? How could they make a living out here in the sticks? Off to college in the city, or trades in Ft McMurray. What happened to tending the land and chicken tandoori? Chicken Tandoori? Yes, because it is a new world, says each passing generation; technology making all these changes, eating samosas on the sofa, Netflix with the tea and biscuits. So now we sit here, still for a moment. It is winter, summer's growth gone frozen. Looking out the window all white, sipping tea and listening to Afternoon Delight. Or maybe it's spring and the snow is melting. Or summer and we're swimming in the lake among the minnows. Or fall with the trees gone wild with color. But whatever season outside these windows, what would life be like if we

owned the mills that framed these walls. If we worked the fields that grows the straw. And hay, what would it be like to own the stores that sell the bread, and make the chips inside our computer's head? What if we made things that didn't rot the earth, burn the air, or foul our waters? What if we grew deep soils and stored fruits and nuts from our own trees. What if our houses were all built by our own hands, cell towers bouncing signals on our own lands.

What if we were our own bosses, responsible for daily and yearly gains and losses? What if we were each other's bosses, not working alone or below or above, but working together on the jobs we know and love? Why, if we value freedom and democracy, do we not live that out in the work we do everyday? Why not make with our own hands and create with our own hearts and minds the things we use and consume? What is getting in our way, hey?

Globalized production and distribution networks: phlbbtt. Of course, our lives as we know them are echoes of a complex historical web of trade routes and material flows going round and round the globe. I don't think we want to go back to the Middle Ages or jump forward to the rubble of an overpopulated and polluted future. But maybe there is another way. We can begin by taking care of the places we live in. Making our homes and making a living from what we have right here. In a open sourced world we can figure things out together. We can create the shape of our neighbourhoods' fate and sever the tether of dependence on the world gone mad.

Yeah, that would be rad.

coming home

coming home to the senses

the future and the past

are through now

let us sit and be with

what is here

what has come

& what is yet to arrive on

the horizon

beyond above and under

are through us right now

Drunk the water of this

earth and washed through these

lips, mouth, chest, belly, veins, muscles,

tissue, cells, neurons, ganglia, molecules,

stars, moons, nebulae, wormholes of all

dancing rust

as our rocks

made fresh
by seismic twists,
erosion crumbles
earth
of sand, clay, silt

feel it on our mouths
as mycelia eat from the earth
and feed minerals to roots
and shoots and trunks limbs

branching in this direct history
from algae to grandma
and the great beyond
which gives us a kiss and a
shove as we sleep
and darkness dreams
the world unfolding

let's get dressed for this
wrestling match of now
with tight tights and superhero

delights

spring from the top

rope

Chair poised to bring

the great blow of

oblivion upon the

idea that the future is

already set

for are we just visitors here?

or are we the very stuff

of which hair is mussed

shoes scuffed

microchips rust?

Let your body tell you where you are

and come home.

(The Hermit Lab, Autumn 2012)

A Squirrel Just Visited Me

A squirrel just visited me, as I'm sitting here typing and sipping tea.

Breathing in, breathing out, the tide rolls. Our bodies, our thoughts, our feelings, are tuned to the frequency of the world around us. Like a radio dial scanning for a clear signal; static and then voices. We tune in to what we notice and we notice what we tune in to. Neural paths, blood lines, branches on a tree, veins in a leaf, wind through the alley, electric power lines, birds flocking in the sky. Networks and patterns shape all worlds, and we dreaming beings, can scan the dial and tune in.

*

Calls from beyond. The phone rings. There is someone on the other line. They mispronounce my name and tell me they are calling to inform me of their special offer. I hang up. Outside, the first snowfall has frozen leaves to the ground. The wind is now pushing at the naked branches and swirling grass stems. There is a light on in the porch. The mailman drives by. Another log goes on the fire in the woodstove. It is a cold winter again this year. Artic sea ice is melting. Two months ago the most powerful storm ever recorded blew through the Philippines. New York City's World Trade Center has been rebuilt and declared the tallest building in America. My cat's footprints in the snow go from our house out to the woods below.

*

Calling all angels. Above me hangs a wooden carving of Shiva flying with winged arms spread; Shiva the destroyer, Shiva the transformer. Shiva is looking right at the other wall, where a brightly coloured skeleton is playing guitar. The skeleton ringed with orange and red flowers says, "viva la vida." And there, on the other side of the room is

Picasso's sketch of Don Quixote. Tilting at windmills. Dreams, ever on the threshold of our waking mind speak through our heroes, our gods: ringtones of the divine.

*

Last week's Oxfam report, "Working for the Few," says that the 85 richest individuals in the world own as much as half of the world's population. That means a ratio of 85 to 3.6 billion. Hmnnn, that is math that inspires Shiva's wrath. Those are numbers that rattle our ancestors' skeletal bones. That's a fact that elicits Sancho Panza's groans. Where is the power to the people, people?

*

Billionaires pockets are like super huge magnets: pulling our change to theirs. Clank, clink, clank-clink-clang-clank-cling-clank. Meanwhile our great-great-great-great grandchildren ask, "what is the change we wish to be, as we float away in rising seas?"

*

Listen to the night speak as you sleep. Voices from all worlds come through, carrying maps and trusty knapsacks. Look around and find the dragon's egg. Dance on top of the bar throwing ninja stars of the heart. Wooosh. Do not get deflated by the degraded value of imagination's currency. Wonder is the ticket and the show. Good thing our bodies know how to get us where we wish to go.

*

So don't throw in the towel based on the waking minds binds. Reason has its season. But it is winter now and the land is asleep. Take a memo from the blanket of snow. Be still.

*

Of course, the squirrel outside my door is anything but still. Slower yet, than in the spring or autumn, but ever on the quest for sustenance. The squirrel, an animal, lives outside. The squirrel is an evolutionarily enterprising wingnut; one of the few who have flourished in industrial cities. A cousin of our global supply chains. A rider on the train of our climate change. Yet, the squirrel, an animal, still lives outside. What would it be like if humans lived again as animals, outside? What is lost by walling off the world, to live only on the inside? I mean, don't get me wrong, hot showers are the bomb. But, do we want to explode all in the name of the Dollar Store's throng?

*

The adventuring part of ourselves is astir, when we rest our plotting minds. Last night in bed I grew my hair all the way down to my toes. I stepped onto a space ship which took me deep below to the earth's solid iron core. I chipped a bit of the stone and brought it back to give away. To give the earth back what we have taken. To die, to melt our bodies into the ground. All things come around on entropy's swing. Matter gathers, romances, dances, and scatters. Our lives are bouncy balls going from word to word on the Karaoke song.

Chapter X: Housing imaginations: The poetics of space



Little houses for dreams of whatever size. June, 2015

“If I were asked the name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (Bachelard, 1958, p. 28).

It is a sunny Saturday at the Hometown Community Arts. In the grassy courtyard there is a large table filled with cardboard, scissors and paint. Nearby is a small table with a typewriter and a chair. People are swirling about. Finding the right materials to build their own little house, cutting up photos and scrap paper to collage the walls, painting roofs. Someone sits at the typewriter writing up the hopes, dreams, or worries they want to their house to shelter. And so it goes, as people go back and forth between reflective writing and cardboard house construction: building words, images, colors into the walls and floors and roof of these structures. At the end of the day we are surrounded by a village of wildly, unique little buildings. Each person speaks about their house, sharing its story; what it is made out of, who lives inside, and what dreams take shelter here.

That day, as people were speaking of their little houses, I was thinking of the recursive relationship between intention and creation. The Open Studio Process is an arts-

based method that begins by asking participants to state an intention and then go on to explore that intention through visual arts, eventually returning to the initial intention in a closing reflection. Going back and forth between self-conscious reflections and immediately physical, visceral, creative activity makes a bridge between reason and intuition. Or if reason and intuition are tricky terms that imply some sort of fundamentally separate cognitive and biological processes—perhaps we can speak to the soft furry animal body of our mind, write the manifesto with a porcupine quill, measuring distance with fish and lizard scales, and draw conclusions based on the carbon copies of genetic information that are all life forms. In other words, the Open Studio Process is a sort of rehab for the Cartesian split of body and mind. And, that day, while hearing people speak of their painted and collage-splattered little houses, I am reminded of the way the world is weaved: between.

Houses are fine examples of how we are. Constructed, lived in, and eventually collapsed or taken down. When the house returns to the earth, what does it leave?, what is its legacy? Just as our bodies house our lived experience in flesh and blood and bone—all the elements returning to the periodic bed-side table from where they come: to earth and air and water: ashes to ashes, dust to dust—our buildings house our bodies. And so in the meantime that we call a life, what is it to live inside a house? What does it mean to be an animal that lives inside a house? What becomes the experience of the world through the eyes of windows, through the act of opening doors, where one goes to bed and makes breakfast, hosts guests, and raises children, learns what it is to grow old?

The different spaces that we create make the shapes that contain our experience (buildings, transportation, recreational places, parks, gardens, farms, etc.). It is also true that the space we *don't* create (e.g., “nature”) also make the shapes that contain our experience. However, the question of what kind of spaces we should create becomes increasingly important when people begin to spend more of their time in humanly constructed spaces. For time spent in humanly manufactured space, is time spent in the world according to somebody’s image. The world is more than human and there are many limits to the human imagination. But, the human imagination can be nurtured by the spaces that people create to reach beyond its limitations. A house can call us home to the senses. A house can remind us of our bodies (our own bodies being a house for us as well). A house can call us to the moon and the stars.

But of course, we are concerned with affection. Houses for daydreams and daydreamers. Shelter for hopes and dreams and half-baked thoughts. Places where images take shape and give form. And places where one doesn’t have to do anything at all, but be.

Why Building Matters

matter is at hand

when we dream, draw, carve, construct

living in a built environment

as the environment is ever built by all doing and undoing.

people build

beavers build

ants build

wind, water shape rocks

seismic reaking

electromagnetic resonance between our earths core and the heavens above

as we

live we

build

and leave traces in our doing and undoing.

it all comes to undoing

so that our lives matter

and the matter at hand

wood, clay, glass

windows and doors

to observe and interact

Story of the Earth

“The earth is at least four billion years old ... and the history of [hu]mankind is just the last fragment of a second at the end of this immense period of cosmic time. We have to understand that the earth is not made for us, that we are simply guests who are here thanks to a lucky accident. Perhaps this idea will increase our respect and humanity” (Gould, 2007, p. 223)

Fossil Caves, September 4, 2015

Water gurgling below. The pitter pat of drips falling from above, ever so slowly leaving calcium deposits on the walls and ceiling. Mineral water drips, over millennia,

into wild organic shapes in the form of stalactites. The water below is gurgling quietly where an underground river once flowed through. On the Fourth Chute of the Fossil River, subterranean channels carved into limestone making the caves I now sit in typing away. Chris, who owns the caves, has let me sit in here today at the end of a business day where he hosts tours to travellers from near and far. Chris describes his work as “recreational geology” where people come to explore and learn the story of the earth. We met a few years ago when I was planning a poetry festival and was told by a colleague, “Oh you have to talk to Chris, he is a poet too.” So I met Chris a few years ago over a cup of tea at the restaurant in a nearby town. We talked about poetry and nature and our mutual affection for the area and the people who live here. Since then Chris hired me as a part-time tour guide at the caves and we’ve seen each other now and again at various events to support and promote culture in the area.

Sitting in the caves today, so cool, away from the humid temperature above ground. My daydreams find many spaces to take refuge. Each dimple of limestone worn by carbonic acid and time. Each curve in the wall where the river danced through. Each layer of sediment deposited by the great engine of earth forming itself. And space. Houses for bats and spiders and little fish and frogs. Where water and time made way through this ancient seabed. Houses for cephalopods, and brachiopods and honey-comb coral. From back when this was a tropical sea—only 450 million years ago...

Oh my out just popped a little marmot!

And the water just splashed below—something swimming down there. Seeing and hearing creatures not noticed when the caves are filled with people. Taking the time to notice who lives around us, our neighbours who find shelter as well.

Limestone is made out of crushed seashells. So here we are on the Canadian Shield—a limestone bed tucked into this river—this land that used to be a tropical sea just north of the equator. Land moved over so much time to all the way up here at the 45th parallel. When winter comes it is fun to imagine life back then. When it was a tropical zone. But, that was way back before animals even had bones. Ancient ancestors of jellyfish and squids zipping around in oversized shells.

In this place, home to ancient life. Now a place where people can come to learn and connect to the way that life and earth shapes itself. This place houses people's imagination.

A boy on a tour I led today looked up at the wall and said, "Hey that looks like squished mud". Yes! I said that is exactly right—that's what sedimentary rock is! Between the dimples and curves of limestone walls a thick smooth vein of mud. You can rub your hand along and feel time folding over.

In this room where I now sit on a raised boardwalk, lit by electric lights, was once a rushing whirlpool slowly washing away the walls. Chris calls this room the parlour, and he serves fine dinners here twice a year. Tableclothes and candlelight, Louis plays piano, last dinner he performed Pachabel's Canon. There have also been weddings here. Music videos and movies filmed too. This is a house for imaginations.

And me, today, I sit and wonder which ways the world is turning. So much whirling human drama above this quiet enchanted space. So much whirling human drama in my own body. Being human, having a mind and a heart and fingers and a nose. Having the chance to sit and notice my own feeling and thoughts. Struggling with being fully alive—how hard it can be sometimes just to relax and unwind. To be present—to come to this moment with a beginner’s mind—fresh to what is happening right now. Not pressing mental rewind to go back in time to replay something else—searching for answers to questions left behind. Because life is scary too. And just as our bodies need shelter from the forces around, so too our imaginations need shelter to make way for love of life.

Beavers and Us. Church Road, Hometown.

When we moved onto this land so did the beavers. We pulled into the drive in our 1990 Toyota pickup, unpacked our earthly goods, and began construction on a half-built cottage in the woods. Meanwhile, just a hundred meters down the hill a young beaver couple were busy making their home. So here we were, beavers and us, both readying for winter. As winter was soon upon us, there was much work to be done.

For my partner Kathy and I, there was much to learn and do. First things first, we erected a lovely little outhouse with big windows overlooking the fields and ponds. Then we got ready for the big machines to come drill a well and bring electric lines from the road. We built a kitchen using scrap wood from a neighbours’ barn, maple branches gathered in the woods and ceramic tiles being tossed out by the local hardware store. We patched up walls and ordered firewood, ready to settle in for our first Canadian winter in the bush.

Meanwhile, down the hill, came the occasional sounds of splashing water and crashing timber. Beavers build. Beavers build houses and gardens and roads. When a beaver moves into a new area they construct an elaborate infrastructure for their needs. Beaver dams built from felled trees and mud and debris, flood woodland areas to create beaver ponds. In a beaver pond is a beaver house, beaver gardens, and beaver roads. A beaver lodge is a secure dwelling, difficult for any predators to reach and a nest for family to live. Near the beaver lodge is the beaver pantry where tree saplings are pushed in to the bottom of the pond to store over the winter. Along the edge of the pond are little canals where the beaver can stay safely underwater when going back to land for food or building supplies. And so you see, the beaver builds much as do we; providing for food, shelter, transportation, and security.

Being new to the neighbourhood, having just moved in, I couldn't help but feel a kind of kinship and camaraderie with the beavers working below our home. I would go down and visit in the morning to see their progress, taking note of how they build. It is just amazing to think of felling a tree with your teeth.

That first year we were here the beavers felled many trees. They flooded an enormous area of over two forested acres. I watched with awe and concern, wondering if they should be stopped from devastating mature woodlands. But, I was humbled and far too impressed to dare intervene. Besides, trapping beavers was beyond my reach as I needed to simply get our house warm for the winter.

As the years have gone by I still walk by the beaver homes each day. The dams and ponds have grown in number and size. In the winter, you can walk right along the

dams, many over 100 feet long. In the summer the dams are now filled with tall jewelweed, making long curved lines of orange flowers floating above the water. At a good spot for viewing the ponds, a weathered teetering sign from last year's poem festival says, "beaver gardens."

Over the years our home has also grown. There are a number of buildings and terraced gardens flowing down the hill to the beavers land. I like to walk back from the ponds and look up at the hill and see how the curves and shapes of our place mimic the beavers'. I'm not sure who has been trying to keep up with whom, but the beavers and us seem to be constructing in concert. Symphony of carpentry, wood chips, water works, gardens, and pantry trips.

Building the Hermit Lab

It is the spring of 2010. A tandem load of lumber has been delivered to our driveway: 3,000 board feet of rough-cut pine. My building education started with a little 8 ft. x12 ft. shed. It went up quickly and well. We bought wavy stained glass and placed it in the south-facing gable end: effervescent green light descends among the shelves built to store odds and ends. Emboldened, I decided we need a workshop. The workshop will be a much larger space, though still a modest 16 ft. x 20 ft. structure.

By the early summer a foundation area for a workshop has been cleared of birch and poplar saplings and the perimeter staked out. I mix and pour concrete for the piers. I read books on framing houses. Study new homes under construction in the neighbourhood. Get advice from experienced builders. Beams, joists and a floor go up. Walls arise. By the fall there are rafters and a roof. As the cold arrives I move inside,

installing insulation and grooved pine siding. A neighbour donates a wood stove and a chimney rises through the roof. Lights and outlets are wired. All is just in time for an opening house concert with my musician friend Kyra in February of 2011. We somehow squeeze 30 people into this little building for a candlelight concert. Kyra sang, “One regret that I hope not to have when I’m lying on my death bed, dear world, is to not have kissed you enough. Tell me, have I kissed you enough.”

Sitting in the Hermit Lab today, looking up the walls, eyes follow knotty pine to the cathedral ceiling open wide. I remember spending so much time dreaming into these walls, into the ceiling, into a space where people would one day sit and dream of other days. A building to host conversations; daydreams and daydreamers. I remember being quite emphatic that this was not a place where people were meant to sleep, going out of my way to design the space so it would be most difficult to get a bed in here. This is not a space for the dreams that come from sleep, but a place for dreamers of day.

Windows are Poems

There are two large doors with full-length windows in the Hermit Lab. The doors are wide open right now looking onto the field below. Cucumber leaves, zinnia, and cosmos. A cat is walking the path down to the guest house. Inside the guest house is a little kitchen and a floor-to-ceiling library. Above the kitchen is a loft looking down at the books below. Windows all around show the woods and meadow. At the top of the loft are windows in each gable end. You could pick up a book and stare outside for almost ever. And people have. Hermit Lab residents sleep here in the guest house/library, where books and dreams meet.

Looking from the Hermit Lab studio higher on the hill to the guest house below, window to window, the world in between. Windows are poems. Each window has a view: A view that changes hourly, daily. The moment-to-moment shuttle of butterfly paths, arc of dragonfly and moths. Seasons create wild new shows. Autumn's moulting colors. "Winter is the oldest of seasons", writes Bachelard (1958) "And we feel warm *because* it is cold outside" (p. 61). Snow melt in spring sends a gushing seasonal creek down the hill. A window is a composition of the light and place outside. Inside outside: window poem. Place your windows to show you the world.

Wood, Earth and Stone

Many people in this neighbourhood build their own homes and gardens. This provides people the chance to get to know trees and dirt and stones. Each little rock wall is a communion with time. Each flowerbed reminds of birth. A hardwood floor is a walk through the forest.

Natural Play Space

One thing has led to another and we are sitting with 50 kids from Hometown Public School, who are drawing a time when they had an adventure outside. Mary and I are watching and listening as each group of kids describes their adventures and how that could be had in a playground in town. Mary is an aboriginal rights lawyer who spends her time these days as a stone carver and dry-stone wall builder. We have been working together inspired to create a natural play space for kids in the downtown park of Hometown. A group of local parents have been organizing to create a playground in town,

which got Mary and I dreaming of cedar log climbing structures and a long curving stone bench. We've been asked to join the kids today at the Hometown Public School to get their ideas too. It is a very fun day and the kids are all ready to play in this space we are dreaming to create.

The Fulcrum by Megan Hyslop, Hermit Lab Residency, Winter 2015

So we're on a break from talking in the Hermit Lab for a wood-chopping lesson.

"Your body is the fulcrum," Andy Trull tells me. "Put your hands here wide apart on the ax and then slide them apart as they go above your head. You're working with gravity." He hands me the ax.

"Turn your back!" I say, when on the first swing the ax bounces off the wood. I want to be good at this, now, and I'm pissed that I'm not. I want to be the best wood chopper, I want to be able to split a cord in an afternoon, I want to be like Dr. Beverly whom I once met hitchhiking, the 70-year-old philosopher who left academia with her PhD philosopher husband to live on the edge of Algonquin Park, who lived without a phone and learned to homestead, including canning road kill bear meat, who for years drove a little yellow Harley Davidson motorcycle from the East to West gate through the Tamaracks and Beeches, who told me as she drove me across the park, 40 minutes out of her way, "You can't imagine the satisfaction I get from chopping my own wood." Andy walks away and wanders back with a cart for the logs. I'm starting to overheat, whether from the exercise or from emotion, I'm not sure. I take off my red winter coat and throw it on the covered wood pile.

“Do I stand with one leg in front of the other or wide apart?” I’m scared of the damn ax, I don’t want to cut my leg.

“Stand far enough back that if it misses, it won’t hit your legs. As you get to know your body in relation to the chopping, it starts to make sense.”

I take another swing, and it bounces off the wood again. I take off my hat and my scarf and put them on top of my coat. My face is tense; I stretch out my mouth muscles like a cat yawning. I put the ax down for a minute and shake out my limbs.

“Breathe out as you swing down...”

I pick up the ax again, line myself up, and take another swing. *PAH!* The blade knocks the piece of birch cleanly in two. A warm glow explodes in my chest. I go to the covered pile, throw a few more logs at the base of the chopping bloc, and pick up another piece. *PAH!* The sound punctuates the air, the pile of split logs shaped from the raw wood growing around my feet that I will later use to heat the whimsical wood cabin where I write and sing and read Annie Sprinkle’s *Spectacular Sex* book and watch the flames in the wood stove.

Artist! I hug this word to me, delight in acquainting myself with a frame that encompasses the wandering, mystical textures of my life. And as I do this I feel a tiger roaring fiercely somewhere inside me, reacquainting myself with my sensory immediacy and drive, my desire to create that has me now happily typing on Esmeralda the computer at 3:30 in the morning because I glimpsed the pattern in this shimmering moment by the birches and the woodpile. In my research for my move to Nova Scotia, I learned that competition was one of the core values for Mi’cmaq culture, a striving for the good of the

community. I was very ambitious in school as a girl but muted my stripes for a time, at first as a kind of safety net for adolescence and then as a semi-conscious symbolic gesture to right the insatiability of neoliberalism and the inequities of white privilege. What if I harness this tiger to bear witness, to advocate the inner life, to listen, to wrestle and dance, to notice, to sense most intensely, to care deeply, to sing and swim, even at times without a life preserver, as part of the pattern of creative life-love and vitality? (Nachmanovitch, Dumitru). I don't need to tone down this dehusking of myself, this shedding of layers to connect with my natural self, a self in harmony with earth rhythms and the patterns of earth-based cultures, relational cultures, once the patterns of my own ancestral culture, before things got a bit scared and disconnected. ¡*Artista!* Pinkola Estés (1993*) says that while there are thousands of ways to lose the skin, what counts is how we find our way back home.

This morning in the Hermit Lab, Andy indulged my whims of pink satin lab coat and jungle print scarf costumes and pacing dance movements as I interviewed him; we veered off into occasional tangents as I scribbled out my feelings about a grant application to K.C. and the Sunshine Band or watched a cat pad down the snowy path towards the woods. Cameron (1992), in *The Artist's Way*, writes that enthusiasm (from the Greek "filled with God") "is a spiritual commitment, a loving surrender to our own creative process... [it] is an ongoing energy supply tapped into the flow of life itself. Enthusiasm is grounded in play, not work." Artist! *It's like saying your name*, my friend Paula once said. I've heard that one definition of art is "the way." This way, water-way, my way.

Design

Oh, the human brain is not as big as the sky and the stars

It can fit in a large mason jar

So let us not get carried away with how smart we are

But then again,

There are more nerve cells in the human brain than there are stars in the Milky Way.

And even though

every atom in our bodies comes from an exploded star

I look around sometimes and wonder

“who do we think we are?”

*

Ok so, at this point it is pretty clear that we are here. We have made our presence known through all our human goings-ons; from spaghetti network roads to drained marsh cornfield rows to electrified night times all around the globe. Looking down from an airplane you see it all—the fingerprints of human change on every inch of the land below.

rocketships, grocery carts, noodle joints, butcher blocks, satellites, out of sight

So the question of design:

We have designed our way into this mess

And now we have to design our way out.

Or did we just stumble here

In the incremental way that life goes from day to day

With no grand plan or vision

Just one foot in front of the other

Pants on one leg at time

While the master plan sits on the shelf gathering dust

The image of who we are

Upstaging what we actually are doing

And then the moment happens when

The seed of a dream

Takes root

And up shoots the way we hoped

The idea comes to bear fruit

And dancing in a gold lamé suit

Holding a champagne flute

Do toot our horns

To the sea within

That follows the tides

Pulled by moon

And or

Strung from the beyond

The patterns and webs

That connect

Tissue

Fascia

Grey matter

Pancake batter

For better yet

To rest our head

In the lap of who we are

*

Figure 14 Mine are Not the First Feet



a landscape poem being installed in a local park

Chapter XI: Conclusion: Making & Belonging: The Philosophy and Poetics of Participation



The participation of all makes the world. As much as we are a part of the cosmos, the cosmos is a part of us.

During the course of this study the experience of participatory encounter was documented through four overlapping themes: conversation, mutual aid, affection for place, and the poetics of space. Each of these themes explores the phenomena of participatory encounter through the experience of people making and belonging. This chapter outlines the characteristics of these themes, reflects on their meaning, and explores implications for further study.

Conversation: The Stuff of Culture



Culture is made out of conversations as conservative and generative phenomena that occur through the spontaneous flow of consensual interactions (Maturana & Poerksen, 2004). In other words, and by analogy, “we make the road by walking” (Freire & Horton , 1990). Conversation is lived in moment-to-moment interactions, while culture is made from conversation over time (de Guerre, 2000). Over the last five years I have

had the opportunity to follow the conversations I lived, moment-to-moment, and notice what became of those conversations. This was a process of following spontaneous interactions and tending to the traces left by those interactions. In many ways this is a description of the experience of everyday life (Shotter, 2008). We live from moment-to-moment in dynamic interactions between people and our environments. We also make agreements that allow us to generalize phenomena into cognitive-linguistic categories that organize patterns and relationships into static concepts. This is what happens when we say that we live in a “community” or work in an “organization.” When conceptualizing ‘community’ or ‘organization’ we may come to think of them as ‘things’. However, a community or organization is not a thing. It is not an entity or an object or anything that you can touch or see. A community or organization is a process, an ongoing conversation that happens over time. It is a process that is continuously being made from the actions of its members in dynamic relation to their environments.

The essays contained in this dissertation are stories meant to reflect the experience of culture as process. By exploring the conversations in which I was embedded over several years I came to experience culture as process. Figure 3 shows the network of conversations in which I have been embedded. Arrows show the flow from one conversation to another. All these conversations happened while working with Hermit Lab fellows and getting to know my local community. Projects materialized through the moment-to-moment flow of spontaneous interactions. This method of conversation over time led to an experience of culture in the making.

Culture in the making. Research at the Hermit Lab explored relational organization. Through this research I came to understand culture in the making. The research was less about making culture happen (intervening to achieve particular outcomes), and more about experiencing culture as it is made. The research outcomes are less about the projects that came out of the process, and more about the relational process that occurred through these projects. The focus has been on cultivating conversation as the unit of inquiry. This allowed me to see the web or network of relations in which I was embedded and reflect on what occurred.

Anyone could do this method of research and come out with entirely different outcomes (both conversations and projects). The integrity and intentionality that one can bring to a process such as this will deeply impact participants' ability to engage in meaningful conversation. The themes identified through the study were those that I found particularly conducive to meaningful conversation as both a researcher and participant.

It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Mutual Aid!



I loved superman when I was a kid. I still do. But in the super heroics of interdependence, we may want more company. A lone superman flying through the sky comes alongside a flock of geese shaped in a long V. The geese take turns flying into the headwind. Superman, an alien orphan, looks lonely next to these geese.

In a world of 'survival of the fittest' it is a good bet to put money on Superman. In a world of "survival of the fittestest," mutual aid will save the day. Evolution selects for

fitness.⁶ But fitness, in terms of natural selection, does not necessarily mean the strongest, or biggest teeth or best hair or fastest car. We only need to look around to see a world inhabited by jellyfish and moles and platypuses who have survived because they fit a niche. And as humans, our niche has a lot to do with cooperation, collaboration and mutual aid.

One of the best things about working in a Hermit Lab is having really good company. As I sit writing this, my friend and colleague Terry, is happily working away next to me. She has come here to help me finish the final chapter of my dissertation. Over the years Terry has been a part of almost every big event at the Hermit Lab: house concerts, construction projects, farmers markets, a poetry festival, community events at the Lions Hall. As a Hermit Lab fellow she has been an editor, gardener, drywaller, workshop facilitator, cook, fabric artist, set designer, architectural consultant, and enthusiastic participant in whatever happens to be going on. In a world of ‘survival of the fittest’ Terry will prevail.

The future is tended by those who take joy in stepping into whatever is happening and doing what needs to be done. Each of us brings with us different ways of being in the moment-to-moment experiences of life. Thus each person will bring a unique perspective of what is happening and what needs to be done in any given situation. It has been a delight to get to know the many Hermit Lab fellows who have come and brought their totally unique ways of being to bear on whatever was happening here. Hermit Lab fellows

⁶ Looking at life as a circle can allow us to see the natural world also through the lens of mutual aid. Rather than “kill or be killed” we can say “feed and be fed”.

have come to finish a book, a play, and three separate graduate theses; experiment with workshops in development; perform concerts and plays; design graduate research; and just get a chance to get one's hands in the dirt, read a book or walk in the woods. The Hermit Lab has provided physical space (accommodations, workshops and a studio) and attention to works in progress (listening, coaching, consulting, collaborating). In return Hermit Lab fellows and participants have been generous in helping with day-to-day tasks (cooking, cleaning, maintenance), projects of mutual interest (construction, gardening, new creative works), and showing up to whatever community events I happen to be involved with. The variety of tasks and interactions has allowed for people's unique skills and interests to come out in surprising and wonderful ways.

One of the most exciting parts of the Hermit Lab has been the interaction between Hermit Lab participants and the local community. There are probably a few dozen people in the area who ask about who is visiting at the Lab or when someone is coming next. People have gotten very curious about the Hermit Lab fellows and enjoy finding out who these people are and what they are working on. Likewise, Hermit Lab fellows have gotten to know a number of people in the community (some quite well), ask about them, and look forward to meeting new people.

For me, personally, the Hermit Lab has been a link between the wider world (fellows bringing new ideas, ways of working, and news from their communities) and the local community (many of whom are long-time residents, very knowledgeable about this particular place, cultures, histories and people). Hermit Lab fellows have helped to get me

out into the community. The mutual curiosity between Lab fellows and community members has drawn me into community life in ways I could not have imagined.

All along the way I have to come to really appreciate the community in which I live. I have been enlightened by the way people in this area show up to make things happen for each other. I have learned that in a small rural area if you don't show up then there is a good chance that it might not happen. In larger population centres there are often more centralized institutions for civic life (this is more true for resource-rich communities and less so for poor, marginalized communities). Around here there is the assumption that if you don't do it, no one else will. This makes people show up. Every time one attends a community event, or town meeting, or volunteers for the fire department, or goes shopping it makes a difference. Being able to feel the difference you make is special. And it is remarkable watching people show up and make a difference. Our area has a reputation for being a place where people come together to get things done. Often that means making do with less resources than urban or affluent rural areas have. I have come to speculate that it is the lack of access to surplus resources that makes people here resourceful, resilient and cooperative. This is not meant to glamourize poverty (and its devastating consequences), but to emphasize strengths that come from making do with less and having to rely on one another.

Mutual aid is when people help each other and get help in return. Superman does not have to work alone. All around us are superpeople and superanimals, superplants and superfungi, superbacteria and superviruses (uh-oh gotta watch out for those). Mutual aid

is about realizing that we are interdependent by giving and receiving. This is the dance that makes the world alive.

Affection for Place



Coming home. Coming home to place. Coming home to the senses.

We are always some place. A place that has a history. A place alive with its very particular present. All the people and creatures and features and forces that make the very place in which you are in right now. You may be at home, you may be at work or school, you may be traveling or visiting or waiting in some other place. Wherever you are, is home to somebody. And over the years has been home to many before and many to come.

When we move, we bring the places we're from with us. When we arrive, we become where we are from. The question, as Chamberlin asks, is, "If this is your land, where are your stories?" (2003, p. 1)

Soon after I first moved to Hometown I was introduced to George, a philosopher-farmer. I remember George telling me it takes about 7 years working a piece of land to really get to know, to be able to listen, to feel in concert with the land. That is 7 years of working day after day, night after night; growing, harvesting, tending, knowing. He has been working the land for over 40 years and he said if you want to see his life's work, take a walk around. George now has stories to tell about the land. The next generation has inherited these stories as well. His daughter and her daughter live right there on the farm

with him. Before George there were several generations of a hard-scrabble settler family. George met the last family members living at the farm before they left and got to know their history from what was left behind. Before them... well, eventually the stories trail off into speculation. Traces of history may be found in books, in what we know from geology and archaeology. Perhaps some living oral history exists for that particular land, indigenous stories not buried by rail lines and lumber.

Every person has the right to belong to a place. Every person has a right to their stories. Whose stories? Whose home? Well for that answer we'd have to ask 'who's home?' Who is here, who was here, and who is coming?

In 2015 the government of Canada announced plans to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees. "Open hearts and welcoming communities: it's the Canadian way," reads the government webpage. "Resettling refugees is a proud and important part of Canada's humanitarian tradition. It reflects our commitment to Canadians and demonstrates to the world that we have a shared responsibility to help people who are displaced and persecuted" (Government of Canada, 2015). Soon after this announcement a group of concerned people from the local community organized an initiative to host a Syrian family in the area. The group was surprised by the generosity and support it received. It was able to raise enough funds to sponsor a large extended family. A paper from Toronto ran an article on describing the history of people finding refuge in our area; European settlers fleeing famine and war, and most recently draft dodgers from America's war in Vietnam and back-to-the-landers. The article pointed out the welcoming culture that has

allowed this area to take people in and thrive with newcomers. Reflecting on this article I thought our county could be renamed ‘Refuge County’.

Welcoming people to this area may well become increasingly important with the effects of climate change. According to some climate projections (Becklumb, 2010; Lovelock, 2010; McLeman & Ford, 2013) southern and northern Ontario will become an oasis for future generations. Food production may actually increase here along with mild temperatures, plentiful water, and natural resources. Considering the likelihood of this scenario, it would be wise to start preparing now to welcome future waves of climate refugees to our neighbourhood: cultivating a culture of conviviality.

This PhD has been five years in the making and I have five years of stories written in the land, in the lab and in the community. There are tangible happenings that touched my life and the lives of the people around me. With time I have grown so fond of this place. Imagination, as Wendell Berry says, “thrives on contact, on tangible connection... imagination enables sympathy, sympathy enables affection. And it is in affection that we find the possibility of a neighborly, kind, and conserving economy” (Berry, 2012).

Imagination, sympathy, affection and economy. May this place continue to be home to those who find refuge here. And may those who come here, recognize whose home this is already. May the stories of those who have been here before, tell us how to care for this home. And may our economy bring us home to the senses.

Housing Imaginations: The Poetics of Space



Hello walls, hello windows. Hello snow and wind outside. Hello shelter. I know you. You keep me warm and safe inside. My mind wanders in your nooks and crannies. Mind takes the shape of the spaces we build. Minds fill rooms the way fish in fish bowls do. May we build spaces that shape the mind to bend and to stand strong.

Thank you to all the people who make the spaces we live in. Thank you to the builders.

I remember looking at the little hill where the Hermit lab now stands. There were birch and poplar saplings between a big beautiful maple tree and a big old pine. I carefully cut the saplings with a little handsaw and piled them on a neighboring slope. Covered with leaves and earth these piles eventually became raised garden beds. There was something really satisfying about turning debris into cultivated beauty. Looking at the cleared site I began to imagine a building, its shape and size, its orientation and contours. I spent a few months just imagining the building in different ways. Sketching dozens and dozens of drawings. When the building rose up and I could sit inside and look out, there was a feeling of being nestled at once, and also reaching out. Meadows reaching out below to forests all around. Beyond the forest canopy the next ridgeline of hills rising above. Eventually I would get to know the ponds below and the beavers who had moved in. Following the contour of their dams taught me the shape of my watershed. And so I began to know, how each spring the snow melt flowed, from the top of our hill down to the ponds below. From those ponds to the creek, from the creek to lake and the lake to the

river and the river to the ocean. Each concentric ring of watersheds flowing from one to another. Now I know where I am in the Great Lakes-St Lawrence River watershed.

Knowing where we are, the homes in which we live, allows our imagination to roam beyond. I see this little hill the Lab is on, the meadow and ponds below, the town down the road, the river which flows all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. We are connected by our imaginations through space. Imagining and sitting, sitting and imagining - we roam the known universe from home. And making room for the unknown, we build a window, a portico to see beyond these walls.

We can't underestimate the importance of the thought and intentions that go into the actions we make. A sensitivity about what we build, the words we say, how we listen.

This Lab was built for hosting conversation. A building for conversation, not for planning, debate or even education. A place for just having a conversation and seeing where it goes, tending to its traces and shadows. The poetics of space is making room for the imagination, for daydreams, for uncertainty. Housing imaginations by letting a conversation go and catch hold of whatever we might fancy (see Figure 15).

Figure 15 Welcome to the Hermit Lab



Coming home to the senses means awakening to the stories etched into the animals and plants and weather and buildings and microwaves and toaster-ovens all around us. The world is speaking if only we may listen. Social research, as such, may be an animate engagement as we tinker and listen and insist, peopling the world as we come to know the patterns of relationships through which the order of living unfolds.

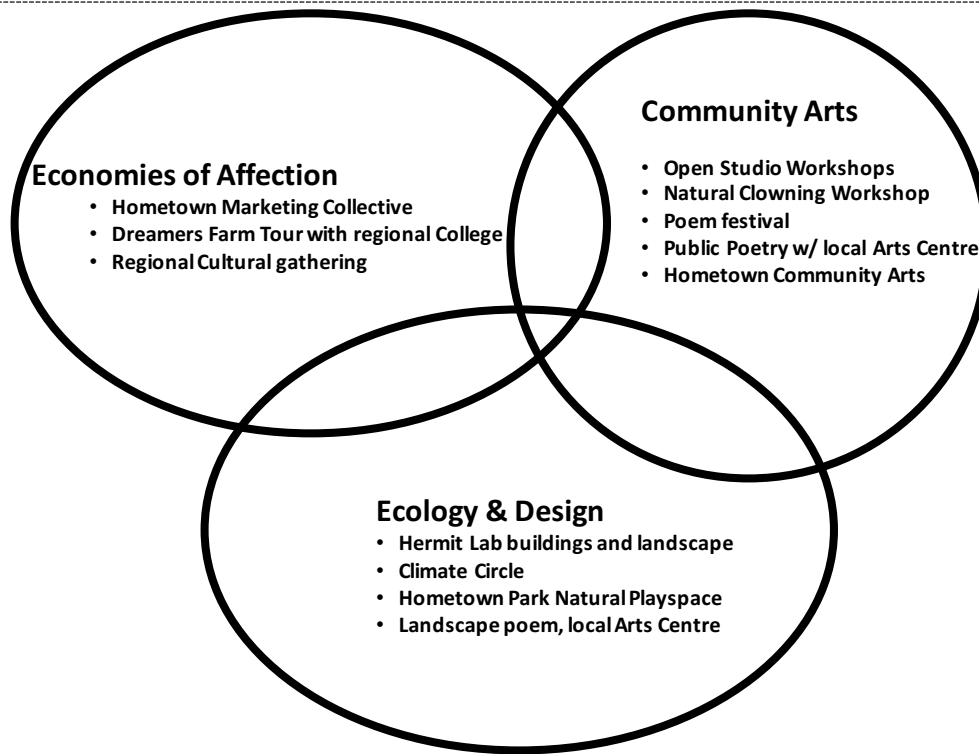
Future Research Directions

People, place and purpose: New research directions

A number of projects emerged from collaboration with people at and through the Hermit Lab. Three project areas can be identified from these projects: economies of affection, community arts, and ecological design (see Figure 16).

Figure 16.3 Project Areas Emerging from the Hermit Lab

Making & Belonging: 3 project areas emerging from the Hermit Lab



These projects emerged from the mutual interests of people engaged in conversation over time. There were many more projects that never came to be, and those that may yet come to be. Over the years I've come to notice when a project is ripe, when people are ready for action, and when circumstances are favorable to collaborative endeavors. This has led me to the supposition that participative democratic actions arise from the intersection of people, place and purpose. In other words, when people meet in the places that matter to them towards a clear and common purpose.

Figure 17 A Socioecological Model for Collaborative Relationships

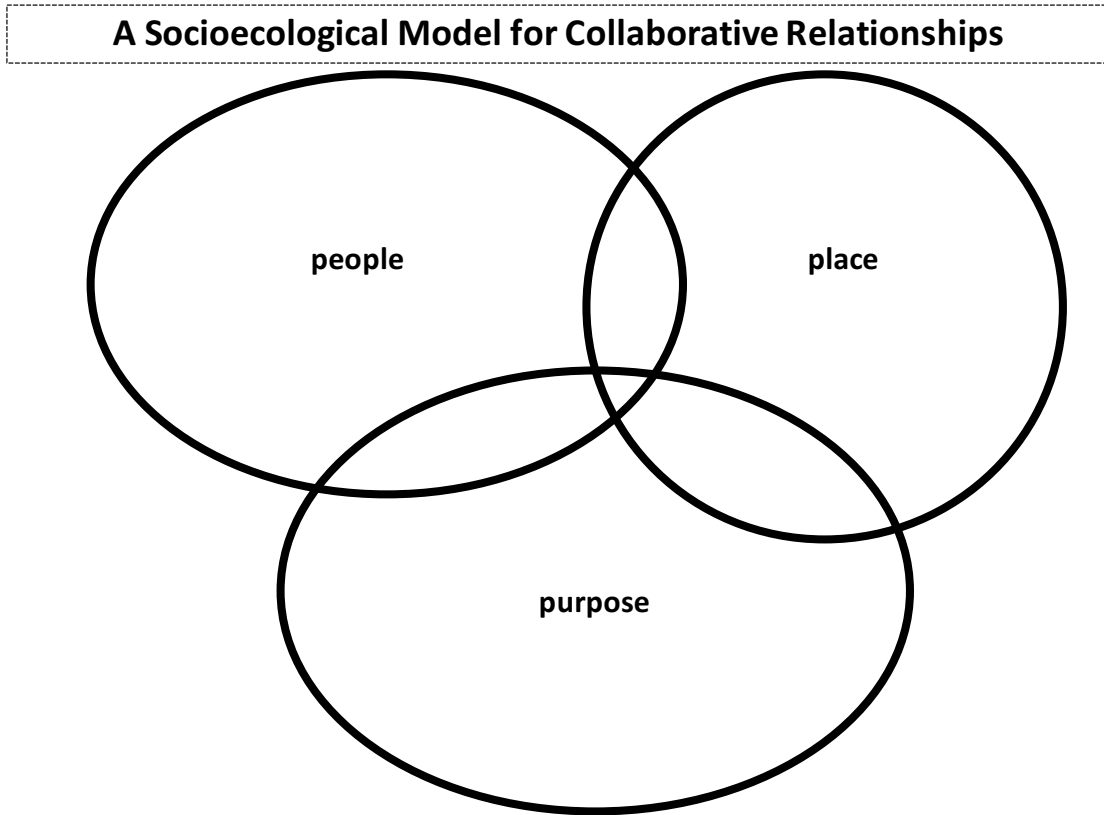


Figure 17 shows the intersection of people, place and purpose as the socioecological model for collaborative relationships. This model can be explored and elaborated upon in future research. Application of this model to other communities and contexts may provide further insights for people actively working towards democratic action and cultural change. The most important consideration with this approach is the element of time. Conversations happen over time, community and cultural change happens over time. Encountering common purpose requires taking the time to become a part of the relationships between people and place.

Poetic inquiry

As is fitting with collaborative and participatory research, this is not the thesis I expected to write. Many times I sat down intending to write a straightforward description of my research, how it connects to the literature and what emerged from the research (questions, outcomes, future directions). While this thesis does serve this purpose, I was continuously surprised to find that every time I sat down to write, poetic essays would emerge. Further still, I have discovered a ‘poetic inquiry’ approach in doing the research (hosting and engaging in conversations). This was not the plan. I had intended to include poetic and arts-based practices to illustrate insights from the research. I hadn’t realized poetic inquiry would be *the* way I’d come to do and document the research. In many ways I am just now coming to understand what poetic inquiry is, how it is done and who is doing it. At the same time, I’m also coming to recognize poetic inquiry as what I’ve already been doing, even prior to this study, for the last 15 years while working at the intersection of community engaged arts, ecological design and social change.

Thus I have discovered that my work is well situated within the field of poetic inquiry, which is immersed in questions of aesthetics, power and relationality. Recent anthologies in the field include discussions of public poetics (Vautour, Wunker, Mason, & Verduyn, 2015), poetry for and as inquiry (Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009), seeing, caring, and understanding (Galvin, & Prendergrast, 2015), critique of the social (De’Ath, & Wah, 2015), and personal and social transformation (Thomas, Cole, & Stewart, 2012). I look forward to learning from and contributing to this field. Future directions emerging from this research into poetic inquiry include;

- People, place and purpose
- Conversation as improvisation
- Conversation as method
- Authorship in public collaborations
- ‘Here and away’: collaborations between rural and urban communities
- Reconciliation between settler and indigenous people in Canada (which starts with ‘conciliation’ – recognizing the legacy of colonialism).
- Indigenous language and public poetry

Concluding Remarks



Throughout this study I found myself in the process of making; whether building a building, or organizing a workshop, or cultivating a new relationship. Often I didn't know what the end result would look like. Sometimes we discover what we are making as it is being made. This is the philosophy and poetics of participation: when we understand the world is in the making.

I also found myself belonging through this study; belonging to this land, belonging to the local community, and belonging to a network of collaborators at the Hermit Lab. I came to know and care for the place where I live. I also have begun new relationships and connections with people working in the fields of community arts, ecological design, and economies of affection. I now look at any community as an eco-

socio context, where people and place relate. This is the philosophy and poetics of participation: when we understand the world is as much a part of us as we are a part of the world.

Epilogue: Applied Poetics

What language does to us

&

What we do to language

I was waiting for the question and it came, from right beside me, unwrapped in an open gesture by Dr. Satoshi Ikeda who had been on my doctoral committee from the very beginning: “What is the unique contribution of your research?”

This was the moment I had spent countless hours imagining. This was the question rattling around in the back of my mind for 6 years. Occasionally this question would surface to the top of mind and I would swat it away with some fierce, protective instinct that I couldn’t quite understand. And here I was, and here we were - members of the doctoral defence committee along with friends and family who had come to support me, and here the question was before me.

Deep breath. And I started in.

My unique contribution to research is:

The application of poetry to the study of participatory (or direct or deep) democracy. Using poetry to get things done, democratically. And exploring the poetry of democracy as it is happening.

Applied by staying still in a place long enough to become a part of it. And showing up to see how, what, by with/who and when deep democracy is happening.

Applied by inviting people to come and explore the questions that matter to us. And by lingering in the traces of those conversations.

Applied by learning to recognize my personal motivations, skills, influence and limitations. And by learning to recognize the personal motivations, skills, influence and limitations of others. And by learning to recognize the collective motivations, skills, influence and limitations of groups of people.

Applied by organizing workshops and collaborative projects. And by scraps of paper and flip charts. And by listening and talking. And by crafting and offering words and phrases.

Applied by allowing myself to start, without knowing exactly what I was doing or how to do it or who to do it with. And by getting out of the way of what is already working and does not need to change.

Applied by making and belonging.

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