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The Meshwork of Alternative Food Systems:
Negotiating Sustainability in Chiapas, Mexico

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An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Cultural Anthropology
2017

Abstract

The Meshwork of Alternative Food Systems: Negotiating Sustainability in Alternative Food Systems By Hilary King

The relationship of food to political, social and economic life makes it a powerful vector for exploring effects of and responses to agricultural industrialization. Critics of industrial farming have described ecological and socioeconomic crises such as loss of biodiversity, climate change, pollution of natural resources, negative health outcomes, and the displacement and dispossession of small-scale farmers. They see these crises as reasons to develop alternative agricultural systems grounded in different logics. An array of initiatives around the world have galvanized around food as a vehicle for promoting more just, connective, and sustainable food systems.

The nature and potential of “alternative food systems” (AFS) are debated and contested. Through an in-depth ethnographic study of AFS initiatives in Chiapas, Mexico, this dissertation uses the concept of meshwork (Ingold 2011) to illuminate the achievements and tensions generated as people work to actualize competing and sometimes contradictory ideas of sustainability. This dissertation examines how different sustainability criteria – agroecological production methods, social embeddedness, relocalization, and education as a means to build commitment to change – are negotiated and operationalized in Chiapas.

This dissertation illuminates the everyday social change processes through which people and organizations attempt to foster particular values and behavior among varied stakeholders. Extended fieldwork centered on spaces of food production and consumption and initiatives engaged in activities of alternative food systems. Documenting the ways such initiatives succeed and fail to enroll a range of supporters over time reveals the complex and organic nature of these initiatives as they manifest on the ground.

This research contributes to existing anthropological work on social change, the anthropology of food and agrarian studies, and studies of sustainability. By examining diverse approaches to building more sustainable food systems, it explores how this diversity shapes and is shaped by broader economic, cultural, and political forces. This shows that many experiments within alternative food systems are ephemeral, they build upon each other to broaden bases of support and develop diverse, new solutions. Findings will be of mounting significance to scholars and practitioners as they work to understand the ideological and practical tensions that accompany the generation of alternative food systems.

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Acknowledgements

To my committee, Peggy Barlett, David Nugent and Tom Rogers, thank you for the intellectual support, encouragement and training. I am a better scholar for all of your time and investment. Peggy, from your first mention to me of Gibson-Graham, I knew you would be a mentor that led me intellectually, practically and spiritually to new understandings. I was right. David, I appreciate you for altering the way that I think, requiring that I be specific and precise, and making me laugh along the way. Tom, thank you for your support and guidance.

For funding support through multiple years of research and analysis, thanks to the Emory Department of Anthropology, the Sustainability Minor Graduate Fellowship, and the Laney Graduate School.

To the women of Mujeres y Maíz, who made San Cristóbal a home. Lucy Silva, you welcomed me as a friend and compatriot. You are an inspiration and a soul sister. Ísabel Reyes Posadas, *gracias por llevarme a todas partes en el bicho*. Alma Amalia González, for intellectual companionship, faith, and a place to live, thank you. To Lucelva, Vicky, Reyna, Mary, Salomé, Adriana, Lulu, Mary, Gladys, Marta, Zenaida, María Elena, Silvia and others, *gracias por dejarme entrar en sus vidas; espero que este proyecto apoye al trabajo importantísimo que siguen haciendo*.

My friends and colleagues in graduate school, I would not be where I am without you. To my Anthropology Amazons: Gabriela Sheets, Isabella Alexander, and Tawni Tidwell, I found a tribe when I found you all. Jennifer Sarrett, Melissa Creary, Sarah Stein, Cate Powell, and Anna Ellis and Mael Vizcarra; it has been an unbelievable joy to be surrounded by such incredible role models. Ag Gals Ioulia Fenton, Sarah Franzen and

Andrea Rissing, thank you for making sense of the food in our lives both practically and theoretically. Howard Chiou, thank you for thinking with me throughout, I don't know what kind of anthropologist I would be without you. I am forever blessed by the friendship, edits and intellectual curiosity that each of you has brought to my life.

In addition to my committee, thank you to Carol Worthman and Carla Freeman in particular for intellectual inspiration and support at Emory. To Lora McDonald, Jill Marshall and Colin Kirkman, thank you for making complicated processes easy to navigate. Many thanks to Todd Polley, Justin Burton, and David Lynn, for finding me a second home in the Chemistry Department. To the Office of Sustainability Initiatives, thanks for supporting students like me.

To Doug Raybeck, you told me I was an anthropologist many years before I was able to hear it. Thank you. I'll try to take sage advice more readily when it is offered in the future.

To the people that allowed me to experiment with these ideas in a practical way, thank you for putting up with my peppering you with academic analyses as we tried to answer practical questions. Emily Kerr, you are the person with whom I started thinking about engagement ladders. I expect a life spent fleshing out and improving these ideas. To my friends and colleagues at Community Farmers Markets (especially Katie Hayes) and in Atlanta's local food movement, thank you for building a meshwork that promotes innovation, collaboration and mutual support.

I send the largest, most heartfelt THANK YOU to my parents. You were unfailingly willing to correct my comma usage and have inspired me to pursue the adventures that led me to this point. Your encouragement and love are unending.

To Daniel, you have accompanied me on this adventure start to finish. You shared this experience with me from walking the streets and eating grasshoppers to late night idea brainstorming. Thank you for being my partner and compatriot, in this and in life, for making me laugh, making me endless cups of tea, and for accompanying me and pushing me to think through these ideas and experiences as no one else could have.

Without y'all, these ideas would never have emerged in this form.

Dedication

To my friends, and those I don't know, who are trying to make sense of diverse initiatives that grow in unruly ways – we are all bound up together.

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Abbreviations

AFS	Alternative Food Systems
MyM	Mujeres y Maíz
LCP	La Casa del Pan

Chapter 1: Introduction

I met Fátima in August 2012 at the organic market in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. I walked into the small market located in the open patio of a colonial building near the center of this city of 200,000 people. It was the weekly farmers market, and I was here for the celebration of its seventh anniversary.

Fátima was almost hidden by an array of circular stacks in varied colors — bright fuchsia, brilliant green, off-white flecked with red, and coffee with cream. The stacks were made of *tostadas*, tortillas toasted until they are firm and crispy. These *tostadas* looked to be from a Dr. Seuss story, arranged on top of each other like warped Frisbees. Fátima was wearing a polyester dress covered with a plaid apron embroidered with flowers, very common among women in this area. She sat comfortably on a small stool, not hawking her wares verbally, but waiting for people to come up to the table. When spoken to, she replied quietly in Spanish, often with an understated smile.

I asked this smiling, quiet woman if I could sit and help sell *tostadas*. Surprised, she laughed a little and let me kneel beside the stool where she was seated. Her small table was lined against the wall of the open-air patio alongside a dozen or so other tables and was covered with a checkered cloth. Vendors' stands were piled high with leafy, green vegetables, limes, baked goods, juices or homemade sauces in mismatched glass jars. Every couple of minutes, a customer would come up to Fátima's table to buy her products. Often, the customers addressed her by name. Some bought a bag of pre-sorted *tostadas*, including a variety of flavored *tostadas*. Other people wanted to make their own

selections, picking out two flavored with cactus, one with chili and chocolate and a couple of plain maize with nothing else.

I asked about her product, her sales, and how long she has been a *tostadera*. She had been making tostadas for about thirty years since her early twenties. She proceeded to ask me questions. Where did I come from? “The United States.” I added the customary (and meant), “*Alli tiene su casa* (you have a home there).” Fátima thanked me for the offer. I asked if she had visited the United States, she told me she hadn’t. I let the silence settle and prepared to steer the conversation in another direction.

After a few seconds, Fátima piped up. “I have not been to the United States, but I have been to Italy.”

I looked at her, surprised. A smile spread across her face. She explained that in 2010, she had been selected as a delegate of Mexico to exhibit her tostadas at the *Salone del Gusto* (Salon of Taste) in Turin, Italy, a biennial gathering of thousands of activists and food producers from around the world organized by the organization Slow Food International. Describing her experience there, Fátima recounted, “I don’t know how to read or write, so I can only tell you what I did. I ate so many things and met so many people, and everyone loved my tostadas. No one had seen them like this, made with beets or cilantro or chocolate or beans. It was so hard to get the permissions to take them there, and to be sure that they arrived unbroken, but they were a big hit. People paid five euros for a bag of five tostadas!”

How did Fátima come to be selling bright colored tostadas in Mexico and exhibiting them in Europe? She explained that she was a member of a collective, *Mujeres*

*y Maíz Criollo*¹ (“Women and Native Maize”). This organization is a collective of women producers and tortilla makers, working to expand markets for maize products made from native maize varieties grown in Chiapas. Fátima had been selling at the market where I met her for a few years now, and she found it a good outlet. She and three of her daughters make the tostadas at their home four or five days a week. Fátima comes to sell their wares one or two days a week, earning a higher price than she would if she sold only to her neighbors at the small stores near her house or within the larger, municipal market. Also, at this market, she has a clientele that looks for and appreciates the variety of tostadas made with vegetables and additional products. She attends classes on topics like organic certification, sustainable agriculture and accounting. She is part of a collective that manages a restaurant where she and her daughters work a few days per week, attaining differing opportunities from any encountered a few years ago.

Fátima had never been to school, but now she has had the opportunity to travel both within Mexico and abroad to show off her culinary skills and traditions. In our conversation, she went on to tell me that she is the first member of her family to fly in an airplane. Her journey to Italy had taken her far beyond the 45-minute journey she made from her home in Teopisca to San Cristóbal each week. Prior to that, she had never left the state of Chiapas.

How did the collective that she is part of come to be? What factors led to the emergence of a market from which Fátima, a middle-aged woman from a small town in Chiapas, is selected to represent Mexico at an international food conference? What does

¹ *Criollo* is a term for maize varieties grown in and adapted to specific microclimates in Mexico (Fitting 2011). *Criollo* maize are considered heirloom or native varieties, meaning that they are distinct populations that have been adapted over time to specific conditions, and which have cultural, economic, and ecological value (Nazarea 2005). In Mexico, common usage for this term refers to seed that has not been subjected to formal breeding improvement (Bellon et al 2005).

this tell us about the ways that food is grown, made and eaten in the world today? This dissertation explores answers to these questions by situating Fátima within changing global food systems, and examining how people use food as a way to interact with and shape the world around them.

The Globalization of Food

The ways that we grow food, trade it and what we eat have profound impacts on the world, the kinds of lives that people lead and the kind of future we will have. Everyone eats. The processes used in the growth, trade, and eating of food are embedded within and connected to many economic, social and environmental issues. Investments in certain systems of production, economic theories of development, demand for varieties of food, cultural traditions, international trade patterns, colonial legacies and many other factors influence what and how people eat in ways that extend beyond individual choice. These factors shape food systems, here defined as the sets of operations and processes involved in transforming raw materials into food, and the subsequent economic, ecological and social repercussions (Buttel 2006).

Though a food system sounds very concrete and singular, there are many overlapping types of food systems, and they operate at many different scales and have a wide variety of effects on people, the environment and our economies. From a “global food system” to “local food systems,” people are thinking increasingly hard about the effects that food production, consumption, and trade have on the planet and our lives.

Food is and has long been a central force shaping relations between groups of people, nations and the natural world. Food has been traded on a global scale for

millennia. From salt (Kurlansky 2003) to spices (Miller 1969) to sugar (Mintz 1985) and other crops, the movement of particular foods from one place to another has shaped societies, generated conflicts, and profoundly impacted social structures and interactions. Within this history, agricultural systems have formed the basis for varied configurations of geopolitical power over time, and played an important role in the construction of world capitalist economy (McMichael 2009). Historically, the production and trade of food has been characterized by semi-stable periods of capital accumulation that are supported by particular configurations of geopolitical power; agriculture has occupied a foundational role in shaping political economy and ecology, with large impacts on social organization (McMichael 2009). Changes incurred as a result of shifting food systems take place at many levels: between continents and nations, but also within individual households (Mintz and Du Bois 2002).

Over the past hundred years, the nature of global food systems has changed. Food production and consumption are increasingly separated, as food products move from one side of the planet to another. Bananas from South American nations are sold in the United States (Soluri 2005). Quinoa, an ancient grain from the South American highlands, is a trendy superfood in the United Kingdom (Parker-Gibson 2015) and increasingly in the U.S. The speed of delivery has increased. Flowers and fruits produced in Africa appear daily in European supermarkets (Dolan, Humphrey, and Harris-Pascal 1999, Dolan 2008). The systems of production and consumption that underlie this global food system have created a flood of “food from nowhere,” marking shifts in the role of food and agriculture within global political economy (McMichael 2009). These systems disconnect food from its production sites and processes with resulting large-scale changes in the

structure of food retailing (Gereffi et al. 2001). The “supermarket revolution” together with large-scale food manufacturers are transforming agricultural industries and food markets across the world (Reardon and Hopkins 2006). These policies have often been based in modernization theory, which proposes that in order to progress, societies can and must advance away from agriculture towards industrialization and mass consumption as the basis of social organization (Rostow 2000).

In San Cristóbal, the city where Fátima sells most of her tostadas, these changes have had a profound impact on the types of food people eat in recent years. Shifts toward an increasingly industrial and globalized food system are visible as one walks around the city. Since the 1990s, the supermarket revolution has hit Latin America, altering food provisioning practices for large sectors of the population (Reardon and Berdegue 2002). Some people now shop at Sam’s Club, a division of Wal-Mart, or Mexican chain stores Chedraui and Soriana, which were not present in the city at the turn of the millennium. Most people continue to purchase ingredients for the week by shopping at a municipal, open-air market full of brightly colored fruits and vegetables sold by the bucket. This style of market is often associated with the developing world, serving up the bounty of items available in the region of the country where the market is located. However, increasingly, the goods available at these markets are resales of purchases from other parts of Mexico or the world, belying the idea that they are constrained to regional production (Todd 2004). Many people attend new organic or natural markets where they buy food directly from farmers. Others continue to grow their own food, and turn it into their favorite dishes cooked over open fires in their houses. Still others just stop at the

taco stand on the corner or pick up a slice of pizza at a convenience store outside their work. Most people employ a wide variety of these strategies.

These sites of food shopping are proxies for a “food fight,” a large-scale debate about how food should be grown, controlled, sold, prepared and eaten (Wright and Middendorf 2008). The network that supports the supermarket revolution has altered labor structures as new industries emerge and patterns of trade change. These changes have been particularly hard for small-scale farmers, independent food processors and distributors. In South Korea, the industrialization of rice production freed up Korean peasants to be a labor force in one of the world’s most productive economies, but it devastated the Korean farm sector, causing a reversal in the rural/urban population divide over only a few decades (Reinschmidt 2007). In India, pressure to grow cash crops and modernize food production has resulted in the displacement and suicide of thousands of farmers. Since the passage of NAFTA, increasing trade of subsidized corn produced in the US to Mexican markets has decreased the profitability of small-scale farmers in Mexico, making it necessary for many to move to cities and work in other industries (Browning 2010).

Offering unparalleled choices to some consumers in some parts of the world, the globalized system of production and consumption that has fueled the supermarket revolution has prompted a variety of reactions. Not all of them are supportive of the globalized system. Inherent in this fight are broader questions about the nature of globalization, economic policy, agricultural subsidies and the role of governments, corporations, individuals and communities in shaping cultural processes and relationships. These initiatives have emerged as communities across the world deal with

elements of a food system in crisis: farmer debt and displacement, spreading obesity epidemics connected to changes in diet and dramatic declines in biodiversity. Fátima's presence selling tostadas made from maize grown in Chiapas, at a market that promotes "sustainable agriculture" is one small piece in a complex web of food systems.

This dissertation examines the food fight through an exploration of Fátima's work and life and the networks within which she operates to take care of herself and her loved ones. As a member of *Mujeres y Maíz* (MyM), Fátima is part of an organization that seeks to advance small-scale agriculture and artisanal food production by building a local market for maize products. The collective, made up of women farmers and tortilla makers, is grounded in regionally specific locations; its advocates seek to address problems associated with globalization and industrial agriculture. Fátima undertakes her work, as part of a collective and outside of it, within the context of globalization and economic policies that place her and the maize from which she lives at the center of debate about what constitutes environmental sustainability, social justice, rural development and economic vitality.

This organization is part of a much broader movement "In Defense of Maize" in Mexico. Mexicans organizing in defense of maize utilize the slogan "Sin Maíz, No Hay País" (without maize, there is no country) (Mann 2011), signaling the importance of this crop that was first domesticated in the present-day nation. The groups that use these slogans as rallying cries are mobilizing to protect the agricultural, cultural and economic systems that support Mexican maize and the lifeways that have been based on its cultivation.

Across the world, similar organizations exist; there are myriad international movements that promote alternatives to the globalization and commodification of food and food systems. In so doing, the movements confront global trends that profoundly impact agricultural systems – trends like the expansion of industrial agriculture, corporate concentration and dietary transformation. The purpose of this dissertation is to understand the context and the lived experience of people who are challenging these trends by participating in and constructing alternative food systems. I examine how the varied people involved in *Mujeres y Maíz* engage these issues in San Cristóbal de las Casas, a city in Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state.

Competing Pathways: Industrial and Alternative Food Systems

The industrialization of agricultural systems has been heralded from many corners and has achieved remarkable ends. Modern, large-scale agriculture has vastly increased the amount of food produced in the world, lessening the percent of income that many people spend on food (USDA 2016). In addition, today it takes many fewer farmers to produce a sufficient number of calories to sustain an exponentially growing human population than it did a century ago, and many farms have been reorganized according to the logics of business efficiency (Fitzgerald 2003). This form of modernization has been credited with raising incomes for farmers in developed countries and lessening the cost of food for consumers, thereby increasing leisure time while supplying safer food for less money (Lusk 2013). Agricultural production requires half the labor that it did in 1970, and produces more food on less land (Lusk 2016). The benefits of technological innovation are heralded as ushering in a new era in food production that can deliver better

nutrition using fewer resources, including new techniques such as genetic modification (Paarlberg 2013).

Despite these apparent advantages, critics of industrial farming note that though these processes have produced immense amounts of food, they have also created myriad challenges for small-scale farmers, communities and the environment (McMichael 2009). Food systems produce as much as 29% of global greenhouse gas emissions, a huge contributor to climate change (Vermeulen, Campbell, and Ingram 2012). Industrial food production systems are hugely expensive, requiring agricultural subsidies and shifts in public support to large-scale, highly capitalized farms (Clunies-Ross and Hildyard 2013). At the same time, small-scale farmers around the world will be most vulnerable to climatic changes that threaten their ability to produce food for themselves (UNCTAD 2013). Industrial agriculture faces ecological and socioeconomic crises related to monoculture and declining yields (Rosset and Altieri 1997), loss of biodiversity (Mercer, Perales, and Wainwright 2012), and pollution of natural resources (Tegtmeier and Duffy 2004).

The expansion of industrial agricultural practices is often accompanied by neoliberal economic policies. Neoliberalism is a political and economic philosophy that emphasizes the role of the market as a generator of human well-being. Policies promoted by this philosophy often center on practices including the limitation of state control over markets, the deregulation of international trade, the privatization of public goods and the increasing implementation and protection of private property rights (Harvey 2005, McMichael 2005). The neoliberal era of capitalism appears to be based in a reverence for a global market as both an engine and a guide for human action (Freeman 2014). In

agriculture, such policies have encouraged deregulated international trade in agricultural goods and the retreat of government-regulated agricultural programs (Wise, Salazar, and Carlsen 2003). These policies have decreased national governments' ability to ensure labor and environmental standards that protect workers from everything from labor abuses to exposure to chemicals and pesticides (Wright 1990). The dominance of neoliberal policies has prompted governments to dismantle public programs that support vulnerable populations through food subsidies and procurement programs (Ochoa 2000). They have also decreased national government commitments to the support of systems of land tenure and production that aid rural or marginalized groups (Arce 2003, Barnes 2009). The corporate concentration of food production (Bonanno and Constance 2008), increased farmer debt and displacement (Barlett 1993), raised food insecurity and threats to national food sovereignty inform debates between producers, activists and policymakers around the world (Anderson and Bellows 2012).

Responses to the widespread, global dominance of industrialized food systems and the challenges associated with them are emerging at international, national, and local levels. A prominent theme across these levels is the potential and importance of small-scale farming for addressing several of the large-scale issues outlined above. Occurrences like the 2008 food crisis, which saw large-scale food shortages and skyrocketing prices around the world despite high levels of production (Headey and Fan 2008), have been cited as evidence that a globalized, market-oriented food system may not be sufficient to ensure human well-being. A 2013 report by the UN Conference on Trade and Development put forth that agriculture has pivotal importance for promoting pro-poor development, dealing with resource scarcities and mitigating and adapting to changing

climates (UNCTAD 2013). The report advocated support for small-scale farmers as a way to combat climate change and promote food and international security, but stated that the potential of agriculture to address these issues is limited by governance problems, asymmetries of power in the food system and current trade rules that promote industrial agriculture (UNCTAD 2013). Even faced with these challenges, the report stressed the importance of moving away from industrial agricultural systems toward sustainable agriculture as soon as possible.

Within food systems literature, these two arenas have largely been treated as theoretically separate, contrasting industrial, “conventional” agricultural systems with sustainable, “alternative” agricultural systems (Beus and Dunlap 1990, Grey 2000). These two systems are often framed as arbiters of competing values with different environmental and social impacts and unequal power relations (Grey 2000, Buttel, Larson, and Gillespie 1990). Industrial or conventional agriculture is seen as high-yield, monocrop, resource intensive, large-scale, government subsidized, and mechanized, creating outputs that can move quickly and easily across national and international boundaries (Buttel 2006). In contrast, sustainable agriculture, as defined by the 1990 US Farm Bill, is a system that satisfies human needs over the long term by enhancing environmental and natural resources and integrating biological processes to sustain economic viability and enhance quality of life (Congress 1990). For many food system activists, sustainable agriculture requires additional attention to the social, economic and environmental facets of food systems as they shape society as a whole beyond the context of food production (Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld 2012). Proponents of this view often argue that such concerns must include the environmental impact of food production and

commercialization, but also animal welfare, the health and safety of food, the social effects of changing livelihoods and economic impact of international food trade (Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld 2012). In particular, many posit that these considerations must take into account the role of agriculture as an important livelihood for people around the world (van der Ploeg 2009).

In food system literature, sustainable systems are often referred to as alternative food systems or alternative food networks (AFS). Though widely contested, alternative food systems are often presented in opposition to the globalized, industrial and environmentally degrading food system and are promoted often with a focus on regional food production and ecologically sound practices (DuPuis and Goodman 2005). Many of these initiatives focus on increasing the environmental sustainability of food production, and may also include economic and social considerations as critical elements. Characteristics of alternative food systems may include the redistribution of value within food networks, increased knowledge and trust between producers and consumers and new forms of political association and market governance (Morgan et al 2006). These alternatives have been associated with the ideas of quality, transparency, and locality, and for some, they signal contested shifts away from the largely dominant industrial food system (Sonnino and Marsden 2006).

The coexistence and competition between these models of agriculture is emblematic of much broader debates concerning what the future of food should look like. Embedded within the systems of food production are differences in opinion about the proper use of resources, the scale on which trade should happen and which forces should inform what people eat and how it is produced. At the root of these debates are questions

not only about the future of agriculture, but about what modern societies should look like and who should make those decisions. Who should control food and food systems? For the millions of small-scale farmers and the billions of people on the planet that eat daily, this question has crucial consequences.

Defining Sustainability in Food Systems

Industrial agricultural systems may be possible to reproduce for periods of time, but they will result in progressive degradations of the natural capital that underlies these production systems (Buttel 2006). Given the recognition of this and other concerns, a major tenet of alternative food systems is building toward more sustainable forms of agricultural production and consumption.

A prominent definition of sustainability that guides current thinking is drawn from the Brundtland Report, “Our Common Future,” published in 1987 by the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development. According to this report, sustainable development was defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland 1987). Following this definition, others have worked to place sustainability more squarely within the ecological processes that sustain and allow for human life. Within all of these definitions, balancing three considerations – economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection – is key (Giddings, Hopwood, and O'Brien 2002). Scholars often cite this lack of a cohesive definition as a strength of sustainability discourse, contending that such a broad understanding makes it possible to bring together a wide variety of stakeholders (Reid 2013).

There is no single definition of what a sustainable food system looks like. For the USDA, sustainable agriculture satisfies human needs over the long term by enhancing environmental and natural resources and integrating biological processes to sustain economic viability and enhance quality of life (Congress 1990). Some definitions focus on principles that help determine the effect of human activities on environmental cycles (Buttel 2006). For the Vía Campesina, an international confederation representing hundreds of peasant organizations, food system sustainability includes elements of self-determination and autonomy embedded in the concept of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is defined as: “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (Desmarais 2008). In this framing, food system sustainability focuses on questions of power about who makes decisions and how decisions are made, a direct challenge to the idea that a nebulous, neoliberal global market system is or should be the primary determiner of what an agricultural system should entail. A central tenet in this concept is that food sovereignty will not look the same everywhere, thereby making room for particular varied solutions to be developed at multiple geographic and other scales.

None of these definitions provides a roadmap for operationalizing the concept of sustainability (Redclift 2005). Proponents of alternative food systems have developed several criteria for evaluating if and how food system initiatives move towards greater sustainability. These criteria evaluate aspects of systems that would better balance human needs within environmental realities. Within the food system, many activists have focused on several criteria in developing alternatives. The application of these criteria can

be studied within specific projects to reveal how vague notions of sustainability come to be exercised and contested in everyday life. I divide these criteria into four areas: sustainable production, social embeddedness, relocalization, and education to build a commitment to change. Each of these areas are explored below.

A key element of sustainability within alternative food systems is the promotion of environmentally beneficial rather than extractive, exploitative processes. This criteria is based on the promotion of alternative agricultural practices that promote harmony with nature rather than degradation of natural resources (Horrigan, Lawrence, and Walker 2002). Production systems based on this premise vary greatly in nature and name, including organic, sustainable, agroecological, and permaculture among others (Rosset and Altieri 1997, Netting 1993). Many of these systems currently fall under an umbrella of “alternative agriculture,” which has no set definition but which draws on several central tenets (Beus and Dunlap 1990). In principle, the overarching idea has been to reduce the need for external, industrial inputs and to manage natural processes in ways that benefit ecological systems and the people that depend on them. This is one criterion upon which alternative food systems may be judged to be more or less sustainable. I will explore this criterion through the idea of **agroecological production**.

The nature of relations and logics drawn on within a food system is another criterion often considered by advocates of sustainability in food systems. Concerns about the impacts of capitalist market logics in the food system are often considered under the idea of social embeddedness, a second consideration of food system sustainability that focuses on the nature of relations between people within food systems. Social embeddedness is a term coined by Karl Polanyi, who argued that economic interactions

cannot be separated from the social and cultural institutions within which they exist and have come to be (Polanyi 1957).

A focus on social embeddedness is grounded in the premise that contemporary capitalist logics privilege economic efficiency and return on capital over other concerns and that such systems should be replaced or complemented with additional values given the role of food as a source of life and livelihood (Rosset 2006). Given this, many proponents of sustainable food systems contend that restructuring food production and consumption into certain types of social relations as a means to prioritize non or anti-capitalist values can be a way to mitigate impersonal and exploitative market structures. For many, the possibility of creating knowable, shorter supply chains, in which producers and consumers have the opportunity to interact, ask questions of each other and build relationships, increases the possibility of socially embedded and just relations (Hinrichs 2000, Jarosz 2000)². This has led to a focus on promoting more direct relationships between producers and consumers in order to allow for greater trust and transparency to develop (Hinrichs 2000). Critiques of the conventional and industrial food system include that the conditions of production are hidden from consumers, leading to exploitation of the environment and people (Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012, Marx and Elster 1986). Proponents argue that embedding food systems in different institutions and relations could have the potential to subvert, contest, or replace capitalist market logics with additional considerations (Polanyi 1957, Hinrichs 2000).

² Social embeddedness is not synonymous with the seemingly positive qualities that some AFS advocates contend that it can contribute to. All food systems are socially embedded in relations of power; feudal, slave and industrial systems are all embedded in particular social relations that result in particular dynamics. AFS are not immune from the reproduction of systems of oppression and domination, as has been well-documented (see (Alkon and Agyeman 2011, Allen et al. 2003, DuPuis, Goodman, and Harrison 2006).

Critics however, point to the fact that these qualities are not inherently associated with personal relationships, and that politics of exclusion and exploitation can be practiced within both direct and more convoluted supply systems (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). Given this, the extent to which alternative initiatives can make use of mainstream, capitalist markets as a tool to generate more multi-faceted, social and ethically informed economic exchange (Fridell 2007) and the potential of AFS to create and/or recognize non-capitalist economic spaces (Gibson-Graham 2006) are subject to consideration in interrogating what social embeddedness means within AFS. As such, evaluating the nature and extent of relationships between production and consumption is a prominent consideration within AFS spaces (Goodman and DuPuis 2002), and I will explore this under the term **social embeddedness**.

For many scholars and practitioners of alternative food systems, a third consideration is limiting the global nature of food production is seen as a path to increase sustainability. For many, the strategy of food system **relocalization**, through the development of regional and geographically limited supply chains has been a strategy to make global food systems “local.” Arguments in favor of this strategy have been made on both environmental and social grounds. Environmentally, the production and shipment of foods around the world has increased the resources used in transport and production (Weber and Matthews 2008), as well as fomented the selection of foods based on needs like durability rather than taste or nutritional content (Estabrook 2012). Socially and economically, studies have shown that the structures of business control, scale and ownership impact labor markets and social connections that arise in different places. In California, a famous study found a marked increase in civic participation in communities

with larger proportions of family-owned as opposed to corporately managed farms (Goldschmidt 1978). This has led many proponents of AFS to focus on the generation and support of businesses at smaller geographic scales (Halweil 2002). Such criteria however, have come increasingly under fire as scholars make the case that the idea of a local scale cannot be equated with more justice or more sustainable food practices (Born and Purcell 2006, DuPuis, Goodman, and Harrison 2006). As such, questioning the relationship between scale, geography and sustainability in food systems is an active part of many initiatives.

Lastly, a key concern in many AFS circles is the degree to which people come to be aware of, educated about, and committed to altering negative aspects of food systems. The idea of education about the above criteria is integral to many AFS initiatives, which are often shaped by the assumption that increased awareness will lead to action about the aforementioned issues (Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine, and Ronan 2011). The question of the extent to which both producers and consumers need to be educated or re-educated regarding the fact that “eating is an agricultural act” (Berry 1992) is under active consideration as a criterion among many AFS advocates, but often emerges as a key strategy in enrolling people to support sustainable production methods, socially embedded markets and relocalization. Throughout this dissertation I will explore this sustainability criterion as **education to build commitment to change**.

The premises underlying these criteria are subject to debate and are being fought out actively through experiments in “sustainable development” that are emerging all over the world. Through daily actions, people are asking what can and should a sustainable food system look like. The way that diverse stakeholders come together and the tensions

and insights that arise through their interactions show ways in which the idea sustainability is operationalized in particular times and contexts. Engaging broad groups in the practice of sustainable development requires on-going, sometimes painful and contentious negotiations to develop workable solutions that address the economic, environmental and social concerns of competing interest groups (Reid 2013).

These particular criteria – promotion of agroecological production methods, social embeddedness, relocalization, and the role of education in building commitment to change – are highlighted within many AFS initiatives as considerations in creating more sustainable food systems. Through this dissertation, I track the achievements, tensions and negotiations that have developed around the actualization of these criteria in San Cristóbal. Studying the achievements and challenges of these initiatives allows us to see how these criteria are negotiated to provide a foundation for visions of sustainability in a particular context.

Paths Toward Sustainability: Policy, Processes and Everyday Social Change

While people are actively building AFS as a path to move toward more sustainable futures, debates rage about the speed, nature and degree of change necessary to lessen human impact on the planet. The stakes are high as well as time sensitive. David Orr states the main challenge of sustainability “is to avoid crossing irreversible thresholds that damage the life systems of Earth while creating long-term economic, political, and moral arrangements that secure the wellbeing of present and future generations” (Orr 2011). These thresholds relate to climate science, ecological systems and social and

political arrangements that promote or disincentivize the maintenance of human knowledge about working with natural systems.

Under such intense perceptions, activists within the food system have strong opinions about the extent of changes that need to be made and the rate at which they must be achieved. Central to these debates is the question of whether or not current alternative food system experiments go far enough in challenging the environmentally, socially and economically exploitative relations that underlie conventional food systems. I situate this divide as falling between those that advocate a relational, process-based analysis versus a systemic policy approach to food systems change (Barlett 2017). Those that advocate relational understandings tend to celebrate the achievements of alternative food systems as moving people in the direction of more sustainable behavior, while systems analysts warn of the dangers of complacency that arise within slower, more process-based approaches. These approaches are not mutually exclusive; scholars and practitioners on both sides recognize validity in both views. However, both represent important streams of analysis regarding the nature of social change as it relates to sustainable food systems.

For many advocates of alternative food systems, the processual approach celebrates the success of solutions that are already active. Relational advocates cite the almost five-fold increase in the number of US farmers markets from 1994 to 2016 (Low et al. 2015) as a huge accomplishment for alternative food systems. The mainstreaming of fair trade and organic products into grocery stores can be seen under this approach as successes in expanding awareness of and support for alternatives to conventional practices (Nicholls and Opal 2005). Ethnographers also focus on people's own understandings of their actions as an important part of the processual approach.

Interviews with participants in alternative food communities have found again and again that many use practices they employ related to food “to combat the helplessness and abandonment people feel when swept into consumer culture by giving them an element of control over their fate, at least in terms of what they are putting into their bodies” (Knoebel 2016, 1). These advocates are aware of challenges and limitations of existing alternative food movements, but tend to focus on processes of becoming as fundamental to generating more sustainable practices (Hassanein 1999).

For some, these alternatives appear to operate only at small scales, and appear unlikely to grow to be able to challenge trends in the globalization of food and agriculture. Numerous examples of alternative food systems, however, have risen to significant prominence, building alternative food systems at international scales and including many thousands of people. Examples like Fair Trade and Organic certifications reveal that coordinated initiatives can succeed in building market niches that have large-scale effects in the food system (Doane 2012, Murray, Raynolds, and Taylor 2006). In 2015, certified Fair Trade products sales totaled more than 7.3 billion euros, and provided more than 138 million euros back to member organizations to fund social programs (Fairtrade International 2016). In 2014, there were 43.7 million hectares of organic agricultural land, producing products for what was an \$80 billion industry that year (Willer and Lernoud 2016). Other initiatives have emerged through which people are trying to develop different ways of growing, trading and eating food at a more regional scale. Rapidly growing numbers of farmers’ markets, farm-to-table projects (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010, Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012), as well as Fair Trade (Raynolds, Murray, and Heller 2007), Slow Food (Petrini and Padovani 2006) and regional

certification initiatives like *terroir* (Trubek 2008) reveal growing interest and investment in building alternative food infrastructures that encourage connections between producers and consumers. For many, these alternative food systems are identified as paths to alternative types of development, based on smaller-scale more environmentally friendly criteria (Hinrichs and Lyson 2007, Follett 2008). Their expansion demonstrates that relational, process-based approaches can have large-scale impact.

For systemic analysis sustainability advocates, movements such as ethical consumerism (Lewis and Potter 2011) may hinder the ability of people to create the overarching changes necessary to advance justice. From this view, the misconception among consumers and producers that certain practices can be sustainable or that our lives can continue without significant disruption and re-prioritization, poses a danger to achieving connections between society, economic relations and ecological systems that can support a thriving planet. For those in this camp, the focus on building small-scale, individualized alternatives can be seen as diluting efforts that could be applied to collective calls for and achievement of systemic, policy change. Alkon (2012) reviews such an argument made by Guthman, who hypothesized that if a portion of the energy applied to building the local food movement were channeled into passing regulations banning certain chemicals used in conventional agriculture, that achievement would accrue benefit to farmworkers and all eaters, rather than stimulating a niche market that largely benefits affluent whites. This approach aligns with broader questioning of whether or not approaches that tout the potential of a “sustainable” economy in the face of neoliberalism actually undercut desirable social change by diluting activist energy and

promoting the idea that the market is a proper venue for realizing social and environmental change (Guthman 2008b).

This critique lays out the dangers of “sustainability lite.” Within this framework it is argued that people may adopt practices or support changes that fail to address the root causes of a sustainability problem and are encouraged to feel that their current efforts are sufficient (Guthman 2008b). This approach may allow for companies or entities to cloak unsustainable behavior within sustainability rhetoric (Dahl 2010, Pierre-Louis 2012). Examples include the rise of “greenwashing,” in which companies use sustainability discourse while continuing business as usual (Dahl 2010) or the dangers of “reflexive localism” (DuPuis and Goodman 2005) which purport to offer solutions to complex problems while ignoring or generating other concerns. For many activists and scholars, these practices pose a serious danger to humanity’s ability to deal with the ecological crises we are courting. As such, powerful voices argue that “we cannot buy our way to a green planet” (Pierre-Louis 2012), calling for the necessity of much more substantive shifts in both belief and practice.

Documenting Everyday Social Change in the Food System

These debates about the way that we move towards greater environmental, social and economically sustainable food systems play out in specific places and moments. Debates about how power can and should be distributed take place within and between all scales of interaction, in publications aimed at global audiences and policy debates in non-governmental organizations as well as during meals around kitchen tables. As such, scholars within these debates have called for the development of a more reflexive food

politics, one that embraces the messiness of process through which changes to food systems are being made through both self-cultivation and relational initiatives and through advocacy for large-scale policy changes with dramatic potential. Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman (2012) reflect that, “from the more reflexive, non-perfectionist viewpoint, true reform of our food system requires that we muck ourselves up in the imperfection of political contestation over food” (32). Through this process, we advance our ability to interrogate not only what the values that inform an increasingly just and sustainable food system will be, but how and in what context those values are developed.

It is this charge that I assume in this dissertation. I argue that whether or not the process proponents are justified in their celebrations or the systemic policy advocates are prescient in their concerns and critiques; it is critical to understand the varied processes by which people get on board with adopting values and practices aligned with sustainability in food systems. It is necessary to document and understand the processes through which people come to define, care about and act on these issues. As always, the lived experiences of alternative and conventional food systems are messier and more contested than any theoretical bifurcation between them might suggest.

This dissertation, then, examines these processes as everyday social change. By that, I refer to the interactions, efforts, relationships and understandings that emerge within and among people that may generate shifts in food systems. These interactions are not always glamorous or life-changing but nevertheless have much to reveal about the relationship between individual psychology, resistance, collective engagement and social change. In doing so, I examine the processes of self-cultivation and the lengthy and messy ways in which practices related to AFS spread, as well as the broader forces that

shape the ways that they develop. Broad-based policy changes which foster systemic paradigm shifts often necessitate and build upon small-scale groundwork. To build the coalitions of people who will organize for more broad-scale social and policy changes, it is necessary for initiatives to meet people where they are in the moment. This involves a study of both behaviors and actions, the conscious meaning that people give to those actions, and the repercussions that they ascribe to that process. Insights can be derived from the different positions of people in relation to certain initiatives, and from uncovering how these positions influence people's investment in and understandings of both the initiatives themselves and the directions in which they are headed. For this reason, this dissertation seeks to lay out an understanding of these processes through exploration of the variety of initiatives that exist in one corner of Mexico, and understand the contexts that have led to their development. Such an analysis helps to situate broader processes as they manifest within particular places. The specifics of this location will be further explored in the next chapter.

The study of such activities has revealed nuanced understandings of how different class groups confront each other in varied and often invisible ways as people with differing amounts of power and ideological orientations fight over what a society should like or how a certain issue should be addressed. James Scott discussed the difficulty in studying such activities among peasants while acknowledging their potential to affect larger-scale political processes:

Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines. Just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do thousands upon thousands of individual acts of insubordination and evasion create a political or economic barrier reef of their own. There is rarely any dramatic confrontation, any moment that is particularly newsworthy. (Scott 1985, 36)

Despite this, Scott argues that the gradual building of such a reef is an important part of class formation and power distribution within society. Through such processes, groups and individuals struggle over access to resources, visions of justice and the identification of specific goals and targets (Scott 1985). Within this, there are many black boxes, a wide variety of practices and ideas that are challenged, opposed, promoted. Through the study of specific iterations, one encounters both the strategic ends that people are working toward and the strategies that they use in efforts to realize those goals.

To learn about these processes of everyday social change, it is important to answer particular questions, ones that I take up throughout this dissertation. These questions include:

- Who are the supporters of alternative food initiatives in Southern Mexico, particularly in terms of race, class, gender and rural or urban residence?
- What forces have shaped the involvement of producers, consumers, and activists of these alternative food systems?
- What different kinds of knowledge, values and behavior do participants demonstrate, and how do these differ across the participants? What lines of tension or contestation have emerged?
- How are the different actors affected by their participation in alternative food systems and what can this tell us about how such systems may develop?
- Most importantly, what does this mean for the impact that these “alternatives” may have for more sustainable futures?

Understanding how movements toward building sustainable food systems put pressure on leverage points at various scales requires examination of social change patterns at a different, lower and more intimate scale. Improved understanding of the dynamics of these projects is essential and will illuminate connections between large-scale forces, seemingly small-scale responses and the tensions and activities generated when they meet. Understanding these dynamics requires new frames of reference that make space for the diverse processes by which AFS are developed, and through which people come to participate in and support them. To that end, throughout this dissertation I draw on the frameworks of meshwork and engagement ladders as tools to both describe what is happening, and how people make sense of what is happening, in alternative food systems in Mexico.

Meshwork: A Relational Framing of Alternative Food Systems

This dissertation examines the processes by which people make changes in food systems, exploring what alternative food systems are, who participates in them and in what ways, and what this study information may indicate for the development and shape of food systems in the future. This study requires ways of framing and understanding how people and organisms interact with, are formed by and form the environments of which they are a part. To think through this, I draw throughout this dissertation on Tim Ingold's concept of meshwork (Ingold 2011).

Meshwork is a framework for envisioning how organisms, as they move through time and space, become entangled with others. Through such entanglements, organisms move through an existing world and also become the constitution of that world. In

describing meshwork, Ingold shows two drawings of an organism, one is a circle and the other a line. An organism depicted as a circle forces us to see that organism as separate from its surroundings, a bounded entity apart from the world it inhabits. The line, he says, shows the same organism as it moves through time, leaving a “trail of movement or growth... *along* which life is lived” (69). This trail does not have a beginning or end, but winds its way through the environment of which it forms a part. For Ingold, it is the intertwining of these trails that makes up the environment: “each such trail is but one strand in a tissue of trails that together comprise the texture of the lifeworld. This texture is what [Ingold means when speaking of] organisms being constituted in a relational field. It is a field not of interconnected points but of interwoven lines; not a network but a *meshwork*” (Ingold 2011, 69-70, emphasis in original).

This idea of meshwork is a crucial tool I use to understand how individuals, organizations, and initiatives become connected, disperse, change and develop in ways that promote varied forms of engagement with food systems over time. Meshwork provides a way to examine the movement of persons and organizations within the environments that they inhabit, affect and create. The idea of meshwork is grounded in what Ingold terms a “relational constitution of being”: things, like people or organisms, “are their relations” (Ingold 2011, 70). This framing focuses on the connections as pathways actively traveled, rather than simply as a line connecting two or more separate organisms, as such connections are often conceived of in networks.

Meshwork is helpful not only for describing the nature of particular alternative food systems, but for understanding the various ways in which people, projects and initiatives shape each other and are shaped by the environments they create and how this

occurs over time. Rather than thinking of beings as nodes within a network, connected by a line signifying their relation, “organisms and persons, then, [are not] so much nodes in a network [but] knots in a tissue of knots, whose constituent strands, as they become tied up with other strands, in other knots, comprise the meshwork” (Ingold 2011, 70). Ingold argues that separating entities from their relations, from the pathways through which they develop relations, inverts a thing into itself, imagining it to be separate from the relations, histories and actions that have made possible its existence, and through which it is constituted.

AFS, and food systems more generally, encompass many different kinds of environments: ecological, political, social, cultural and economic. Within each of these environments, interactions between people, the foods that they produce and consume, and the processes through which they are connected, are both shaped by and shape the overall landscape. Alternative food systems and their proponents are actively attempting to re-structure the environment – the conditions of possibility – for different types of production, consumption and exchange, towards a goal that is both amorphous and motivating for many people.

For this reason, the meshwork approach offers advantages. First, it allows one to visualize how AFS grow or contract over time, seeing how initiatives develop, how people move within and between them, and how they build on each other. In addition, this framework promotes the theoretical integration of AFS within and as part of broader environments and forces while allowing one to query what particular contexts are amenable or detrimental to the flourishing of such initiatives, and for whom. This framing thus allows one to connect alternative food systems in complex ways to the

larger-scale social processes by which they are shaped and which they may be shaping.

Engagement Ladders: Concretizing Understandings of Social Change

Processes

A meshwork view posits that alternative food systems must be understood as bundles of people and ideas weaving connections and building new webs of relations. It is crucial to look at the ways people engage with the ideologies and practices that underlie the construction of such systems. Polanyi, in examining how social change happens over time, suggests that:

[O]nly when one can point to the group or groups that effected a change is it explained *how* the change has taken place. [The] ultimate cause is set by external forces, and it is *for the mechanism of the change only* that society relies on internal forces. The “challenge” is to society as a whole; the “response” comes through groups, sections and classes. (Polanyi 1957, 159-160, emphasis in original)

I attempt to look at how different people and groups within alternative food systems, and within particular organizations, take on different roles and responsibilities as a means to uncover both the possibilities that AFS present and the limitations that they face.

In order to do this, I use the concept of engagement ladders. I have developed this idea by drawing on contemporary analyses of how organizations use social media and other platforms to interact with their supporters in varied ways (Kanter and Fine 2010). I expand upon this idea by identifying multiple engagement ladders as a way of concretizing understandings of the many ways that people participate in alternative food systems. As we will see, individuals come to and participate in AFS initiatives equipped with varied knowledge, practices and life experience. As such, they engage differently

with the ideas and behaviors promoted within AFS projects. Their capacities and desires to apply and enact specific actions are often not solely reflected in their level of knowledge, implying that their behavior and their ideas are neither co-constitutive nor consistent. Approaching this diversity with engagement ladders allows for an expansive mapping of how people interact with and within alternative food systems, through and between behaviors, ideas and connections that are neither linear nor necessarily progressive. Such an understanding provides a more useful framework as both a descriptive, and potentially strategic, tool for gauging the relationship between knowledge and behavior for varied participants in AFS. By using the idea of engagement ladders throughout the dissertation, I seek to develop a schema that complements the idea of meshwork, allowing scholars to identify means of participation as practical engagements, as well as a *meshworked* viewpoint from which to analyze these engagements.

Categorizing different types of work inherent in building alternative food systems is not new. Stevenson et al. (2007) identified three overlapping but different types of actors: Warriors create opposition to policy that supports corporate dominance. Builders construct and advance alternative food initiatives. Weavers connect people to expand the movement overall. The collective action of these three types of workers can foster alternatives that may grow sufficiently to alter conventional food system practices. As actors who span these groups work together, they generate new understandings, practices and visions for what alternative food systems can and should be. This analysis, while very useful, focuses on groups of actors that are already involved with and committed to the construction of alternative food systems in some form.

Through the use of engagement ladders, I expand these analyses to broader constituencies in the food system, those that may only be lightly engaged with the values, knowledge and behaviors connected to AFS. This framework allows me to examine the varied levels of intensity and connections to AFS practices of different groups of people. I look at how the everyday realities of life over time encourage or discourage people's continued participation in developing and maintaining AFS. Through the application of engagement ladders concepts to greater numbers of people involved in alternative food systems, I seek to add to understandings of different manners of connecting with and to AFS and to develop both a descriptive and strategic tool for AFS scholars and practitioners.

An Ethnography of Everyday Social Change

Gauging the impact of alternative food provisioning systems requires on-the-ground interaction with participants. The potential of regional food economies, shortened supply chains and alternate consumer practice as means of addressing agricultural crises have been taken up extensively by rural sociologists. Many of these studies focus on the US and Europe (Goodman 2004). In developing countries, many studies of AFS focus on responses to food system globalization such as anti-GMO and food sovereignty movements rather than on the emergence of consciously-created producer-consumer networks or the building of markets for "alternative" products in these settings (Fitting 2011, Desmarais 2006).

The contributions of anthropological analysis and ethnographic approaches to studies of AFS are clear. Jaffee's (2007) ethnography of fair trade coffee producers in

Mexico and Besky's (2013) study of workers on Indian tea plantations have fruitfully explored the contested nature of justice and value that emerges within alternative trade initiatives, using anthropological lenses to reveal the lived experience of producers and consumers. Both Jaffee and Besky were able to uncover both achievements and tensions of fair trade certification practices through on the ground engagement with the communities participating. Jaffee found that fair trade certifications did make a significant difference not only for coffee farming families directly involved in fair trade networks, but by increasing employment through demand for day laborers and by increasing cash earnings within communities. Among coffee farmers, Jaffee found a strong identity among "organic coffee farmers" that included indigenous knowledge practices in combination with techniques introduced from outside, altering the way that coffee was grown both on and off organic parcels. These effects may have been captured through other methods, though the emerging identity aspects may have been missed without such ethnographic inquiry.

In her work among Darjeeling tea plantation workers, Besky uses ethnography to reveal many disconnects between the representations of justice and fairness presented in fair trade marketing and the lived experience of life on a plantation. Her analysis, which looks at how fair trade's "one-size-fits-all" certification for tea plantations actually undercuts existing Darjeeling labor laws, allowing plantation owners to pocket premiums rather than make improvements that existing labor laws require. In undermining existing legal structures, fair trade certification does not succeed in making life on the plantation more just in the eyes of workers even as it legitimizes the portrayal of ethical consumption to consumers in other countries. These insights, garnered through long-term

ethnographic engagement, help to show how context specific the effects of AFS are and can be. Specific contexts produce certain tensions that reveal both achievements and limitations of AFS.

This project continues this vein of inquiry through an exploration of the nature of alternative food systems in San Cristóbal de las Casas. By examining the relations, visions and behaviors that come to exist between consumers and producers, restaurant patrons and community organizers and people engaged in communal effort, I show how notions of sustainability are negotiated between different groups and people. This allows for an improved understanding of what alternative food systems are; what relations are enabled by the organizations and initiatives that people participate in, the diverse ways that they engage them entails considering how people interact, and how they think about and conceive of those relations.

Through ethnographic research, this dissertation explores the connections and contradictions between and within stated beliefs and actions, exploring ways that AFS may contest and conform to existing practices and evaluate ways in which these initiatives (re)shape food systems and participants themselves. Inherently, these changes are always in process, not finished products or processes that can be separated from the contexts in which they are being created (Gibson-Graham 2006). As such, within this dissertation, I draw on the idea of meshwork to examine the processes through which connections are made, and ideas and actions are furthered or abandoned. I use engagement ladders to contemplate which persons decide to participate or not in this particular context. Understanding the channels through which people engage with the

ideas and practices of AFS on a daily basis is an important element of any conversation about the movement toward sustainable agriculture futures.

Organization of the Dissertation

In the following chapters, I focus on the actors located in Chiapas who participate in wide-ranging ways in a diverse food system. By examining the knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of different actors, it becomes possible to see how place-based processes are influenced by global phenomena and how the structures of daily life both impede and enhance people's ability to experiment with their livelihoods, as well as the power of different kinds of social organization to bring people together in varied ways. Through the analysis of AFS using meshwork and engagement ladders, I will show that people's participation with these initiatives lie along continuums rather than at ends of polarly distinct behaviors and beliefs. Ideas about the value of "local" maize, its role as a cultural icon, and of food as a tool of resistance, are actively shaped by global discourses on genetic modification and cultural sovereignty. The same farmers that produce food for organic markets from heirloom seeds for example, also drink Coca-Cola and rejoice that they can buy cheap plastic sandals that are manufactured in China. Through the examination of these seeming contradictions, there are insights about the development and nature of social change in food systems.

Chapter 2 lays out a brief history of the case study host organization, Mujeres y Maíz, as well as some context of alternative food systems in Mexico and Chiapas. In addition, I address the methodology used in collecting and analyzing the data that is the basis of this project. Chapter 3 explores the diversity of the current economic landscape by examining where and how women involved in Mujeres y Maíz currently sell

handmade tortillas and recounts a brief history of maize and tortillas in Mexico. Chapter 4 looks at *Mujeres y Maíz* within the broader context of alternative food networks in San Cristóbal, situating it within the meshwork that shapes collaboration in the city and within historical currents that help make San Cristóbal such an active place for competing food systems. Chapter 5 examines the work of *Mujeres y Maíz* as an organization, looking at the successes and tensions that emerge from working across existing boundaries between members of the organization. Chapter 6 looks at the varied themes expressed by a cross section of consumers at a MyM-run restaurant regarding food choices and food systems and explores how these understandings shape consumer's everyday lives. Lastly, the conclusion looks at how understanding the varied processes of social change that occur at different scales within food systems necessitates an appreciation and understanding of the range of activities and approaches of alternative food systems.

Through these analyses, this dissertation centers on the diverse lived experience of people engaged in alternative food systems in and around San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. Their questions and struggles are not theirs alone. Rather, the journeys presented here reflect similar issues across the world that arise as people build alternative means of functioning that they conceive will move in the direction of more sustainable futures. Baker frames these journeys thusly:

As local food movements and markets firmly take root in communities across the globe, scholars, activists and entrepreneurs are looking for new models and stories about the ways alternatives are being developed... thorny issues [are] emerging from the theory and practice of food system relocalization: the ways these initiatives intersect with broader policy processes; how they address issues of scale; the possibilities for (and limitations of) expanded notions of the economy; how to create organizational structures that embed food and farming in

appropriate ecological, cultural, social, and economic systems; and how to take into consideration the agency of diverse actors, both human and nonhuman. (Baker 2013, 4-5)

The life of Fátima, and the people with whom she interacts through her membership in *Mujeres y Maíz*, is one of these stories. Through the tale of this organization, we examine and encounter the diversity of food systems and locations of exchange in San Cristóbal, innovative events and workshops, and examples of the varied types of investment entailed in building coalition around food. By bringing abstract questions about the change in the nature of food systems down to the level of individual interactions and histories, this dissertation shows how the idea and reality of global, conventional food systems shape and are shaped by the alternatives that people construct and deconstruct through everyday actions. Over the course of the following chapters, we explore the broad landscapes in which they take place, trends and facets of the particular environments that have shaped the initiatives and their participants and the varied ways that people interact. May the recounting serve scholars and practitioners in search of such stories.

Chapter 2 : Mexico, Maize and Mujeres: Background and Methods for an Ethnography of Everyday Social Change

In Mexico, it is common for industrial tortilla stores, *tortillerías*, to employ young men to drive around on motorcycles selling tortillas made from Maseca, the rehydrated corn flour from which most tortillas are made. Each motorcycle is outfitted with a box on the back into which one kilo portions of tortillas wrapped in paper are placed. The *motos* then head out sputtering to different neighborhoods and rural towns, along dirt roads where the only shops have small collections of sweets and soft drinks for sale in the front room of long-time village residents. Often, these are areas where people still grow their own maize, and for whom the purchase of tortillas would be a large daily expense. Most people still make tortillas at home. Still, increasingly, the moto comes two or three times a day in search of customers.

An anthropologist told me a story about one of these tortilla deliverymen. This anthropologist and his wife, who live in San Cristóbal, have a few acres on which they grow native maize varieties and other produce. These acres are outside of town, far from any corner store *tortillería*. One day, a moto showed up at the gate, and the anthropologist happened to be walking by. The young man asked if he would like to buy any tortillas. Looking over his maize, the anthropologist politely said no, he was growing maize to make tortillas at home.

“This is exactly what we are trying to get rid of with these deliveries,” the tortilla deliveryman replied, his engine sputtering along. “It’s easiest to buy tortillas. Why spend your time growing all this maize?” The anthropologist replied that this was different

maize, and part of a bigger agricultural system. The young man replied something to the effect of, “Well, you can’t keep this up forever. We’ll be coming out here more and more.”

Though this story is based on an actual experience, it sounds apocryphal. It is the embodiment of the competition that many perceive to exist between conventional, industrial food systems, and the smaller-scale systems that have long been the backbone of agricultural production. The competition between these systems as a path to greater prosperity is based on the contestation of the idea that there is and has been a single trajectory on which food systems, and society in general, have and should move. These ideas stem from modernization theory, which posits that advanced societies can and must move away from agriculture towards industrialization and mass consumption as the basis of social organization (Rostow 2000).

Mexico is often cited as a *mestizo* country, one of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage. Ideas of what it means to be modern and developed have long been shaped by competition and conflict around how the nation’s indigenous people should and can shape its future (Mallon 1995). Chiapas, which is home to 13.5% of the country’s indigenous population, more than a third of the population speaks an indigenous language as their first language (INEGI 2010b), has occupied a unique space. The indigenous population and varied terrain is a challenge for many national development visions. Study and innovation juxtaposed to neglect of Chiapas within national modernization agendas have fostered Chiapas’ evolution as a center of alternative development discourse. Chiapas has emerged as a prominent location for studies of indigenous agricultural systems and agroecology and also as an epicenter of indigenous rights and autonomy

movements that have captured global attention. Indigenous communities that have continued to grow food have also maintained maize production. The convergence of these factors shapes food systems and discourse in San Cristóbal in ways that cut across ethnic and class lines in some ways and recreate them in others. Within this context, the study of maize and agriculture as a vector for alternative approaches to what it means to be modern is particularly fruitful. This chapter explores this history, before delving into the methods through which the data for this dissertation were collected.

San Cristóbal de las Casas: An Alternative Center

San Cristóbal is the cultural capital of Chiapas, the southeasternmost state in Mexico. In many ways, Chiapas is considered impoverished by the standards of modernization. Chiapas is the poorest of Mexico's 37 states; 76.2% of the population lives below the poverty line (CONEVAL 2015). More than 56% of the population subsist on less than the nationally set minimum wage determined to meet the basic needs of a family (Hudson and Hudson 2004). The state is home to 4.3% of the national population, but more than 10% of its agricultural workforce. According to national agricultural census data, 41% of farmers in Chiapas are smallholders with five hectares or less (INEGI 2010a). The state contributes only 1.8% of the national GDP (INEGI 2015).

However, in terms of a postmodernist definition, one in which varied visions of life, social organization, and sustainability are being explored, Chiapas and San Cristóbal are locations of immense richness (Nash 1997a). San Cristóbal boasts “a rich ethnic and cultural mix and a strong anti-establishment streak. Sure, there's a Burger King across the street from Revolución Café, but San Cristóbal still manages to feel like an off-the-

beaten-path destination, a place that exudes beauty and intelligence in equal measure" (Moon Handbook Chiapas, 2010). It is common to hear several of Mexico's sixty-two nationally-recognized indigenous languages spoken when walking down the street. The streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas are lined with brightly colored houses, their doors framed by large, weather-worn wooden beams and bougainvillea vines. Cobbled streets border tree-lined plazas where grilled corn on the cob is sold on the street across from the French-style bakery and it is as common to see women in traditional indigenous dress as it is to see backpacker tourists with dreadlocks. Famous Mayan ruins like Palenque are reachable in a day's bus ride. It is home to important cultural centers and universities. Located in the heart of the mountains in a pine forest at 7,200 feet above sea level, the city was founded by the Spanish in 1528. It was the state capital of Chiapas from its integration into Mexico in 1824 until the end of the 19th century, and it continues to be publicized in guidebooks and by many *Chiapanecos*, people from Chiapas, as the cultural capital of the state, "a place where ancient customs coexist with modern luxuries" (Lonely Planet, 2007).

San Cristóbal has changed drastically over the past fifty years, going from a fairly small and relatively isolated town to a bustling tourist center. The population of approximately 200,000 is an exponential increase; up from 116,000 as recently as 1995, and up from 17,500 in the 1950 census (Van den Berghe 1994). People from all over the world flock to this beautiful mountain town to experience "traditional" cultures and cultural activities. Touted as a great base for tourist exploration of indigenous villages in the region, San Cristóbal has become an on-the-map mecca for many travelers that want to feel like they are getting into "real" Mexico (Van den Berghe 1994).

The perception of the city as part of "real" Mexico is often tied to the large number of indigenous people that live in Chiapas. According to the 2010 census, some 1.2 million of the state's 3.2 million inhabitants spoke an indigenous language, and more than 400,000 people did not speak Spanish (INEGI 2010b). Almost one in eight indigenous Mexicans lives in the state. Major ethnic groups include Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol, and many others. Two of the most popular day trips from town are to San Juan Chamula, famous for its brightly colored Catholic church where Coca-Cola is used in ceremonies and where pine needles are spread over the floor. Zinacantán, another nearby town and tourist destination, is home to flower growers who also wear brightly colored tops that are available for sale to tourists (Cancian 1992). It is common to hear languages other than Spanish on the streets, and a word or two uttered in the midst of bargaining in Tzotzil or Tzeltal will usually garner at least a smile from vendors in the market.

Since 1994, San Cristóbal de las Casas has also been on the international map as a center of anti-globalization movements. On January 1 of that year the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) took over the city in an uprising that coincided with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). NAFTA was framed as the epitome of neoliberal globalization focused on free trade as a path to prosperity, but which increased the vulnerability of indigenous people, small-scale farmers and others to dispossession and abandonment from the state (Brass 2005). The EZLN called for increased autonomy for Mexico's indigenous people, but also for access to land, just wages, schools and medical services (Nash 1995). EZLN communications projected a new vision of autonomy and democracy as they could pertain to indigenous and marginalized people in a postmodern context, one that was based in a long tradition

of pluriethnic and pluricultural communities as an alternative to the type of modernization grounded in a neoliberal capitalism that privileges de-regulated market relations (Nash 1997a, b). The EZLN occupation was seen as a grassroots call to return to traditional culture and community authority and to turn against neoliberal capitalism (Brass 2005), one that spoke to activists and sympathizers in many parts of the world.

In San Cristóbal, these incongruities bring to light contradictions, tensions, and flows of ideas within a particular alternative food system. In this place, the meeting of peasant agriculture, international tourism, indigenous resistance and neoliberal commoditization leads to generative and contradictory connections surrounding food systems.

Competing Visions of Mexican Agriculture: Situating Chiapas

Mexico has long maintained coexistence between industrial and small-scale agriculture. The tension resulting from the push for agricultural modernization and the continuance of small-scale farms is integrally woven into the social fabric. Chiapas' large indigenous population and smallholding agricultural communities have contributed to its evolution as a center of alternative visions for the role of agriculture as an engine of development and definitions of what modern societies can and should look like.

With its mountainous and difficult terrain and largely indigenous population, Chiapas was historically low on the list of national priorities for economic development. During the Colonial Period, Chiapas was a site of precious metals but lacked an outlet to the sea, and remained distant from the main routes of commerce in the Spanish empire (Gall 1994). These qualities failed to draw in a large percentage of Spanish or mestizo

inhabitants. The region's economy came to be peripheral, subordinate and based on agriculture – cocoa, indigo, cochineal, sugar, wheat, leather and livestock. The distance from Mexico City and the absence of mines favored marginalization of the majority indigenous area (Gall 1994). These factors contributed to a lack of federal development investment. The railroads and industry promised to the nation during the Porfiriato in the late 19th century and modernization of the mid-20th century largely left highland Chiapas to itself, focusing more on the coastal lowlands (Van den Berghe 1994).

Through the 19th century, much of the land in Mexico was held either in *latifundios* or *haciendas*, very large landholdings, or in *minifundios*, small plots that generally were too small to maintain families living on them (Thiesenhusen 1995). By 1910, over 90% of the rural population was landless and only 15% of indigenous communities held onto previously communally-owned lands (Sonnenfeld 1992). In Mexico, the hacienda system was built on a bifurcated labor system, where indigenous people either lived and worked on the hacienda or were dependent upon it as wage laborers living in surrounding communities (Wolf 1969). In Chiapas, an emerging coffee industry was enmeshed in the hacienda system, in which land ownership was often concentrated in the hands of foreign capital. During the reign of Porfirio Diaz at the end of the 19th century, more than 40% of land in Chiapas was held by foreign owners, displacing thousands of indigenous people who were brought into work as day laborers on large-scale coffee plantations (Hudson and Hudson 2004). Within this system, access to land provided a portion of peasants options for subsistence outside of the haciendas but was insufficient to meet most people's needs (Wolf 1969).

The hacienda conditions produced roiling discontent across Mexico, contributing

to movements that sought to re-prioritize smallholders as members of the nation. By the early 20th century, tensions surrounding the system and its impact on social structure and access to resources led to serious challenges to the Mexican state. Peasant farmers were key players in the Mexican Revolution of 1910, rallying behind the cry of peasant leader Emiliano Zapata, “*Tierra y libertad*” (Land and liberty). This motto reflected a commitment to the redistribution of property held by large landowners under the government of Porfirio Díaz to peasant farmers around the country (Womack 2011). This commitment was guaranteed by Article 27 in the Constitution of 1917, which made the Mexican people the owners of all land, water and mineral rights, and allowed the government to redistribute land from large landowners to agrarian communities (Kelly 1994). This amendment codified the *ejido* land tenure system, through which communal lands taken from *haciendas* were granted to townships and the right to work specific parcels was disseminated to community members (Pérez 2003).

Land reform movements under the government of Lazaro Cardenas returned many peasants to land ownership, paving the way for the renewal of small-scale production (Cornelius and Myhre 1998). During the 1930s, Cardenas allocated more than 18 million hectares of land which were distributed to 814,537 peasants, exceeding the amount of land distributed by all his predecessors (Dorner 1992). This system of land tenure, in which property could not be bought or sold, became an organizing principle of social and political structures in many rural Mexican communities, and sought to ensure that peasants had access to productive territory (Cornelius and Myhre 1998). By the early 1990s, 54% of Mexican national territory was held in *ejido* lands and indigenous communities (Stephen 1994).

Despite these achievements by Mexican peasants, the role of smallholders as engines of development continued to be contested. Mexico became the seat of the original Green Revolution (Perkins 1990). In the 1940s, scientists supported by the Rockefeller Foundation endeavored to solve the issues of world hunger by working to increase the yield of staple goods that a farmer could produce (Pilcher 1998). The Green Revolution focused on technological innovation as the means to boost production, promoting the use of high-yield seed varieties, increased mechanization, irrigation and the use of fertilizers and pesticides among small-scale farmers across Latin America and Asia (Sonnenfeld 1992). The Green Revolution approach was both challenged and adopted by small-scale farmers around the country. These technological packages favored large-scale agribusinesses due to their necessary high capital investment, though the seeds and fertilizers were also often shared with small-scale subsistence farmers, thus drawing them into monetized agricultural cycles that required the regular purchase of fertilizers, pesticides and other inputs produced elsewhere (Warman 2003). These innovations increased Mexico's food production between the 1940s and the 1960s; but such advancements dropped off in the 1960s, leading many to challenge the viability of Green Revolution technology for ensuring food security among small-scale farmers (Barkin 1987).

In Chiapas, many indigenous communities continued to practice small-scale, labor intensive agriculture that often did not align well with modernist, technologically-oriented, Green Revolution approaches. Many of these smaller-scale systems have been maligned as inefficient and environmentally unsound (Netting 1993). In the latter part of the century, this contributed to systemic neglect of smallholders on the part of much of

the Mexican state (Fox and Haight 2010). Ninety percent of Chiapas' farmers have 20 hectares or less (INEGI 2010a)

However, in Chiapas, the maintenance of these systems among indigenous farmers contributed to studies of indigenous practices that have shown that the narrative of the destructive indigenous farmer is misplaced. This has led to the emergence of Chiapas as an important center of study and recognition of the potential of alternative forms of agricultural production in contributing to human well-being and environmental sustainability. In the Lacandón jungle in Chiapas, for instance, centuries-old strategies of the Maya have produced sustained-yield food production in a rainforest environment in a manner compatible with the way that the forest regenerates and is preserved (Ford and Nigh 2015). These small-scale techniques are better able to make use of the diversity and abundance of tropical ecosystems than large-scale commercial agriculture. Both contemporary practices and the archeological record to show how Mayan farmers adapted to changes in climate to continue producing vast amounts of food in regenerative forest gardens that outpace the productivity in conventional, industrial agriculture (Ford and Nigh 2015, Altieri and Toledo 2011, Altieri, Rosset, and Thrupp 1998).

The history of these practices certainly extends beyond their study, but over the course of the 20th century, a portion of Mexican and international scholars found inspiration in these systems, leading to the development of Southern Mexico as a center for the study of small scale agriculture rooted in agroecology (Astier et al. 2017). Practitioners often identify agroecology as a set of practices as well as a science. The science of agroecology applies ecological science to the study, design and maintenance of sustainable agroecosystems (Altieri 2002). The practices, many piloted and undertaken in

Chiapas, include moving farms toward crop diversification in order to promote synergistic and beneficial biological interactions leading to improvements in soil fertility, productivity and crop protection (Altieri 2002). Agroecological initiatives:

aim at transforming industrial agriculture partly by transitioning the existing food systems away from fossil fuel-based production largely for agroexport crops and biofuels towards an alternative agricultural paradigm that encourages local/national food production by small and family farmers based on local innovation, resources and solar energy. (Altieri and Toledo 2011)

Agroecological approaches diverge from most federally supported agricultural programs and funding in Mexico (Astier et al. 2017). This makes agroecological approaches impossible to mandate through a top-down structure and emphasizes enhancing the capability of community-based initiatives to develop innovations through grassroots extension services and farmer-to-farmer connections (Rosset et al. 2011). Embedded in the concept of agroecology is a focus on diversity, synergy, integration, and social processes as key to increasing options for rural people and resource-poor farmers (Holt-Giménez 2006). Within this context, agroecological approaches, championed in academic and applied research as well as international and local development initiatives in Chiapas, stress community oriented approaches that meet the subsistence needs of community members.

These approaches clash with industrially-based modernization of Mexican agriculture. Landscapes and socio-historical factors have resulted in a dramatic divergence in farm size and productivity in different regions compounded by an unequal distribution of agricultural investment; the northern states continue to be characterized by larger-scale, monocrop corporate farms for export while the southern states have a much higher concentration of small-scale farmers (Fox and Haight 2010, De Janvry 1981).

Many smallholders have not benefitted much from Mexican agricultural development policies, which have tended to use social welfare programs rather than agricultural development funding to address issues in rural, smallholder communities (Fox and Haight 2010).

Such policies have led to increased migration from rural communities in Mexico (Browning 2010, Rees 2006). External pressures and changing economic circumstances have forced indigenous and rural Mexicans increasingly to depend on salaried work instead of and in addition to subsistence agriculture. This has increasingly required them to migrate to lands further and further away – Quintana Roo, Yucatan, Tabasco, as well as cities like San Cristóbal and Tuxtla Gutierrez – in search of work that pays at least the minimum wage (Cancian 1992, Re Cruz 1996). Chiapas moved from being ranked last in receipt of family remittances from abroad in 1990 (Solis, 2005) to 11th in 2004 and 14th in 2013 of 37 states (Bancomer 2014). These statistics support the assertion that it is increasingly difficult for small-scale farmers to maintain subsistence production and rural lifeways in the face of neoliberal economic policies and the commodification of food production. These trends are detrimental to the maintenance of agroecological systems, which are knowledge-intensive and dependent upon farmer experimentation and adaptation (Altieri 2002). As farmers leave their farms in search of economic opportunity elsewhere, this knowledge base and practice is displaced.

The convergence of these models – a mechanized, industrial, export-oriented food production system along with the maintenance of tens of thousands of small-scale, subsistence-oriented farmers – is fertile ground for studying the tensions created as these streams coexist and compete with each other. These streams reveal contrasting schools of

thought regarding the nature of agricultural production as a path to economic prosperity in Mexico. The first demonstrates a commitment to a modernization paradigm through which Mexico will develop through the use of agricultural technology and the capitalization of larger industrial farms. The second rests more firmly on the preservation of small-scale agriculture as an integral foundation for a prosperous, healthy and independent nation. Within Mexico, Chiapas occupies an important locale in the study of how people negotiate what sustainable agriculture is and means due to its being a center of the study of agroecology and indigenous production systems.

Contemporary Responses to Agricultural Industrialization in Mexico

The pursuit of agricultural trade liberalization as a path to economic development has had mixed results for Mexicans. Much of the redistribution achieved in the 20th century has been undercut in recent decades. The restructuring of Mexico's communal *ejido* land tenure system, which occurred multiple times during the 20th century, usually moved resources away from small-scale farmers, forcing their entry into the industrial economy (Pilcher 1998). In 1991, this restructuring was codified in the amendment of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution of 1917. The overhaul of Article 27 allowed peasant holders of communally held land to mortgage, rent and sell their plots. Coinciding with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the 1990s, this change prompted a large-scale transfer of rural land ownership away from small-holder farmers (Cornelius and Myhre 1998). In addition, the inclusion of agricultural goods in NAFTA, a first for free trade agreements, has had a large impact on Mexican maize farmers. The influx of subsidized commodity corn from

the United States under NAFTA has contributed to a decline in corn cultivation as a viable livelihood (McMichael 2007, Browning 2010), particularly in indigenous communities (Fox and Haight 2010). These policy changes contributed to very high rural outmigration, particularly from southern parts of Mexico that relied heavily on subsistence peasant agriculture (Rees 2006, Cornelius 2009).

Mexicans in many social positions have reacted strongly to these shifts, which have had concrete negative effects for rural Mexicans and for small-scale farmers. Peasant organizations throughout the country have mobilized against neoliberal reforms that threaten peasant livelihoods. These movements draw on the legacy of the rural peasants of the Revolution of 1910, who positioned themselves as the heart and soul of the nation, a nation that needed to be challenged and fought for (Fitting 2011, Boyer 2003). Through reforms like Article 27, peasants helped to cement a position for themselves and their lifeways as foundational to a prosperous and just Mexico in which land is allocated to those who work it (Cornelius and Myhre 1998). Smallholders like those in control of ejido parcels have long occupied a powerful place in the Mexican national imaginary and hold an important though contested status as a central element of the national economy (Kelly 1994). Both peasant and other movements in the past couple of generations show the continued tension between visions of Mexico and its place in the world.

Many Mexican farmers are members of movements like *Vía Campesina*, which champions the rights of farmers to maintain control over production under the framework of food sovereignty (Borras, Edelman, and Kay 2008) as a means of challenging neoliberal economic reforms (Wise, Salazar, and Carlsen 2003). Since the early 2000s,

many Mexicans have been organizing “In Defense of Maize” and in opposition to global trends reshaping the landscape and livelihoods built on Mexico’s staple food crop (Baker 2013). The discovery of transgenic corn in Oaxaca in 2001 prompted widely publicized street demonstrations and organized responses from peasant and urban groups, and contributed to the emergence of new national and international organizations committed to protecting Mexico’s maize stock (Fitting 2011). Organizations like ANEC, a cooperative of Mexican grain growers, draw on the Revolutionary rhetoric of the 1910 Zapatista Rebellion to garner support, coining the now famous phrase “Sin Maíz No Hay País” (No Corn, No Country) (Mann 2011).

In Chiapas and San Cristóbal de las Casas in particular, the current of Zapatismo has added an international element to these discourses, complicating the relationship between a supposedly local or Mexican response to globalizing forces. The EZLN uprising in 1994 is but one in a long history of indigenous self-organization in the region (Nash 1995), but garnered unprecedented international attention for peasant demands that had long been simmering and articulated those to a broader global audience. Paradoxically, many of these demands were made using the same technological advances and new media that had promoted the neoliberal capital expansion they decried to advance their anti-globalization demands (Martinez-Torres 2001). The

Figure 2.1 Artwork featuring the Zapatistas, like this postcard by Beatriz Aurora, is common on the streets and in shops in San Cristóbal de las Casas. Used with permission.



EZLN became one of the first groups to use the Internet as a means of disseminating demands and building public support by communicating with allies across the globe (Knudson 1998).

In response to the perceived threat of NAFTA, the EZLN called not only for land redistribution and protection against privatization, but also for access to the credit, technology and skills they deemed necessary to enable them to better determine their own destiny. Such demands were pitted against what was seen as a modernizing, neoliberal, capitalist project threatening indigenous lifeways. Communications from the group focused on projecting a new vision of autonomy and democracy as they could pertain to indigenous and marginalized people (Nash 1997b: 42). The EZLN occupation was seen as a grassroots call to return to traditional culture and community authority and against neoliberal capitalism (Brass 2005).

This rhetoric of the Zapatistas, as well as academic analyses of indigenous lifeways including those focused on agroecology mentioned above, drew on a long tradition of pluriethnic and pluricultural communities to present an alternative to neoliberal modernization (Nash 1997a). It succeeded in drawing international attention to and solidarity with visions of a “different world,” people interested in learning about and being part of solidarity economies, resistance to capitalism, and a commitment to “a world where many worlds fit” (see Figure 2.1). Although many of the demands made by Zapatista communications focused on the domestic sphere in Mexico, they resonated with similar initiatives in other parts of the world. The Catholic Church and the Diocese of San Cristóbal collaborated and aided with negotiations between the state and the EZLN, drawing on tenets of liberation theology (Harvey 1998). In many contexts, the uprising

was hailed favorably as a new social movement, cause for celebration in international circles (Brass 2005). Zapatismo was an important reference point for the anti-globalization protests that occurred at the Seattle, Washington meeting of the World Trade Organization in 1999 (Rovira 2015). The demands and vision put forth by the Zapatistas in Chiapas have been taken up as part of a rhizome of networks “that conceive of themselves, despite their thematic or geographic specificities, as not only circumscribed to the local or national sphere, but as part of a greater, a ‘global’ struggle” (Rovira 2015, 114).

Within this context, San Cristóbal has become a location of interest for people desirous of living out “alternatives,” albeit people with different logics, experiences and commitments. Poor indigenous Mexicans walk along the street in the city center next to highly educated expatriates who call San Cristóbal home. Backpacker tourists and hippie travelers hawk homemade jewelry on the streets, peddle songs in English or work part time in Spanish tapas bars in the pedestrian center. These discourses have contributed to the development of “zapatourism,” a particular kind of visitor often focused on solidarity tourism often linked to indigenous villages (Berg 2008). People interested in the currencies are spent in Zapatista coop shops by tourists who take advantage of low cost flights paradoxically facilitated by the neoliberal economic policies that decrease state regulation of aviation (Schlumberger and Weisskopf 2014). The reality that highland Chiapas is ever easier to reach, more visible, and also inhabited by many people seeking to engage with “radical democracy” and pluriethnic values, has turned San Cristóbal into a relative mecca for individuals looking to experience alternatives, a new iteration of the hippies from the 1970s. Politically progressive indigenous Mexicans and indigenous,

evangelical Christians who have been excommunicated from neighboring cities all walk the same streets (Kovic 2005). Ladinos and mestizos from other parts of Mexico who have moved to San Cristóbal for both its natural beauty, to attend university and pursue courses of study like sustainable development, choose to stay in the region that many see as vastly different from their homes in other parts of the country.

These varied currents in San Cristóbal contribute to discourses of alternative development that influence and inform a wide variety of responses to agricultural industrialization in Mexico. Mexico is home to active peasant movements decrying the results and future of neoliberal economic reforms and its effects on local economies, biodiversity and health. It is a middle income country and destination for international tourism in which models of neoliberal consumer development are expanding. These currents contribute to making San Cristóbal and Chiapas offer a unique context in which to analyze changing food system dynamics.

Maize as a Vector for Exploring Food Systems

In Mexico, maize is a primary locus for the negotiation of the social, economic and political ramifications of conventional and alternative food systems. Maize is a potent cultural symbol, a foundation of livelihoods and the subject of intense social and political debate.

Cosmologically, maize is literally the stuff of life among indigenous populations in the country. In the Mayan creation myth, *Popol Vuh*, the Gods attempt four times to make men with varying materials, from mud and earth to wood, before settling on creatures made of maize (Recinos 2011). Two twin brothers, the progenitors of humanity,

made of maize, are the heroes of this story, demonstrating the critical role that maize has played in Mexican cosmology. In line with this creation story, it is common to hear some Mexicans refer to themselves as “people of maize” (Pilcher 1998).

Maize is at the foundation of Mexico’s historical, agricultural systems. It was here that between 8,000 and 10,000 years ago humans cross bred *teosinte*, a tiny grass with hard kernels, into the large-eared corn that is familiar in many parts of the world today (Wilkes 1989). The combination of maize, beans and squash cultivation practiced by indigenous Mesoamericans for centuries, the *milpa* is a cultural institution, heralded for the innovative ecological feedback loops that this crop combination enables (Ford and Nigh 2015). Through the joint cultivation of these crops, Mesoamerican farmers have long created fields that are both environmentally and nutritionally complementary; for instance, while the maize grows tall, the bean plants climb up the maize and also replenish necessary nitrogen in the soil (Baker 2013, Mann 2004). Maintaining and refining milpa systems has long been a foundational construct for farmers across Mesoamerica (Re Cruz 1996). Similarly, the combination of maize soaked with lime affects the relative ratios of amino acids, calcium and other proteins available for human digestion, thereby supplying the basis for a millennia old healthy and sustainable Mesoamerican diet (Katz, Hediger, and Valleroy 1974). Maize is an integral part of Mexican culture agriculturally, culinarily and nutritionally.

Maize is the subject of intense sociocultural, economic and ecological debate (Fitting 2006). Through the 19th and early 20th centuries, the “Tortilla Discourse” in Mexico was used by elites to connect the consumption of maize to perceived national maladies; corn was thought to be nutritionally poor in comparison to the wheat favored

by elites of mixed and Spanish descent (Pilcher 1998). In this context, the indigenous foodways that were centered on maize as well as the maize themselves became signs of Mexico's failure to progress as a modern nation (Pilcher 1998, Baker 2013). Such arguments contributed to large-scale investments in technology to mechanize tortilla production to increase the industrial labor pool and move Mexicans to eat different foods like wheat bread (Pilcher 1998, Ochoa 2000).

The rejection of this negative framing of Mexico's staple crop gained ground in the 1930s and 1940s as part of Mexico's *indigenista* movement (Pilcher 1998). Following the Revolution in 1910, many currents in Mexican society moved away from European tenets toward a reconceptualization of the nation that emphasized Mexico's indigenous heritage. *Indigenismo* centered on a valuation of indigenous lifeways and move away from Europeanization as the ideal. This movement was represented in various facets of Mexican society. Murals and paintings by renowned artists Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo and others portrayed the difficult lives of dignified Mexican peasants, attempting to demonstrate the ways that these citizens contributed to and shaped the nation (Pilcher 1998).

The movement reoriented the attention to indigenous foods like maize, which began to be accepted and adopted as part of the emerging national cuisine. *Indigenismo* as a cultural movement was coupled with such a focus academically. It led many Mexican and international anthropologists and social scientists to focus on the valorization of Mexico's indigenous history and patronage through the study of indigenous groups. In 1948, the National Indigenous Institute (INI) was founded, and quickly came to Chiapas. San Cristóbal was selected as one of the cities to host a regional

coordinating center. The Harvard Chiapas Project focused on basic ethnography and the study of cultural change of the region's indigenous people for more than half a century beginning in 1957 (Vogt 2002). These same projects informed studies of agroecology cited previously in this chapter. Oral histories and studies of indigenous groups catalogued food traditions that gained respect. Cookbooks and cultural figures began to tout tortillas and tamales as definers of Mexican identity, and postrevolutionary governments supported these harmony-inducing revaluations of indigenous foods as a means of reducing class antagonism (Pilcher 1998).

Such acceptance of certain foods however did not signal the end of class and ethnic oppression in Mexico. *Indigenismo* was not divorced from the integration of indigenous Mexicans into a modernizing, national cultural project. Although INI anthropologists were trained in programs that espoused cultural relativism, this perspective did not align with the nationalistic ideology of *mestizaje-indigenismo*, which ultimately proved to have strong racist overtones focused on cultural homogenization rather than the cultivation of pluriethnic and pluricultural communities (Bonfil Batalla 1987). Many of its projects focused on the diffusion of services like Spanish-language education, health programs, industrial farming techniques, artisan goods for sale to tourists, and increased economic integration of indigenous regions into national and international markets (Gonzalez 2004).

The incorporation of indigenous communities into the regional and national economy attempted to end the isolation of many villages, but had the additional effect of ending their economic self-sufficiency. This led some INI anthropologists away from many of Mexico's national universities and into regions where they felt better connected

to many of the applied issues facing rural and indigenous Mexican communities (Gonzalez, Personal Communication, 2014). To better address these issues, many scholars participated in the development of new institutions of higher education in Chiapas, including institutions like ECOSUR, the UNICH, the Intercultural University of Chiapas, the Unitierra, contributing to the study of subjects like agroecology for which the region is known. Throughout, as explored above, the role of agriculture and of maize in particular maintained an important place.

The relationship between the cultural heritage, livelihoods, and environmental impacts came to the fore in the early 2000s around the genetic modification of maize. In 2001, researchers discovered genetic material thought to be from modified *Bt* maize in the Oaxacan countryside (Quist and Chapela 2001). The contamination of Mexico's maize stock with genetically modified maize was a shock, given that the Mexican government had placed a *de facto* moratorium on its planting in 1998. A coalition of indigenous and environmental groups demanded that NAFTA's Commission on Environmental Cooperation (CEC) be tasked with completing an assessment of the risks of importing and growing transgenic maize in Mexico (McAfee 2008). Following lively public hearings, the scientists and officials writing the report included assessments by rural peasants and activists whose concerns extended beyond the preservation of maize biodiversity for its own sake. These accounts stated that the presence of trans-genes in native maize varieties constitutes a threat to political autonomy, cultural identity, individual safety and biodiversity. This report was condemned by the US Environmental Protection Agency and the Office of the US Trade Representative as flawed and

unscientific for privileging socio-cultural rather than scientific and economic considerations.

The competing framing of the issues of GMO maize found in this report are demonstrative of the broader debate about the role that maize and its cultivation can and should play in Mexico. Questions of power are mediated by control over the varieties and methods of production for maize. Maize, as the foundation of Mexican livelihoods and cultural heritage, is contrasted against the genetically modified corn that is the basis for an international trade system that threatens the lifeways connected to maize. Baker (2013) illustrates the distinction between corn and maize as an allegory for understanding what conventional and alternative food systems embody: “corn is used as a symbol for the commoditization of food and the corporate control of food production, processing and consumption. Maize, on the other hand, is used as a symbol to describe agricultural practices grounded in practical farming knowledge, culinary traditions, and local economic exchanges” (Baker 2013, 3).

Given the multi-faceted importance of maize for Mexico, it and the indigenous lifeways that it supports have been seen as both a cause of and path out of poverty. The importance of maize makes it a vector through which to examine debates about what it means to be modern, and how, who and what should be valued. Today’s debates are extensions of class and racial conflicts that have endured for centuries. The contested role of maize and small-scale farms as holding Mexico back from an industrial future or as the guardians of a valuable natural asset take place in farmers’ fields in far-flung rural villages and the halls of international institutions where trade policies are negotiated. Should Mexico move towards further agricultural modernization, production for export,

and food-import dependence – toward a production of corn? Or should Mexicans work toward a vision of a revitalized rural life, farmers’ rights, and national food sovereignty – founded on the cultivation of maize?

Putting Maize on the Table: Tortillas in Alternative Food Systems

Many in Mexico advocate for a future based on the cultivation of maize. To advance this vision, farmers, restaurateurs, agronomists, university specialists and consumers across the country are working to promote the cultivation of heirloom maize and the development of local and organic markets with this goal in mind (Baker 2013). These initiatives are efforts to preserve maize and the rural lifeways that it supports as opposed to the neoliberal trade policy focused on the international production and trade of corn. Several of these initiatives have turned to the commercialization of products made of maize as a means to support farmer livelihoods, agricultural biodiversity, and the connection of consumers to issues of food production (Mann 2004). Within this context, maize-based foods like tortillas become a potent object through which to explore the meanings and practices that people attribute to and employ in negotiating the role of food in shaping the world around them.

Tortillas are the staple food of the Mexican diet. On average, each of the country’s 120 million residents consumes approximately 185 kilograms of tortillas per year, coming out to approximately half of a kilo per day per person (MacClancy, Henry, and Macbeth 2009). In highland Chiapas, tortillas “explicitly signify a man-made meal; humans, unlike animals, eat their meal *with* tortillas” (Vogt 1993, 41, emphasis in original). Given this importance, tortillas have emerged as an important vector through

which to place the above debates about corn versus maize onto the plates of Mexican farmers and consumers.

All tortillas share certain characteristics. Tortillas are made of maize, corn that is cultivated and then dried so that the kernels can be stored. The maize used to make tortillas can be of varying quality. To make the dried maize kernels edible as tortillas, maize is cooked for a number of hours (varying depending on the qualities of the particular maize) in water that is infused with lime. The process of cooking maize with lime makes certain proteins and amino acids present in maize accessible to the human body, as well as making it easier to remove the hull of the corn kernel (Katz, Hediger, and Valleroy 1974). Maize cooked with lime is referred to as nixtamalized maize, or *nixtamal*. After the maize is cooked, it is washed either by hand or by machine, to remove the hull of the maize kernel. Following this, the maize is washed and drained. It is then either run through an electric grinder called a *molino*, or ground by hand, to get to the *masa*, dough, used to make tortillas. This dough is then either put into a machine that presses out the tortillas and cooks them on a conveyor belt or can be patted out by hand and cooked on a clay or metal griddle, often over an open fire.

In many parts of the country, “both tortillas themselves and the labor that produces them are deeply embedded in the identity politics of the region and nation, in the gendered routines and rhythms of everyday life and in the smells, sounds, feels and tastes of that life” (Wynne 2015, 381). Historically, it was women’s work to produce the tortillas each day, cooking the maize with lime, washing it, and grinding it out on a *metate*, a grinding stone. This work was unpaid, domestic labor that regularly occupied many women for five to six hours each day. In the late 19th century, as part of the tortilla

discourse, it was argued that this work needlessly removed: "... hundreds of thousands of robust and strong women... from the industrial workforce while a market for mass produced tortillas surpassed a hundred million in annual sales" (Pilcher 1998, 100). The race to free these women from the drudgery of grinding maize contributed to the mechanization of tortilla making.

Over the past century, the mechanization of tortillas has led to many changes in their production. Rather than being made from maize cooked at home and ground by hand, the vast majority of Mexico's tortillas are now made from dehydrated corn flour. The process of nixtamalization is done on an industrial scale, and the cooked maize is then dehydrated and fortified with different nutrients to turn it into the flour widely available on supermarket shelves (Bank Muñoz 2008). This maize flour is then rehydrated at tortilla stores all over the country to produce the now well-known, thin, white tortilla common across the nation.

For many people, it has become increasingly difficult to find good, handmade tortillas amongst the abundant Wonderbread-like version of industrial tortillas, made with Maseca's dehydrated corn flour. International chefs and cookbook authors, but also lay Mexicans, lament the difficulty of locating handmade tortillas (Mann 2004, Baker 2008). The tortilla industry has largely replaced and displaced the many thousands of women who used to produce tortillas at home for their families every day, and has greatly impacted both the type of maize used and the quality of tortillas consumed across the country. The 2004 Industrial Census estimated that there were almost 64,000 *tortillerías* (tortilla stores) and nixtamal milling locations in 2003, employing more than 154,000 people (Appendini 2010). Another study, by SAGARPA in 2007 estimates that there are

approximately 45,000 tortillerías in the country, and between 10 and 12 million corn milling machines (SAGARPA 2007). The number of women that produce tortillas at home to feed their families or for sale is much more difficult to measure.

The maize traditionally used in handmade tortillas requires specified knowledge, a knowledge of maize rather than a supply of corn to return to Baker's analogy. Handmade tortillas were traditionally one of many items made from a wide variety of maize stocks. Farmers across Mexico struggle to maintain different maize stocks, reaffirming social, economic and ecological relationships through seed saving practices and agricultural behaviors (Tuxill et al. 2010, Perales, Benz, and Brush 2005, Smale, Bellon, and Gomez 2001, Gómez, Bellon, and Smale 2000, Badstue et al. 2007). These *criollo* maize varieties are adapted to and cultivated in specific areas, and refer to maize that has not been formally "improved" in laboratories or by using so-called modern techniques. Across parts of rural Mexico, rural producer households keep separate containers for criollo varieties of white, yellow, red and black maize; providing the basis for both different production profiles as well as culturally significant culinary and agricultural uses (Baker 2013, Bellon and Brush 1994, Perales, Benz, and Brush 2005). Preliminary projects suggest that expanding markets for these varieties could convince producers to expand their production, but many maintain this diversity for reasons that extend far beyond the economic (Mann 2004).

Maintaining the lifeways of these farmers is dependent, however, upon their ability to meet their economic needs. A path to supporting these farmers rests in the development of alternative market channels. People involved in these efforts are actively testing the idea that "smallholders, by providing handcrafted, high-quality agricultural

products and appealing to contemporary consumers who value healthy, natural food associated with the nostalgia of the rural village and ecologically friendly technology, may be able to capture a significant share of the global market" (Nigh 1999, 254). It is a belief on which many alternative food system initiatives operate, where artisan foods are increasingly being made available and sold in small-scale markets and exchanges. Initiatives that connect consumers with products made from heirloom maize sourced from small-scale farmers have emerged in Mexico City, Chiapas (Mujeres y Maíz, 2012), Puebla and Oaxaca (Baker 2009). Such options are being developed just down the street from many Maseca tortillerías. Such initiatives provide opportunities to examine the tensions, contradictions and achievements of alternative food systems within the broader context of industrial and conventional sectors, grounding the work in the daily production of tortillas as a nationally critical food.

Mujeres y Maíz: Host Organization

Mujeres y Maíz is a group working to build relationships that support farmers and tortilla makers by increasing the consumption of products made of maize grown in the region. I stumbled upon a blog for “Mujeres y Maíz Criollo” (Women and Native Maize, henceforth MyM) in the summer of 2012. The blog said that this organization worked with women to grow and sell corn in San Cristóbal de las Casas in order to improve their livelihoods and reconnect consumers to regional food. I emailed the address and was told by the project coordinator that I could visit and learn about what they do. I arrived in time to attend the anniversary celebration for San Cristóbal’s weekly organic farmers market,

henceforth the AgroEco Market, where I listened to Fátima tell of her experience traveling to Italy.

MyM is a group committed to strengthening the livelihoods of women who work with native, *criollo*, maize varieties in Chiapas. The aim of the organization is to foster viable livelihoods that promote sustainable maize production in Chiapas. It pursues alliances between rural and urban communities in order to cultivate “the culture of corn” that revalues the production and consumption of heritage maize. In this way, the organization supports economic development for women food producers, promotes the re-valuation of sustainable production methods for maize, and enlivens the food economy and culinary traditions in Chiapas.

Mujeres y Maíz is a part of a group of inter-related organizations, initiatives and people that work under the diverse and contested umbrella of “sustainable agriculture” in and around San Cristóbal. The initiatives include a thrice-weekly farmers market (the AgroEco Market), numerous farm-to-table restaurants, networks of school gardens and workshop series among other projects. Working through the people involved with MyM, I was able to connect with a convenient sample of producers, consumers and others who are leading the discourse and enacting measures that reflect the paradigm shift toward alternative food systems. Such a group of informants can reveal how Mexicans in a variety of social locations are making sense of, and responding to, different agricultural paradigms and their social effects.

The Extended Case Method and Reflexive Science

This research uses the case study of MyM to explore how and why people are

working to re-shape food systems. A case study requires detailed investigation of an organization or group as a way to analyze both the contexts and processes that make up particular phenomena (Meyer 2001). A strength of the case study approach is that the design and data collection procedures can be tailored to the research questions and often are accessible for the use of theories or concepts that guide the research and analysis (Meyer 2001).

In approaching this case study, I drew extensively on the theoretical approaches in Michael Burawoy's extended case method (Burawoy 1998). As a framework, the extended case method links scientific approaches to lived experience and the contextualized data that are gathered through participant observation. Burawoy contends that there are two different scientific approaches, which he distinguishes as positive and reflexive science. Positive science is characterized by a commitment to a study of a knowable external world in which it is the researcher's job to discover what is "out there" by maintaining distance between the studier and that which is being studied. This distance rests on minimizing the role of the researcher, selecting reliable data, developing research methods and questions that can be replicated and ensuring that the samples selected are representative.

However, through analyses of field experience, Burawoy shows that the entanglements of ethnography, particularly the location of a researcher in an existing social world, inherently violate these commitments of positive science. A researcher embedded in a community and experiencing the interactions therein cannot help but shape the phenomena that he or she is studying. In interactions, there are various "context effects" that influence and weaken data collected through positive science. Researchers

and research subjects must contend with the fact that circumstances outside the control of either are likely to affect participant responses in ways that are challenging to measure. Respondents may not interpret questions the same way. The schedule of interviews or the race and gender of either party may affect responses, and interviews or participant observation can obviously not be separated from the political, social and economic contexts in which they take place.

However, rather than abandon scientific approaches in favor of solely interpretive orientations, Burawoy suggests that our understanding of both context and phenomena can be reformulated to understand study as dialogue, adopting the view that “context is not noise disguising reality but reality itself” (Burawoy 1998, 13). Through iterative, dialogic processes, researchers and those researched can improve upon existing theories of how the world works. In this way, reflexive science places intersubjectivity of scientists and their subject of study at its heart by incorporating and understanding “context effects” as principles.

Thus, reflexive science is founded on intervention, process, structuration and reconstruction. Intervention is, in this view, a virtue of social research, and it is “through mutual reaction that we discover the properties of the social order” (Burawoy 1998, 14). Through the processes of social research, reflexive science seeks to aggregate the situational knowledge of those under study into broader understandings of social processes. This requires structuration, the situating of particular knowledge into the broader spheres that shape its conditions, thereby moving “beyond *social processes to delineate the social forces* that impress themselves on the ethnographic locale” (Burawoy 1998, 15, emphasis in original). These principles lead to the reconstruction of social

theory from dialogue. Burawoy explains what is entailed in this process:

We can move from one generality to another, to more inclusive generality. We begin with our favorite theory but seek not confirmations but refutations that inspire us to deepen that theory. Instead of discovering grounded theory we elaborate existing theory. We do not worry about the uniqueness of our case since we are not as interested in its "representativeness" as its contribution to "reconstructing" theory (Burawoy 1998, 17).

In summary, "reflexive science starts out from dialogue, virtual or real, between observer and participants, embeds such dialogue within a second dialogue between local processes and extralocal forces that in turn can only be comprehended through a third, expanding dialogue of theory with itself" (Burawoy 1998, 5). Reflexive science draws on the multiple readings of a situation to understand the broader social processes. This allows one to study the everyday world by examining the relationships through which it both structures and is structured by an external field of forces. This conceptualization aligns well with Ingold's (2011) concept of meshwork, which focuses on the relational processes through which people and organizations are constituted. The dialogue inherent in this approach is useful for situating the work of individuals and organizations as part of an ethnography of everyday social change. I will show how the everyday actions of different individuals, groups and organizations in and around San Cristóbal conform to and challenge broader social processes through their engagement with alternative food systems. Through the application of the extended case method, this dissertation shows the blurry and messy ways in which alternative food systems operate in order to deepen the theories of social process.

The processes of dialogue and engagement inherent in the extended case method are particularly well suited to studies of alternative food networks, which in and of

themselves are interventions designed to produce change. Many of my research participants were actively engaged in their own studies of the very processes that I was examining, situating us directly in the sort of dialogic relationship that Burawoy proposes. The decisions and approaches that my colleagues, friends and informants made were both in response to and an effort to shape and interact with the forces around them. Therefore, this dissertation uses the extended case method as a framework for drawing conclusions on broader processes of social change by examining the experiences of people in this specific place.

Positionality: My Roots in Food Movements

Sitting in the interview, I spoke nervously about my commitment and desire to learn about fair trade coffee by visiting farmer cooperatives across Latin America and East Africa. I was applying for a fellowship to pursue independent research on how groups of producers around the world were making international trade work for them by building links with coffee roasters in distant countries. Then, an unexpected question came: “How do you feel about capitalism, if you are so interested in cooperatives?”

I sat stunned for a moment. Then, I explained that I wanted to explore how and for whom neoliberal free market capitalism did not seem to work so well and how the alternative employment of collaborative effort and cooperation could succeed. I wanted to investigate how small scale farmers worked together to build direct relationships, both within their geographic areas and across international boundaries. This would allow me to see the coffee that I brewed every day—the beans that went in to the lattes that I made at the fair trade coffee shop that I managed on campus— within a broader social, political

and economic context. How, I wanted to know, did this alternative trade model, with its groups and its social premiums, shape the lives and relationships of the people growing the coffee that I consumed?

Receiving that fellowship launched me on the course of study that led to this research. From 2005 to 2013, I worked with coffee farmers, primarily in Latin America, examining how participation in cooperatives and Fair Trade coffee networks impacted small-scale farmers. I pursued answers to these questions through research fellowships, a master's degree in Anthropology, and as the Chief of Farmer Relations for a direct trade company. The company, Liga Masiva, connected farmers in the Dominican Republic and Mexico with consumers in the United States, experimenting with the premise that communities with transnational connections may be interested in supporting producers in their countries of origin outside of traditionally certified "fair trade" products. This experience cemented my desire to explore how farmers and consumers in the developing world were adopting and exploring the concepts of traceability, accountability, and ethical trade in spaces that moved beyond the certification schemas that are employed in transnational initiatives, like fair trade and organic.

Throughout my work in each of these positions, I was most interested in how people made sense of their participation in them. After all, there is little glory in the day to day trudging to a cooperative meeting when someone still has to get dinner on the table or figuring out how to write a grant report such that it is understandable both to members of your collective and also to funders. Given this, I came to be intently interested in how people lived, thought about and made sense of their desire to work to create or be part of some sort of change that they deemed positive.

Through my work with coffee, I found myself back in Mexico, a place where I had spent a year in my teens. I moved to Oaxaca, and there I connected to Amado Ramírez Leyva and his wife Gabriela Fernández Orantes, who together run a restaurant and tortillería that connects eaters in Oaxaca to peasant farmers around the state. Through these connections, they aim to re-orient Mexican palates to an appreciation of the identity based on maize and maize farming and to the biodiversity of maize. I became fascinated by not only this approach to food system relocalization, but also to its application to a staple crop like maize rather than a “luxury” good like coffee.

I have continued to explore these questions in applied ways throughout my graduate studies. Over the course of my doctorate work, I have maintained a commitment to active participation in the construction of alternative food systems, in addition to an academic interest in studying them. Throughout the write-up of this dissertation, I have actively worked with a farmers’ market management organization in Atlanta, Georgia, attempting to find solutions to many challenges that are analogous to those faced by my research community. Many of these activities have challenged my ideas of what “local” food is, and pressed me to consider the complex ways that knowledge, attitudes, and practices are both shared and contested by people who participate in related movements. In Atlanta, refugee farmers grow foods from seeds that they brought from Nepal or Bhutan, shaping “local” food networks by selling next to African American urban growers, who regularly call for land redistribution while working to alleviate poverty in the city’s historically Black neighborhoods. Understanding the contradictions and connections produced by these relationships illuminates a great deal about the tensions and the achievements of alternative food systems.

Over the past ten years, I have been a researcher, a farmer liaison and an advocate, educator, and barista. These experiences helped me understand the explanatory power of foods as a valuable theoretical and pedagogical device, a vector through which to explore questions about the nature of society, the economy and interconnectedness. Across the various realms of research and work that I have undertaken, I found that similar questions were being asked and explored in a wide variety of locations and product chains. Both fair trade coffee from around the world and farmers market cherry tomatoes from across town, brought up questions of transparency, ethics, knowledge, and power for those growing and purchasing them. The frustrations, achievements, and motivations expressed in these different spheres mirrored each other.

Rather than compromising my ability to do this work, I have found that my commitment to building alternative food systems held me to a high level of integrity in my assessments of the work entailed in their construction. My position as an activist researcher is thus an integral part of this work, but a facet that I believe strengthens my ability to present the processes demanded in building alternative food systems. If anything, I tend to focus too heavily on the challenges so as to dispel any rosy view that these initiatives are or will be a panacea, but I am most committed to understanding the goals people set themselves and being cognizant of the processes involved in building toward it. Through this research, I set out to examine how the dynamics and diversity of alternative food systems in Mexico shape the views of participants as to the role of food, and the connections it creates, a question that people everywhere are gnawing on.

Data Collection

This dissertation is built on data collected during eleven months of fieldwork primarily in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, and surrounding areas. I also spent two months in and around Oaxaca, Oaxaca, with maize farmers and those working with maize. The data presented in this dissertation were collected using a mixed methods approach. I collected data through participant observation, semi-structured and in-depth interviews, document analysis, and social network analysis. Using this combination of methods, I aspire to be able to understand and explain complex phenomena in context.

Active Participant Observation

This project is grounded in participant observation as a primary method. Participant observation achieves a close and intimate familiarity with a particular group of individuals and their practices through intensive involvement in their cultural environment (Bernard 2011). Participant observation is usually undertaken over an extended period of time.

Over the course of my fieldwork, the locations of my participant observation varied greatly. I shadowed a variety of informants in my study, many of whom have diverse fields of work. The women involved in *Mujeres y Maíz* worked in locations that ranged from the La Milpa restaurant (which sold, among other things, the organization's tortillas), in their homes, ambulatory sales, outdoor festivals and other outlets. I accompanied them to children's school plays, graduations, and family dinners. I also attended workshops, meetings, and catering events. My interviews with consumers took place at La Milpa or at another restaurant, cafe, or meeting place where the informants

felt comfortable.

I spent five to six days a week with women involved in MyM either accompanying them in their work at home or spending part of the day at La Milpa restaurant. For the first few months of my fieldwork, I cooked, cleaned, shopped and served at the restaurant, as well as prepared tortillas at home with different members of the collective. I traveled with the staff of MyM to participate in meetings in other communities and to aid in project implementation ranging from transporting metal mesh for water cisterns to aiding in the recruitment of MyM members for catering events.

In addition to these direct experiences, I attended dozens of events, workshops, and meetings in order to explore initiatives in San Cristóbal linked to tenets of alternative food systems. These included educational events on food system relocalization, trainings on increasing sustainability of food production, alternative markets, or other events linked to the maintenance of food-related traditions. Many of the people involved in initiatives and events were familiar with each other, though some were not. I was a regular attendee, conducting interviews and building relationships with producers and other consumers, at the AgroEco Market. Events included meetings of another collective of women who make tostadas, trainings for young health promoters on conscious and creative eating, planning sessions for markets promoting solidarity economies, field trips, academic forums and special events celebrating foods and foodways. I accompanied a group organized by Slow Food that visited members of MyM to harvest maize and beans, as well as attend conferences for small-scale maize producers from around the state. I went along with members of the collective as they took advantage of trainings hosted by a local solidarity-buying group, or film screenings taking place in restaurants where the

women sometimes sold their wares. Each of these experiences served to round out my perceptions of the diverse alternative food system in San Cristóbal de las Casas.

Over the course of my time in San Cristóbal, I found that I was much better at organizing workshops for people than I was at talking to people about workshops that they organized. My collaborators requested that my support for the organizations with which I became involved during my research activities expand to include hosting meetings for potential members of MyM and academic forums to discuss the issues that my research addressed. In an effort to support MyM and other organizations that I encountered, I worked to compile recipes.

I am a tall white woman. I attend an elite university in the United States. At many of these activities, I stuck out, literally because I was a head taller than most of the women working with MyM. My language skills allowed me to experience the surprise of participants in my research who were shocked to find that the collective was not a project of mine, or who turned to me to speak as an expert when interacting with the women themselves. I did my utmost to point people to the women of the collective itself. I also made note of the instances in which my voice was perceived as an expert in the room, as this relates to the positions of relative privilege, and also the idea of who “owns” particular food practices.

These activities fall into the category of “active” participant observation. Although “observation” has been traditionally privileged in participant observation, changes in technology, location of study and duration have prompted anthropologists to reconsider the nature of participant observation. Though ethnographic research used to be based on extended commitments to distant locales, social scientists increasingly study

contemporary social groups and subgroups in varied settings that require taking a more active, participatory approach to ethnographic research. Within these settings, “the ethnographer’s ability to develop a social role that is recognizable by the community may be particularly important. In some contexts, active participation may be a prerequisite to the ultimate success of the study” (Johnson, Avenarius, and Weatherford 2006, 32). Active participation advances one’s ability to engage research subjects.

In my case, my role as researcher/ethnographer afforded me access, but this access was substantially increased when I was also able to be useful. Contributing “active” roles such as my ability to reach items high on the shelf at the restaurant or to manage money while collective members prepared foodstuffs at a busy food stall increased my credibility. In other situations, my ability to talk about an informational meeting concerning joining the collective was the only incentive that encouraged the women to speak with me. These activities, though possibly perceivable as limiting my ability to be impartial or objective, allowed me to experience both the highs and the frustrations of organizational work necessary to achieve collective goals.

Throughout this participant observation I recorded extensive field notes. Field notes come in many varieties, from jottings, diaries, logs and full field notes (Bernard 2011). I took field notes in notebooks, on the backs of napkins, scraps of paper and on a computer. I often took down jottings during and between interactions. I also maintained a diary and usually attempted to summarize key insights based on my logs and field notes every couple of weeks. Field notes were recorded sometimes during and always following my interactions. These notes, in addition to transcripts, formed the primary material for much of my analysis.

Interview Data

Throughout my research, I conducted interviews of various natures and durations. These interviews focused on the range of actors that participate in alternative food systems in and around San Cristóbal de las Casas. Within initiatives around food production in San Cristóbal, there are many ways to participate. These include participation as consumers, food producers, activists, researchers and organizers. My research was to include interviews of people serving in all of these positions. I generated three overarching categories into which I divided the interviews: consumers, producers and animators. I define “animators” as people actively engaged in the organizational and logistical work of developing alternative food systems. These categories are neither mutually exclusive nor easy to delineate. One person may traverse roles as consumer, producer, activist and organizer in a single day. Indeed, one of the findings of the study is that these categories overlap in ways that critically affect how the initiatives under study develop and the types of impacts that they have.

Table 2.1 Interview Data Overview

Consumers	
Casual Consumer Interviews	107
In-Depth Consumer Interviews	25
Tortillería Customers	15
Producers	
In-Depth MyM Members	21
Unaffiliated Producers	9
Tostada Producers	6
Social Network Analysis (MyM)	17
Animators	
In-depth Interviews	11

Casual Consumer Interviews

I completed 107 casual consumer interviews over the course of my research. These interviews were conducted at La Milpa Restaurant, at the AgroEco Market, and at the

homes of people who purchased tortillas from members of MyM during door-to-door sales. The interview guide can be found in the Appendix.

This interview guide was developed after six weeks of preliminary fieldwork. This initial period allowed me to adjust question wording and subject materials to be culturally appropriate and relevant. At the beginning of each interview, each participant was given a one-page information sheet about this study, telling them of its purpose and the nature of their participation. I also provided my contact information in case they had any further questions. I asked participants if they were comfortable with my taking notes on the interview guide, and if they were comfortable with the interview being recorded. The majority of these interviews were recorded, permitting me to transcribe them at a later date. Unless participants were interested in giving an in-depth interview, no identifying or contact information was collected from them.

In addition to these interviews, I completed fifteen interviews at another tortilla store approximately three blocks from La Milpa, using an almost identical interview guide. This tortilla store is part of a chain of tortilla stores that makes tortillas using *nixtamal masa* (dough made from corn cooked with lime) rather than dehydrated nixtamalized corn flour, like Maseca. This gives an example of a supplier for people who are interested in purchasing tortillas made from *masa*, but who are neither purchasing handmade tortillas nor participating in self-identified alternative food systems.

Finally, I carried out unstructured interviews with people purchasing handmade tortillas in two of San Cristóbal's primary municipal markets, Castillo Tielemans and MerpoSur. These interviews serve as an additional narrative illustrating the concerns and motivations of people who purchase handmade tortillas. Over the course of the fieldwork,

I completed nine unstructured interviews with women who sell tortillas at the main markets or out of their homes, in order to identify some differences in the experiences of women organized as part of the collective, as opposed to women who were unassociated.

In-Depth Interviews: Producers, Consumers and Animators

I completed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with producers, consumers and animators during my fieldwork. These interviews ranged in length from forty minutes to more than two hours. Several informants were interviewed more than once. These interviewees were selected through a combination of purposive sampling (consumers who signaled in casual interviews that they had some awareness of themes or commitment to values of alternative food systems) and snowball sampling among producers and animators.

Semi-structured interviews usually have an interview guide but do not have to be followed in an exact manner (Bernard 2011). In these interviews, I aimed to solicit answers to key questions, but did not always ask these questions in exactly the same order. I tried to ask questions with similar wording, though sometimes conversation required me to approach cultural domains from varied perspectives. However, I also allowed informants to pursue their own lines of thinking, which sometimes led to questions that were not on the interview guide.

I completed 25 in-depth interviews with consumers. Out of the 107 casual consumer interviews that I held, approximately 74 individuals said that they consume handmade tortillas on a regular basis (at least once per week). My study hypothesized a relationship between the practice of consuming handmade tortillas and additional

knowledge, values and behaviors tied to alternative food systems; so, I asked these participants if they would be willing to participate in a second, more in-depth interview. If they agreed, I asked them to provide additional contact information. I conducted interviews of 21 of the 32 interviewees from La Milpa restaurant who provided contact information and elected to complete the in-depth interview. I accomplished four additional interviews with customers who bought tortillas from ambulant vendors who came to their homes.

My principal producer informants were the members of MyM. This group was comprised of 53 women from three cities. The women participated in this project to varying extents. The core group of informants were those who were most involved in the organization on a daily basis, those who worked at La Milpa and those who sold at the AgroEco Market in San Cristóbal. I finished in-depth interviews with one-third of these women. The interviews with this group included sections on life history, work history, demographic information and questions about their practices and motivations related to food production and consumption. These interviews were semi-structured. Not all of the women answered all of the questions. Some were more or less talkative and more or less interested in certain subjects. As these women were also part of my participant observation, some of the answers to the interview questions were solicited in circumstances outside of the formal in-depth interview. These interactions closely mimicked the “go-along interview” described by Kusenbach (2003), in which the researcher asks questions of an informant over the course of normal interactions.

Among producers, I also attempted to complete a pared down version of the in-depth interview that I did with consumers. This interview focused on cooking and

shopping habits, recollections about food and its place in a person's life, food preferences and questions about food systems and sustainability. Raising these topics allowed me to investigate how these women's consumption habits may have been informed and shaped by their experiences with MyM, highlighting the ways that identity as producers and consumers is neither static nor mutually exclusive. This section also included basic social network analyses to evaluate the nature and number of personal and organizational connections that MyM members had developed through participation in the collective.

In addition to talking with people close to the organization as producers and consumers, I made a point of engaging other actors in alternative food initiatives in San Cristóbal. These people I term "animators," extending the term beyond the "network animators" that Grasseni (2013) identifies as those that logistically support solidarity buying groups in Italy. In my context, this term refers to people who are actively engaged in promoting initiatives related to alternative food systems and organizing others to take part in such initiatives. This group of interviewees included activists, researchers, organizers and project implementers that have been involved in the creation and/or study of the initiatives that I engaged through my fieldwork. Many of the members of this group know each other and have worked, taught or studied together on these issues. In many instances, the same people that have been involved in developing the alternative foodscapes in San Cristóbal have been propelled to do so by their own experiences as consumers. These interviews were also semi-structured, based on people's histories and experiences of the initiatives in which they are or were involved. These interviews and interactions took place in people's academic offices, their homes, farms or other locations, and were often complemented by informal interactions in additional settings

with many of the interviewees. Exploring the varying degrees of understanding, and the differences in knowledge, values and behavior between and within these groups was very informative for the study. Interviewing this group and conducting participant observation at conferences and events that these individuals ran or in which they participated gave me the capacity to assess various ways that academic and activist discourse around food issues and food systems both match and fail to align with the experiences of producers, consumers and activists participating in initiatives.

A primary finding and argument of this dissertation is that the lines between a producer, a consumer or an animator are blurry. For the purpose of this chapter, I chose one of these categories as a primary identifier for people with whom I interviewed and interacted. However, a major finding is that individual people cross over categories, an aspect that will be explored in the following chapters. The entire time I pursued this work, I encountered individuals whose participation in the initiatives that I explored had varied over time. Some that had been involved in developing precursors to the AgroEco Market were not active animators at the time that I interviewed them, but continued with commitments to consume products sourced consistently with the values that they had previously worked to create. Similarly, people that had begun participating in the AgroEco Market as shoppers have been moved to produce food for themselves, complicating their identification with only one of these categories.

Everyone is a consumer of food. Even those who continue to have and cultivate land are making choices about the products that they choose to buy as people integrated into a monetary economy. Many consumers in this study interacted with MyM in other capacities and/or organized events engaging in similar work. Several consumers self-

identified primarily as producers and were visiting San Cristóbal on business from their farms.

Document Analysis

As an organization, the evolution of MyM has been fairly well documented. Various students, interns and researchers have been integrated into the project since its inception. The coordinating team has seen the benefit in documenting the processes and experiences of the women involved in the organization. The organization was accustomed enough to receiving these requests that at the time that I was arranging my fieldwork, I completed a four-page application to undertake my thesis with this organization. In it, I was asked about my intentions, deliverables and purpose of the study.

Given this, I was able to draw on several previous works that documented the development of aspects of Mujeres y Maíz. These works include two undergraduate theses, “Building Possibilities for Food Sovereignty: The Experience of the Women and Corn Cooperative in San Cristóbal de las Casas and Teopisca, Chiapas,” completed by Francisca Velasco Lopez in 2014 (López 2014) and based on research conducted between 2010 and 2011. The second one, “Processes of Production and Commercialization of Maize in Amatenango del Valle, Chiapas,” by Mary Bautista León, was completed in 2013 (Bautista León 2013). An evaluation of La Milpa Restaurant was completed in the fall of 2013 by Micaela Alvarez, a professor at the Intercultural University of Chiapas. The works are cited within this dissertation and complement many of the interviews and exercises that I undertook with the women involved. These works, coupled with various others about alternative food networks in San Cristóbal, form an important point of

dialogue for the findings of this dissertation.

Drawing on these documents allowed me to avoid asking about many activities that members of the collective had already completed, thereby saving them time and allowing me to approach them with different questions.

Data Analysis

Ethnographic studies are built on detailed observations of social life and practices. The researcher uses such observations to make efforts to identify, describe and analyze the ways that participants interpret the world around them and their interactions with it. Utilizing the extended case method, these particularities are then linked to and used to deepen theories about larger social processes and forces. In this case, the focus is on the nature of alternative food systems practice and how people engage with it in their daily lives.

Throughout my fieldwork, I aimed to analyze my field notes and interview data in order to continually refine and connect what I observed with theories that informed my research. During fieldwork, I maintained and typed up field notes, working to summarize themes and areas for additional inquiry periodically. This allowed me to develop ideas about what was going on and to assess these interpretations in later field interactions.

After a month of fieldwork, I coded my field notes to identify key themes that went into developing the interview guides, first for casual consumer interviews, and later for the in-depth interview guide. Within these, I drew on both ideas and topics that had emerged from participant observation, as well as topics drawn from academic literature on alternative food systems and anthropological theory.

Once I returned from the field, I compiled and transcribed my field notes and interviews, photos and archival documents. I transcribed these sources to make it possible to code and analyze them for shared themes and differences across the different actor groups and individuals. Reflections from my own field notes, in-home observations, event participation and participant observation were used to triangulate analyses. I approached the analysis of my ethnographic data using a combination of grounded theory and content analysis. Through open coding for themes, I allowed many primary theoretical insights to emerge from my notes and interactions. I complemented these with attention to specific content grounded in my case study focus, including ranking knowledge of definitions of organic or other terms related to concepts in alternative food system literature.

In this way, the case study approach of this dissertation allowed me to approach specific questions informed by theories or concepts that guided the research and analysis (Meyer 2001). Some results emerged from using grounded theory to draw theoretical perspectives and insights from the data itself (Bernard and Ryan 2009). Through this combination, I have attempted to compile an “ethnography of everyday social change” that reveals both the particularities of this specific case and connections to broader conversations about alternative food systems.

Anonymity

Throughout this dissertation, the vast majority of names have been changed to protect the identity of study participants. A few of the names have not been altered, in line with the requests of certain participants who preferred to be identified. Silvia for

example, when I asked if she would like a pseudonym, responded, “Why would I do that? Then no one would know that it is me!” For others, I have altered details like the number of children that people have or some details of their biographies to help ensure that their identities are protected. Several interviewees provided me with permission to draw from our conversation with attribution, and their names are connected to specific quotes and circumstances. Lucy Silva, for example, allowed for the use of her real name in hopes that this work may encourage future contacts and collaborations with other groups or individuals working in similar ways.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Inquiry

In any study, there are limitations and issues with the data, whether quantitative or qualitative. Such issues affect this project; and some, though I am sure not all, are outlined here. As a participant observer, I developed deep relationships with the women involved. This positionality helped me to be privy to class dynamics in the organization. However, my relationships with some members were deeper than others, a fact that undoubtedly shapes this narrative.

More systematic analysis of social networks would have allowed me to speak more concretely to the ways that connections on both personal and professional levels shape interactions between people and organizations. I focused on self-reported social network expansion for the women involved in *Mujeres y Maíz* and did not conduct a systematic analysis of connections of individuals and organizations. Such work has been shown to be very useful in demonstrating how the generation of infrastructure for sustainability networks impacts collaboration in various settings (Bodin and Crona 2009).

Future expansion of work on social network mapping for these organizations and the people in them would provide great insight into their fluidity and the ways that people move between them.

The difference between what people say they do and what they actually do is well-documented. This study relies on triangulation from participant observation, interviews and additional analyses to describe both what people said that they do and what they actually do. However, it would have benefitted from additional methodologies designed to capture people's in-the-moment, decision-making processes. Examples of these include go-along interviews with consumers at the supermarket and the regular market. In addition, a larger sample size would allow for stronger statistical analyses of correlations between knowledge base, behavioral change and other criteria. Other examples might include spending time with people in their kitchens at home, discussing food choices based on what they had in the house. A greater attention to when and how people actually made particular food choices would surely have re-shaped some of my explanatory frameworks.

In addition, the scope of this research is fairly narrow in several ways. In paying attention to the ways that the individuals involved in the organizations in San Cristóbal make meaning out of their participation in these initiatives, the study does not comprehensively tie these processes of meaning making to broader forces that may be shaping those processes. In the case of this study, this is particularly true regarding the impacts of initiatives like this on rural areas. Though I connected with maize producers in Amatenango del Valle and Teopisca, I did not undertake an in-depth analysis of the effects of access to differentiated markets that are available to some but not all producers.

In other contexts, such differential access generates new concerns and inequities in rural and agricultural communities (Bacon 2010, Jaffee 2007). The understandings of the impacts of connections like those fostered by MyM would be greatly enhanced by more comprehensive treatments of the rural communities supplying primary goods for initiatives like this one. Several studies that cover maize producers and production practices have begun this important work (Bellon and Berthaud 2004, Baker 2013, Badstue et al. 2007, Badstue 2006). Many women whose families have moved to urban areas over the past generation are part of broader processes of land dispossession in rural Mexico, resulting from various causes (López 2014). Questions surrounding these processes and their continued impact on rural producers are under-represented in this study.

There are also myriad other ways to approach questions about the role of food and sustainability as they relate to social change in Chiapas. Rather than building out from a particular organization, one could tackle these questions more discursively in the city, focusing on a broader swath of the general public to gauge understandings of and connections to ideas about agricultural sustainability. More attention to the history and development of the individuals that have pushed varied organizations forward would help to show the impact of individual people and relationships. These are but a few ideas that might address some of this study's limitations.

Emerging practices around alternative food systems engender new processes of wealth accumulation and new ways of valuing certain forms of production and consumption that are open to some and closed off to others. Additional studies that look at who chooses not to participate or become involved in such initiatives would reveal

much about how power, inequality, and psychology both open up new channels and ways of being to some people, while leaving them inaccessible to others. Though I aim to address some of these questions in this work, much more research is needed in this area.

Conclusion

Based on these approaches and methodologies, this dissertation is an ethnography of everyday social change. In the following chapters, I will explore the varied ways that people participate in the construction of alternative food systems in and around San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. By focusing on this corner of the world, and the webs of relations developed there, I seek to show how these experiments “[challenge] the postulated omnipotence of the global, whether it be international capital, neoliberal politics, space of flows, or mass culture” (Burawoy 1998, 30). The particulars of Chiapas both as a challenge to national modernizing visions and as a center of alternative approaches to modernization and valuation of indigenous lifeways and practices shape the types of approaches and collaborations that have developed there. These particulars also impact who participates in and defines visions related to sustainability and sustainable agriculture. From identifying indigenous Mexicans that have maintained particular practices to national and international activists interested in promoting their ideas of sustainable practices, this dissertation explores the ways that these people, their ideologies and their behaviors interact with each other and with broader forces of political economy that impact agricultural systems. These negotiations influence what sustainability means and how it is understood in particular times and places.

Chapter 3 : The Social Economy of Handmade Tortillas: Webs of Relations in Food Systems in San Cristóbal

Tortillas, and their role on the proverbial and actual table, serve as an enlightening proxy for understanding the past and the future of Mexican food systems. Tortillas are the staple food of the Mexican diet; each of the country's 120 million residents is credited with eating approximately a pound of tortillas per day (MacClancy, Henry, and Macbeth 2009). The vast majority of tortillas are made by machines using dehydrated corn flour (Morton 2014).

However, tortillas made by hand have grown in popularity in recent years (Bordi 2006). Handmade tortillas are an important social and cultural artifact, as well as an economic vehicle for many low-income women. All of the members of Mujeres y Maíz make tortillas and other foods from maize, and most use the sale of these products as a primary livelihood strategy. This chapter is an exploration of how different situations of exchange promote different types of relations between food producers and consumers. I draw on five ethnographic vignettes to reveal the variety of channels that members of MyM currently utilize to sell tortillas. In each case, the production processes of the tortillas are the same. All of the tortillas are made at home daily by the women. The maize used in the production of the tortillas is also the same. The situations of their sale, however, and the values that play out within these situations, are remarkably different.

I refer to these varied circumstances as the social economy of handmade tortillas. The social economy of handmade tortillas consists of “webs of relations” (Ingold 2011) within which different knowledge, values and behaviors are enacted. These webs of

relations demonstrate a complex set of locally-mediated responses to the globalization of food and foodstuffs. By exploring the varied sites of the social economy of handmade tortillas, it is possible to determine how different values and behavior are fostered in different locations and to explore how these relate to the production and development of alternative food systems. Throughout the vignettes, we will see how various criteria of sustainable food systems – agroecological production, social embeddedness, relocalization and education for commitment to change – are evoked and negotiated. The chapter begins with the five individual stories. These are followed by an analysis of the social, economic and political forces that engender the different webs of relations that are present in these different locations.

Five Vignettes of Handmade Tortilla Sales

The five vignettes recounted here take place in various locations. The municipal market is one of three primary indoor/outdoor markets in San Cristóbal. Vignettes two and three are of ambulant, door-to-door sales and independent vending at a fixed location. The last two vignettes take place at self-proclaimed alternative food system sites: La Milpa restaurant, run by the Mujeres y Maíz collective, and the AgroEco Market.

1. Municipal Market

Rocío has spent most of the afternoon making tortillas. She stands surrounded by her wares in the open air section of the small house that she shares with her husband and children, as well as her husband's mother, his two brothers and their wives and children.

She is a petite woman of indigenous Tzotzil heritage. Rocío moved to San Cristóbal as a teenager (which she still resembles though she is now in her late 20s), learned to speak Spanish and eventually met her husband. Both Rocío and her husband are of indigenous heritage, though Rocío's mother-in-law was raised in the city mostly speaking Spanish and her children all speak Spanish as a first language. The house is about a 15-minute walk from the town center in a working class neighborhood. Mercedes fondly remembers when many of the neighboring houses were *milpas*, fields, some of which her father planted in the 1950s and 1960s when she was growing up and this neighborhood was far from the city center. Today, there is one open spaces where their neighbors are growing small rows of maize, but things feel very urban even as one moves away from the well-trafficked main street a couple of blocks from the house.

Inside, the house has four rooms off of an open central area, one for each of the four related nuclear families. Rocío shares one room with her husband and two children. In the center, there is an open air kitchen that includes three separate tortilla-making stations, consisting of stoves with a large round *comal* (the griddle for making tortillas) set up on cinder blocks. Small ledges ring the *comal* on which one can balance various additional necessities for the making of tortillas or other products that that are specialties of the family, like *huaraches* (elongated tortillas) or *memelas* (tortilla-like pockets stuffed with refried beans). For Rocío, these necessities consist of a brightly colored blue plastic basin filled with tortilla dough and then a small table on which she has her wooden press.

Rocío has been making tortillas for two hours when I arrive at 2:30 in the afternoon. At 3:00 pm, we set out to walk to the Castillo Tielemans Market; aiming to catch some people headed home for their late lunch or prepping for dinner. I carry the

basket of tortillas propped on my hip for part of the 20-minute walk. It weighs about twenty-five pounds. We walk into the market on one of the main throughways and set up in front of a stall that is closed. Rocío borrows a stool from a couple who sell soap and other household goods in a storefront just nearby. Rocío used to sell tortillas to them each time that she came to the market, but recently their children have decided that they don't like the tortillas and prefer those from the tortillería.

We are sandwiched between empty wooden shelves across from dead, plucked chickens and other stalls selling dozens of types of chilies. Rocío displays the tortillas, which are packed in a basket inside a large plastic bag placed inside a piece of striped woven cloth. In order to fit more tortillas in the basket, they are arranged in overlapping circles spiraling up and up. Rocío begins to pull out the tortillas, stacking them just so and pulling them apart so that their moisture does not cause them to stick together and tear. Unfortunately, about one in twelve tortillas has already torn a little bit. Most of these Rocío pulls aside. She takes these home and feeds them to her chickens; as even a slightly torn tortilla won't sell, she tells me. In the market, there are three industrial tortilla stores. Rocío says that often times the tortillerías have long lines of customers. You often see these customers walking by, tortillas wrapped up, even as Rocío yells out again and again, "Tortillas! Will you take tortillas?"

She explains that this is a difficult time to sell, as many people are already home for their lunchtime meal. Many of those walking by have already purchased their tortillas. However, she has to come late in the day because the stall owners will not let her set up a stool to sell earlier in the day. Thus, she has to wait until the afternoon when some of the stalls have closed. She looks for a spot where no other people are selling tortillas, despite

the fact that often merchants sell similar things near each other. When she has tried to sell tortillas outside the market in the mornings, she has been unsuccessful because the other vendors, mostly of fruit and vegetables, chase her off.

She says the tortillas sell for a peso each, or a dozen for ten pesos. When selling in the market, most people walk by without even talking to or acknowledging Rocío. They are a mix of phenotypically *ladino* people, Mexicans of mixed indigenous and Spanish descent and those that appear indigenous due to their dress or appearance. Some glance sideways at what she is selling, but only one in about every twelve stopped on this particular day. About a third of them decided to buy some.

Twice today, customers bargained aggressively, getting seven tortillas for 5 pesos. One noticed that one tortilla was broken, and asked for another at no cost. Following this, Rocío whispered to me that we could up our sales by joking with customers. “If they ask you, tell them that you made the tortillas, they’ll never believe it,” she told me, “... and with a lot of love!” Two times, people who stopped decided against purchasing for health reasons. One stated, “Those are much better than the tortillería ones. They have more flavor but also more fat because they are made of pure corn.” Another exclaimed as she walked by, pointing to her stomach, “I love them, but with those I get too much belly fat!” One of Rocío's old customers, who used to buy 20 or 30 pesos on a regular basis, also stopped buying recently when she found out that she had diabetes, because she thinks that these are worse for her than the tortillería tortillas.

Today, Rocío walks away with 72 pesos at about 5:00 pm, just above the daily minimum wage for Chiapas (CONASAMI 2015). These earnings however, do not include her cost of ingredients or her time, which together leave her with a minimal

profit. We have stood for an hour and a half and sold about 75% of the tortillas that she made this afternoon. The last three sales were below her desired rate of 1 peso per tortilla, but she was willing to go lower since it was time to get home to her children.

Rocío said that making tortillas is not a lifelong strategy, but rather something that she can do now to earn a little bit of money while her children are small. Since she can't be out of the house all of the time, this gives her a way to earn just at least some money. However, once her children get bigger, she said that she will probably try to get a job at a chain grocery store working at the checkout, because that way at least she could make 800 pesos a week. "It's not much," she said softly, "but more secure than either working [at La Milpa Restaurant] or selling tortillas here."

2. Ambulant Sales

I arrive at Gabriela's home about 10:00 am. She is already working, wearing a sweatshirt under her apron and with the hood up over her head. She has already completed half of a bucket of *masa negrita*, blue corn tortilla dough, and has a stack of tortillas wrapped up in cloth in a basket. She began at 8:30.

Gabriela moved to San Cristóbal from a neighboring state after she met her husband. She now lives in a small compound located up a dirt alleyway on the outside of town which is shared among her and her two children, her two sisters-in-law and their five children, and her mother-in-law. Each family unit has its own rooms. Gabriela and her husband's rooms are made of cinder blocks rather than the wood that her unmarried sister-in-law and mother-in-law inhabit just feet from her husband's workshop. The house has a small garden, filled with medicinal plants which all of the women use to make

tinctures and shampoos that they sell at the AgroEco Market as members of another organized group. Gabriela's husband, Rodo, has a small carpentry shop in the back and does custom orders for signs, doors, tortilla presses and other household furnishings. All four women share an electric mill that they acquired through their participation in the collective Mujeres y Maíz. This mill is in its own small room and prompts frequent rings of the doorbell by other women in the neighborhood who come to have their home-cooked maize ground into nixtamal for one peso. Gabriela is not from an indigenous household and she grew up speaking only Spanish. She finished 8th grade, a high level of education among the members of Mujeres y Maíz collective. Her two children, still in primary school, regularly help her with making tortillas at home.

Gabriela and I leave the house about 2:00 pm, in time to make rounds for lunch for many of her clients. We walk down the hill from her house to the *comvi*, the privately run bus that takes us into town. We pay six pesos. Gabriela talks me through our route, visiting eight or nine homes in hopes of selling the ten dozen tortillas that we (mostly she) have made during this afternoon.

Our first stop is Chocolatería, a small coffee shop in front of the Santa Lucia church. Gabriela said that here she often sells ten pesos worth of tortillas to the owner to take home and sometimes ten pesos worth to each of the young women working. Today the owner was not there. Neither of the young women working wanted to buy any tortillas to take home for later. We walk out of the shop, Gabriela a bit downtrodden, as this location usually resulted in the sale of 30 pesos worth of tortillas.

Second, we stop at The Red Frog, a tattoo shop downtown. "Doña Gabriela!" proclaims El Pelón, the bald shop owner. "What do you have for me today?" Gabriela

lists her wares: tortillas and other corn-based snacks. El Pelón buys a dozen tortillas, explaining to me that he lives alone and that should hold him until Gabriela returns on Friday, three days from now. The assistant tattoo artist is not around today to buy his customary dozen, another loss of ten pesos.

As we walk past the office of ProNatura, a non-profit environmental organization, Gabriela tells me that she used to sell there. However, it seemed to her that many of her clients were usually out when she stopped by on Tuesday or Friday afternoon, so she has stopped entering. “Too bad,” she says, “I like Toño and Jorge who work there, but I just don’t feel comfortable going in all of the time now.” We walk past the door on the way to our next destination. People brush past us. I catch both interested and disdainful looks for the ambulant vendor, though mostly Gabriela seems to fade into the many other humans moving from one place to another.

Two more stops on foot, and Gabriela asks me if we should take the bus. Though I am happy to walk, I think to myself that she has already been on her feet for at least seven hours today, first methodically making these tortillas, and now selling them. Gabriela is about 4’11” tall and slightly round. She comes up only to my shoulder. She is wearing black flats below her calf-length skirt, much less comfortable in my opinion for long walks than my tennis shoes and jeans. Still, we decide to walk the next 15 minutes, up into the middle-income neighborhood of El Cerrito to our last stop.

Our sixth stop is at the home of Violeta, who is a seamstress and travels selling clothes made from traditional fabrics. Just near where the AgroEco Market used to be, she has a small boarding house and storefront, which says "Bazaar" outside. Inside, the front wall is lined with blouses made of *huipiles*, woven tops traditional of indigenous

women from across the highlands of Chiapas. Violeta has one employee, Ana, who helps her to sew the blouses into something worth buying. Often, Violeta travels around Mexico selling her wares at different open air and artisan markets. She makes very little, according to her, from this shop. People rarely enter. In order to pay the rent, she lets out three rooms to foreign visitors that surround the open courtyard.

She invited Gabriela and me to sit down, though she proclaimed that she was not going to be able to purchase any tortillas today. She had just returned from a sales trip that did not go very well and has very little money to spare. However, she offers us a cup of tea and conversation. Though it meanders around, it soon turns political. Violeta and Gabriela discuss Coca-Cola's control of water in Chiapas, and the need for organizations like MyM to combat these corporate takeovers. Though no concrete steps for next actions are generated, Violeta and Gabriela seem to enjoy talking over concerns about work, the lack of work and globalization.

In the end, we have spent almost an hour and a half with Violeta. Though this may be longer than usual, it is clear that these two have a friendship that is nurtured through these visits and that a cup of tea or coffee is a common occurrence when Gabriela stops by. As we get up to leave, she decides that yes, she will buy a dozen tortillas. "It has gotten late," she acknowledges to Gabriela, "You probably just want to go home from here."

Outside, Gabriela and I head our separate ways. She has not sold everything, but it is getting dark. I watch as she moves down the street toward the bus, readying herself to pull the six-peso fare from her pocket. By my calculations, she has sold 85 pesos'

worth of goods, approximately \$7.50, for 8.5 hours of work, not counting the cost of supplies.

3. Pequeño Sol School – A Fixed, Independent Sales Location

I sit on a bench in the parking lot of the private school Pequeño Sol, watching as primary school aged students come out of their classes and rush to be picked up by their parents, many of whom are driving nice cars. The guard calls to each student by name as their parents arrive. Backpacks, largely in excellent condition, are stacked haphazardly with little concern on the ground by the bench. I wonder where Silvia is. We are supposed to be selling to all of these children and their parents, and I worry about the day's bottom line if many have already left by the time she gets here.

Silvia arrives flustered in a taxi cab at 2:20 pm. She has come from Teopisca, a town about 30 minutes away. Half of the students who had been released at 2 pm are already gone. I run up to the taxi to help her out, as she unloads bag after bag of goodies. There is a huge bucket full of 20 pounds of steamed *chayotes*, a green squash, wrapped in a plastic bag to keep them warm. There is another bright blue plastic tub full of quesadillas, potato, zucchini flowers, *nopal* cactus and chicken. She also has a purple bucket, the kind a person might use to mop, filled to the brim with steaming hot *atole de maíz*, a porridge-like drink. It is tied shut with saran wrap. Another reusable woven bag is full of tortillas and *memelas*, smaller, thicker tortillas that are filled with beans. Silvia's tortillas are small, about the size of conventional tortillas (approximately 4 inches across) and they are sold 30 tortillas for 20 pesos. There are many familiar customers who buy tortillas once or twice per week. In addition, she has brought vegetable tamales and small,

cream-filled pastries, both made at home. She carries bags of plastic bags for serving, a mayonnaise jar full of extra *atole*, little baggies of salt, chili and limes, and a tupperware container of homemade salsa. All this we rush down from the taxi to get set up under a large tree, on a small folding table provided by the school. Silvia's brother works here, and she has a long-standing relationship that allows her to come and sell to the kids and their parents one or two days per week after classes end.

Silvia immediately turned on her saleswoman self, leaving behind the late and flustered woman who had just arrived somewhere between the taxi cab and the sales table. She smiles broadly, announcing what she has on offer to people walking by and calling out to teachers and parents with whom she is familiar. In a low voice, she tells me, "One's way of being is really important and determines a lot. For that reason, I never lose my faith. With God in mind, and with a smile, we won't go hungry." Up come students and teachers. Multiple times they want to settle accounts, going through what they had purchased the previous Wednesday, asking about the additional purchases of their children today, in order discharge what they owed for the week. Parents typically purchase tortillas and items to take home, while the students buy snacks to tide them over in the afternoon. A mother arrives to buy the dozen eggs that she had asked Silvia to bring to her the previous week, as well as tortillas, *chayotes* and other goods. In calculating her payment, she asks Silvia how much she owes from her child who had come to buy some snacks twenty minutes earlier and had asked if his mother could pay when she arrived. Together, they worked out the total.

By about 3:45 pm, the only people left milling about are two teachers, the janitors and us. Silvia gives out gifts to each person. One of the janitors calls a taxi for her.

Another teacher, who often gives her a ride to the collective taxis at the end of the day apologizes that he is heading out before she finishes her sales and thus is not able to take her today. Lastly, Silvia gives cheap chayotes to the janitor, who offers to take one teacher's order to her classroom while Silvia remains at her table. These gifts seem to be tokens of gratitude, a way to cement relationships, and a sign of genuine affection. The janitor takes away the table as we pack up, telling Silvia he would try to have it out and ready for her on Friday. "When there is a line," Silvia explains, "I can't give them a better price, and I can't give them anything. But since they are really good customers, when it is empty, I give them a little something."

4. La Milpa Restaurant – A Project of the Mujeres y Maíz Collective

"Are there tortillas?" a young, well-dressed, pregnant, Mexican woman asks as she approaches the counter in the restaurant. She seems shy, but also familiar with the routine of coming in to buy tortillas. She has gotten out of her husband's old-style Volkswagen beetle, which rumbles on the street in front of the restaurant's open front. "Of course," Mari Carmen, one of two collective members who are working today, smiles. "A dozen?"

Mari Carmen is 72 years old with a bright smile and a flowery polyester dress covered with a checkered apron. She is no more than 4'10" tall, a noticeable fact when she reaches into the mountain of tortillas that are wrapped in cloth and stacked inside a plastic bag, all of which rest inside a tall metal pot on a small table behind the counter. The top of the metal pot is almost at the height of her shoulders. Mari Carmen pulls out a bunch of tortillas and counts out twelve, carefully peeling them apart one by one to

ensure that none break in the process. “They are made from blue corn today,” Mari Carmen tells the young women. “That’s just fine,” the woman replies, “I like the blue ones even better than the yellow ones. And both are totally different than those from the *tortillería*.” The young woman takes out her money and her own cloth, brought from home to wrap her tortillas. She walks out the open front of the restaurant and gets into the car idling in the street.

La Milpa Restaurant is located outside the city center in a working class neighborhood in San Cristóbal. It is open five days a week from approximately 8:30 am until 5 pm or so, depending on when the food sells out and how many customers come. It is one large room, with five small tables that are easily drawn together or separated to seat groups of various sizes. On the walls, there are posters of maize varieties in Chiapas, and familiar images with the “No Corn, No Country” campaign waged by peasant and consumer organizations across Mexico (Mann 2011). The stove is visible from the counter top, and the women quickly put together meals that customers order while they watch the preparation.

The day’s tortillas were delivered to the restaurant an hour ago by Leticia. Each day, different women from the collective deliver 100 pesos worth of tortillas, ten dozen. All of the women who make deliveries have small children and prefer to make the tortillas at home rather than work a full day’s shift at the restaurant. They bring them daily to the restaurant about 9:30 am so that there are fresh tortillas each day. These tortillas are used for all of the meals in the restaurant and also for sale to women like this morning’s customer, who stop on their way home or decide to take tortillas-to-go after they eat their breakfast or lunch. Some customers ask who has made the tortillas today.

There is no bartering here. The price for the large tortillas is more expensive than at the Castillo Tielemans or the Merposur municipal market: 15 pesos a dozen rather than one peso per tortilla. For many customers, the knowledge that these tortillas are made from “real maize,” non-GMO, grown in Chiapas, is a source of peace of mind and a reason to pay the slightly higher price.

Throughout the day, people come in to buy tortillas, punctuating the typical work of running a restaurant. Many of the interactions are carried on with laughter and questions for the women. The clients are wide-ranging, from families to university students who receive discounts. It is quite common to see foreigners eating here and taking home tortillas and just as likely, Mexicans taking care of daily business and stopping for a well-priced lunch after doing errands at a city office down the road. Other than several signs decrying violence against women and photos of Mexico’s varied maize varieties on the wall, this restaurant looks very much like a typical *comedor*, restaurant, in a working class neighborhood.

At 3:00 pm, Mari Carmen and Verónica, her daughter who is in her mid-forties and not much taller, finally have a minute to themselves. Only one of the restaurant’s five tables is occupied by clients. The two of them serve themselves small bowls of *sopa de chipilín*, a brothy soup dotted with herby green leaves typical of the region. It is the use of herbs like this, as well as the handmade tortillas, that are cited by many clients as being among their reasons for frequenting this small restaurant in a slightly out of the way neighborhood. Verónica and Mari Carmen take fresh, warm, blue tortillas off of the rectangular metal griddle that sits over a low flame on the gas stove. Rolling them tightly, they dip them directly into the soup.

Suddenly, there is a plonk on the counter just behind them. “Mari Carmen, give me a dozen of those delicious tortillas.” Noel, a friendly Mexican man in his early 70s, wearing a fedora, has put down 15 pesos on the counter, having already paid for his lunch and that of his wife and daughter. Mari Carmen sets down her food, goes to the back to wash her hands and comes back to take the tortillas out of the stack in the cloth in the bag within the silver pot. The tortillas are still warm. Since Noel ordered them to take home, Mari Carmen counts them out slowly, peeling them apart as she did for the young pregnant woman. She wraps them in wax paper. Noel had forgotten the embroidered cloth that he usually brings to the restaurant to take the tortillas home.

Noel proceeds to ask how Verónica and Mari Carmen are and what soups they plan on making the rest of the week. They are regular clients at the restaurant who come by once or twice a week after picking up their 3rd grade daughter from her school two blocks away. He is a retired professor from Mexico City. His wife, Verónica, more than 20 years his junior, is a stay-at-home mother to their two young daughters. Noel inquires after Mari Carmen’s health at Verónica’s prodding from across the room. Were her ankles swollen and bothering her today, as they had been last week? Mari Carmen explains that they are much better; she has been using one of the natural remedies that she and her daughters make from medicinal plants which they grow at home to help with the inflammation.

After they leave, Mari Carmen explains to me, “I love working here, people really value my smiles and the way that I am with them. They come back often! And they really like the food and I enjoy telling them about it, and telling them about what we do.”

5. The AgroEco Market - *Tianguis Comida Sana y Cercana* (“Healthy, Local Food Market”)

The AgroEco Market in San Cristóbal is eight years old. *Tianguis Comida Sana y Cercana* (The Healthy, Local Food Market), henceforth referred to as the AgroEco Market, is commonly referred to as the “organic market” though that term was dropped from the organization’s webpage. This is the location where I met Fátima. As of 2014, the market operates in two locations. Twice per week, on Wednesday and Saturday, the AgroEco Market takes place in an old house near the touristy town center. There is a large covered courtyard and a shady internal room. The second location is at ECOSUR, a university campus on the outskirts of town, on Fridays. The Friday ECOSUR location is frequented by many students and faculty. Downtown, each Wednesday and Saturday, the otherwise closed building opens its doors to put on the AgroEco Market and it is common to



Photo by Matthew Reamer. Used with permission

Figure 3.1. Doña Margarita selling at the AgroEco Market.

see a general flow of foreigners and well-heeled Mexicans walking in and out. Inside, the market looks like a North American farmers’ market. Tables line the walls. The crowds of consumers are speaking many languages, Spanish, English, French and Tzotzil. The producers and food makers present each have their specialty; Argentinian Max sells handmade pizzas, and Italian Martina sells homemade baked goods. Doña Carmen sells sauces made of local herbs and chilis, all packaged in reused mayonnaise or jalapeño jars.

Soymilk is available in Tetrapak boxes. Three tables full of vegetables are dispersed around the room to round things out, layered with kale and lettuce as well as the radishes and carrots that are more commonly found at the municipal market.

Margarita, Fátima, Gloria and Leticia are all members of MyM, but here they sell as independent vendors rather than as part of that collective. In this context, they are mini AgroEco Market celebrities. They are always located in exactly the same spot. Many people know their names. Customers regularly joke with them and ask about what types of tortillas they have today. Margarita waits until the end of the day when a man comes all the way from Tuxtla, an hour away, to buy 150 pesos worth of tortillas each Wednesday and Saturday. He sells them at his organic food store, but can't find any he deems of acceptable quality in Tuxtla.

Margarita, a small-scale farmer *ladina* woman with a kerchief tied around her head, stands behind the folding table that she shares with Fátima. In front of her are baskets of tortillas, piles of limes from her farm and beans in plastic bags. In front of the tortilla basket, she displays a small laminated sign that has her name on it. It is her certification as an agroecological producer as evaluated by a volunteer committee of producers, consumers and activists who are part of the market. This group visits each producer of the AgroEco Market each year to evaluate their systems and capacity for production, ensuring that the foods available at the agroecological market meet the standards that the group itself has set (Nelson et al. 2009). Margarita is one of a few producers whose certificate is on display. Though the others have the credential, not many people ask for it and thus few vendors display it. Margarita, however, is a long-time producer, trained in organic agriculture since the 1980s. She proudly recognizes and

is recognized by others as a grandmother of the kind of sustainable production systems that this market seeks to promote, and she is a passionate advocate of the participatory certification.

Leticia sits on a chair next to Margarita. She is a member of the Luna family, one of the primary families of Mujeres y Maíz. She has a round face and wears the polyester dresses typical of evangelical, working class women. Her mother, Mercedes, spoke some Tzotzil even while growing up in the city of San Cristóbal, but Leticia did not learn it. After her marriage, she and her husband moved into his family home in the next neighborhood. Though she no longer shares a house with her mother, brothers and sisters-in-law, who include Rocío from the municipal market vignette, Leticia continues to work regularly with her mother and sisters-in-law to make the tortillas that she sells at the AgroEco Market. She and her sisters-in-law sometimes sub for each other to sell, or take care of each other's children when they have outside obligations. It is common, however, for Leticia's three children to run around the market most days that she is selling there.

Fátima sits in the corner, stacks of multicolored, warped Frisbee shaped tostadas placed on the table between her and the customer. Occasionally she dozes a little bit while sitting up as the afternoon wears on. People actively approach and ask her what she has used to flavor the stacks of toasted tortillas in front of her. The list is long: cilantro, beans, beets, chocolate, chili pepper, cactus, chipilín herb, spinach and lard. She and her daughters sort and pack some bags of the tostadas at home, selling packs of seven for 15 pesos, just over two pesos per tostada. Alternately, customers can choose their own

combinations, selecting two of one and three of another and so forth from the stacks that diminish steadily over the course of the day.

One customer comes up, a woman in her late 30s. She peers into the baskets of both Margarita and Leticia, asking them each by name what colors they have today. Leticia and Margarita smile, but do not call the woman by name though they all seem familiar with each other. To Leticia, she asks, “Do you have the blue ones? Well, today I’ll buy three dozen from you, just so Doña Margarita is a little bit jealous!” All three women laugh at this joke. Leticia and Margarita smile. After she leaves, Leticia says to me, “Some days she buys from me, some days from [Margarita]. It all comes out even in the end.” Margarita, Leticia, Fátima, and Gloria fish for change out of the pockets of their aprons, each careful to put her hand into a plastic bag before touching coins to keep it sanitary. No one bargains. The price is ten pesos for 12 smaller tortillas. When asked about the value for the price, a middle-aged woman customer states that these are quality products, “... and these women don’t go to the other markets, they only sell here. And it’s beneficial to all of us, we all benefit. We get food that is better for our health, and they get better prices.” Regularly, each of the saleswomen sell out of the tortillas and other products that they bring to the AgroEco Market. Though they all experience that the prepping and selling makes for long and intense work on market days, the typical minimum of 300 pesos that they earn seems worth it.

A Social Economy of Handmade Tortillas

Each of these vignettes reveals different associations that have developed around the exchange of handmade tortillas in San Cristóbal. In the first vignette at the municipal

market, Rocío deals with a good deal of anonymity and precariousness. Her customers are often different from day to day, many are critical of her products, and she has very little external validation or support. Gabriela, on her ambulant sales, has many loyal customers, but may or may not encounter them at home when she arrives, leading to a similar amount of precarity. In both situations, the women have a lot of autonomy to leave or arrive on their own schedules. At the school, Silvia is a well-known vendor, she also has loyal customers and an opportunity to develop long-standing relationships that include the giving of gifts and reciprocal favors. At La Milpa, women who often sell alone for a precarious wage are sheltered from that precarity by a daily stipend and supported by a collective organization, but are required to invest a different amount of time and to learn different skills than they might be in another situation. At the AgroEco Market, the tortilla makers are often known by name and praised for skills and knowledge that are less valued in other locations.

The differences that we see across these locations support the idea that economic interactions are always embedded within broader social relations. Ingold would describe these interactions as creating webs of relations (Ingold 2011). The idea of economic interactions as enmeshed in broader webs of relations aligns with theories that challenge the conception of human beings as primarily rational, self-interested, economic actors (Chang 2010, Marx and Elster 1986, Polanyi 1957) and rather contends that people's behavior is shaped by a plethora of motivations, values and concerns (Wilk and Cliggett 2007). Such observations support the idea that the "pure market relations presupposed as foundational to modern consumption may simply not exist, even within highly developed consumer markets" (Appadurai 1986, 5).

Within these webs of relations, economic interactions cannot and do not operate autonomously from politics, religion or social relations (Polanyi 1957). Rather, market relations are constantly being shaped and re-shaped by people's responses to, and interactions with, the activities, relationships, and meanings they attach to exchanges that they undertake. Many proponents of alternative food systems contend that the varied nature of these processes can be used as tools to both support and contest practices, social systems and power distribution (Gibson-Graham 1996). People use exchanges like gifts to create social cohesion and reciprocal relationships, constructing and maintaining ties that strengthen interpersonal and group bonds (Appadurai 1986, Mauss 1967). Peasants use tactics like developing patronage relationships to undermine and reorient exploitative relations and redistribute power in ways that protect them from the unpredictable nature of market forces (Scott 1985). That is a social economy.

The webs of relations that make up the social economy of handmade tortillas in San Cristóbal are shaped by the social, political and economic context. In some locations, the tortilla makers are treated with a great deal of respect. Their experiences of precarity are different; in some locations their sales amounts, number of customers, and reception of their products are more consistent than others. In some, they are known to their customers. In others, their relationships with customers are more tenuous. Two of these locations, La Milpa and the AgroEco Market, have been developed expressly to contribute to the "ever-evolving weave" of alternative food systems by promoting certain types of interactions, practices and knowledge.

The social economy of tortillas shows a web of relationships through which cultural, economic, political and historical ideas about culture, class, race and other

factors are mediated. Through a more in-depth analysis of these vignettes, it is possible to show how the diverse webs of relations encourage people to apply and experience their exchanges differently in different locations. As societies face different pressures, different class segments respond in different ways that are influenced by existing social ties, statuses and levels of security (Polanyi 1957). To explore these, this chapter analyzes the above vignettes along four vectors: the evaluation of price and quality, the physical space and set-up of each location and the nature of social relations fostered by each space. Within these, the sustainability criteria explored in the introduction – agroecological practices, social embeddedness, relocalization, and education for building commitment to change – are visible, considered and enacted to varying degrees.

Pricing

In the locations explored here, the prices of tortillas differ. In addition, the practices around bartering also differ. Handmade tortillas are sold by the piece, as opposed to conventional tortillas that are sold by the kilo, reflecting that each is an individual item. The calculations and justifications used by consumers in relation to these regarding price also differ by location.

Handmade tortillas at the municipal market were typically sold for one peso per tortilla. Such coordination has been found to exist across peasant markets across the world and often reflects a great deal of market coordination between independent sellers who agree on set prices (Scott 1985). This price was largely consistent across the market vendors. However, at these locations, many customers bartered on price, asking for six tortillas for five pesos or a dozen for ten. When vendors refused to budge on price,

customers regularly walked away in search of other vendors serving a different quality of tortilla or offering cheaper prices. The practice of regarding the tortillas as interchangeable with those produced by a woman down the corridor supported bartering. People asked few questions about the maize used and its origin. When a tortilla makers' supply was almost out, or as mealtime approached and the number of customers dwindled, sellers often discounted their prices. This practice was familiar to many consumers, who would note the time as they bartered.

Among ambulant vendors, pricing was more variable. As shown in the vignette, Silvia would typically not barter, but would offer discounts to customers to generate goodwill, make sales and develop a loyal customer base. These gift-like gestures (sometimes actual gifts) helped to establish reciprocal relationships (Mauss 1967). Gabriela, in her ambulant route, would sometimes barter with people on the street toward the end of her sales day; and she occasionally offered discounts to long term clients, particularly when they purchased multiple items. Among customers who were visited at home on ambulant sales, or those who bought from Silvia at the school, people spoke of their pleasure at the convenience as a reason to pay the asking price without complaint.

In contrast, at La Milpa and at the AgroEco Market, customers did not barter at all and discounts were not available. Though tortillas were cheaper at the AgroEco market, they were also smaller in size than those tortillas served and sold at La Milpa. At the AgroEco Market and at La Milpa, customers often stated that the higher prices (or smaller tortillas) were worth it because in these locations one knew who had made the tortillas and with what maize the tortillas were made. Producers stressed the lack of bartering at La Milpa and the AgroEco Market as a benefit and a sign that their work was

valued differently in these locations. They were aware that their products were received differently in this setting. At the AgroEco Market or at La Milpa, the prices were not discounted, even nearing the end of the day, and it was common for tortillas to sell out before the end of sales time.

Table 3.1 Characteristics of Handmade Tortillas Across Location of Sale

Location	Price	Size	Barter Accepted	Discounts Offered
Municipal Market	1 peso/ tortilla	Varies 6" to 8"	Yes	Often
Ambulant Route	10 pesos/ dozen	Varies 6" to 8"	Yes	Occasionally
Fixed Independent Location	10 pesos/ dozen	Varies 6" to 8"	No	Occasionally
La Milpa	15 pesos/ dozen	8"	No	No
The AgroEco Market	10 pesos/ dozen	6"	No	No

In interviews, customers shared multi-faceted reflections when asked what constituted a fair price for a handmade tortilla. Many customers saw the overall higher cost for tortillas at La Milpa or the AgroEco Market as an investment in their health. Many cited that these tortillas do not contain “unnatural chemicals” and are not unnecessarily processed. Though industrial tortillas were cheaper, many people stated that it was impossible to know what went into Maseca flour. People worried that corn cobs or rotten maize might be in the flour with the potential to make them sick. One woman in her mid-60s proclaimed, “I can pay more for these tortillas now, or pay the doctor for medicine later.” Such sentiments were regularly voiced as reasons to pay more for handmade tortillas.

For many, calculating the cost was challenging; but in every in-depth interview, thinking about it resulted in people concluding that a peso per tortilla was very cheap. A 26-year old woman who lived at home with her mom recounted conversations between the two of them in relaying her thoughts: “I don’t know how much the women spend, if

they use firewood or charcoal, but you'd have to calculate all that, the time to cook the nixtamal, the lime, their time. Here they sell us a dozen tortillas for 15 pesos, and I wonder, can they make anything? Generally, I tell my mom that we should not barter with them, but rather be conscious of the fact that they have invested their time, and they have families to support.”

Armando, a 31-year old university student who worked part time in a paper store to support his wife and five-year old son, shared similar thoughts. At age 15, he left his rural hometown to come to study in the city and noted a serious change in his eating. He started shopping at the supermarket and spent little money on food due to having little disposable income. While he enjoyed eating handmade tortillas when he went to visit his parents, he bought them from the tortillería when in the city. After his son was born, however, and he began a degree in Sustainable Tourism at the Intercultural University in San Cristóbal, his views shifted. He explained:

I see things differently now. A handmade tortilla is artisan. Everything it requires, the time of the women, takes time and we don't want to pay fair prices. We bargain. Tostadas at ten pesos, we want to pay eight. What we pay is not a fair price. These women get up at three in the morning, which the rest of us don't want to do. Rather, we get up at 9:00 am and grab five pesos and go to the tortillería. But making a tortilla, from choosing the maize, cooking it with lime, washing it, preparing the press, heating the griddle. It's not like just grabbing a pan! And then I arrive and want to pay one peso for the tortilla? It's not fair!

For others, the price fits into a broader economic context within which consumers have more power than producers generally. For Rita, a 32-year old Mexican who had spent time studying economics in London, this context influenced her thinking:

A big factor is to try to make it so that producers can set their own prices... Because of my privilege, I get to decide who I work with, on

what, and for how much. That's a privilege that producers don't have. Because they are exploited, they don't get to decide the value of their work. So for me a fair price would start with producers that are able to decide the value of their work. And most of the producers [in places like The AgroEco Market and La Milpa] aren't trying to get rich. They are just trying to make a living. So for this reason, it doesn't bother me if I have to pay two pesos more per kilo.

This quote shows the correlation of price to other aspects of social relations that are made by some customers. Such evaluations were markedly less present in interactions where customers demanded lower prices in the municipal market.

Across the different locations, the webs of relations cultivated in promoted a range of considerations that were reflected in prices paid and bartering practices. In the municipal market, Rocío was most vulnerable to customers seeking the lowest possible price through bartering and critique of the products on offer. For Gabriela, personal relationships usually resulted in sales at her desired price, though not as consistently. For Silvia, personal relationships in which she worked to generate reciprocity allowed her to mitigate market vulnerability by cultivating a clientele willing to pay her prices. Some locations attempt to develop additional mechanisms to tame market pressures. At La Milpa and the AgroEco Market, the more formal setting supported an asking price that was higher than in other locations, thereby creating a new market niche that lessened producer vulnerability to lower prices.

Such efforts to tame market forces are often cited by proponents of alternative food systems as a means of increasing sustainability along the lines of several criteria. Socially embedding relations directly between producers and consumers, and decreasing geographic distance are thought to increase the share of the end cost that producers receive. Such rationale underscores fair trade certifications, which provide a social premium to support farmers and farmer organizations (Raynolds 2002). Similar rationale

about the ability of economic incentives to re-shape markets is sometimes evoked as justification for the premium paid to organic growers, supposedly to offset potential increases in costs and decreases in yield from employing more environmentally friendly production methods (Morgan and Murdoch 2000).

The variability in consumer practices, however, poses significant limitations for alternative food systems. If only a small portion of consumers ascribe to the considerations mentioned by some consumers or have sufficient disposable income to pay higher prices, no matter how fair to the producers, then the possibilities of these models to engender social change may be severely limited. In San Cristóbal, these pressures are already mounting. As concerns about maize production and health issues have gained traction in the media, additional options for buying tortillas have emerged. Some tortillerías now use nixtamal dough in a tortilla machine, allowing them to sell tortillas that are not made of Maseca for about half the price of handmade tortillas. In the face of this influx, handmade tortilla makers have to evoke additional considerations among their clientele. Price is only one mediator of value, however. Other factors shape webs of relations.

Quality Evaluations

Tortillas are also evaluated on criteria other than price. For many people, handmade tortillas and those made from rehydrated Maseca flour are in two completely different categories. In interviews with consumers, handmade tortillas were commonly referred to as “real tortillas” as opposed to “tortillería” in reference to industrially made tortillas. Among urban consumers in San Cristóbal, handmade tortillas were seen to be

imbued with many qualities that were not ascribed to industrial tortillas. Handmade tortillas were regularly described as more filling, “toothy,” better smelling, having a longer shelf-life and ability to reheat, as well as being more nutritious. In contrast, industrial tortillas were referred to as “like paper,” falling apart, always uncooked and not filling. Such evaluations however, tended to be made by most everyone. In 107 interviews with consumers, only one person claimed to like Maseca tortillas from the tortillería better than handmade tortillas. Several people mentioned that their young children prefer Maseca tortillas because they are softer.

Handmade tortillas are less uniform than industrial tortillas made from dehydrated maize flour. Conventional tortillas are typically about 5” across and vary little since they are pressed and measured by an industrial machine. In contrast, the handmade tortillas that were typically produced by the food makers in this study tended to range from 6” to approximately 8” across. Handmade tortillas differ in size, color, thickness and many other attributes. The type of maize used to make the tortillas, the time of cooking the maize, the amount of lime used in the water to cook the maize, the degree of washing of the maize, and the fineness of the dough are all attributes that can be evaluated. As a result, the tortillas can be evaluated based on different attributes. The vignettes demonstrate that different criteria are stressed in different locations, and the webs of relations in these spaces affect how quality is evaluated. Such evaluations are shaped by the social and cultural contexts, and the different kinds of capital and prestige that the tortilla makers have in different spaces (Bourdieu 1984).

At the municipal market, harsh evaluations of the quality of handmade tortillas was rampant and used as a strategy to justify bargaining. Rocío was asked about the

maize that she used, and customers often demanded to see each of the tortillas to ensure that none were ripped, burned or undercooked. Occasionally, a repeat customer would come by who remembered the quality of Rocío's tortillas, but this was less common because Rocío's sales schedule was inconsistent. Interestingly, in this setting handmade tortillas were often critiqued as being not as healthy as others. Several customers remarked that the tortillas had too much fat or too many calories.

These harsher evaluations may arise due to the social context of an ambulant saleswomen in the municipal market. The labor of making handmade tortillas was historically domestic labor; it was done by women in the home and was unpaid. In part due to this history, making tortillas was historically associated with lower class women, considered the most basic skill of the peasant household (Pilcher 1998). Though many people acknowledge the work of making tortillas to be difficult, the skill and time involved are often connected to women of lower economic status even people prefer the taste of handmade tortillas (Wynne 2015). Of the nine tortilla makers selling at the municipal market that I spoke with that were not affiliated with MyM, three spoke almost no Spanish, and two others spoke very broken Spanish; all said that they did not do other paid work outside their homes. Many women who make tortillas to sell are thought to make tortillas because they lack other marketable skills. For Mercedes, one of the matriarchs originally recruited to sell tortillas at the AgroEco Market, this was in fact the case. Mercedes, prior to joining MyM, considered her tortilla sales a menial economic requirement. Since she had no formal schooling, this was the only thing that she knew how to do. Making tortillas was her strategy to feed her family, and selling them was a necessity due to her poverty in the urban setting of San Cristóbal. Many of these

producers, like Mercedes are burdened with feelings of backwardness and inadequacy; and they worry about their products being of inferior quality, not fresh enough and lacking in value when selling at the municipal market.

For Gabriela, as an ambulant vendor, evaluations of the quality of her products were often a result of past experience with her clients. Similar responses were true for Silvia selling at the school. Regular customers of ambulant vendors tend to evaluate the quality of the products that they buy very highly. Anita, an older woman who buys tortillas from Gabriela twice a week, recalled the reaction she had after using masa that Gabriela made: “One day, I was making tamales, and I asked her if she could make the masa, and everyone said that they were the best tamales ever, delicious, the best in Mexico!” For Silvia, customers regularly asked if she had similar products to the week before, often framing the question in terms of “do you have more of that delicious _____?” For both of these women, consistent relationships with their patrons helped these clients trust the quality of the products that they purchased. However, though these relationships aided them in stabilizing their sales and building their incomes, these relationships could be precarious in terms of consistency and were time intensive. The personal relationships served as a generator of trust between the parties involved, but required a lot of investment on the part of the tortilla maker.

Success as an ambulant or home vendor can also be problematic. A friend in my neighborhood had quality concerns when increase in the scale of her supplier’s production of homemade tortillas occurred. As her producer’s renown had grown, her customer thought that she observed changes in quality: “Mercedes’s tortillas used to be delicious, but nowadays she is producing too many. They are often burned, and she is

adding Maseca flour. I can taste the difference. It's really bad for her to change her product. It's so much worse. I found María Valentina however because she came by the house, and now I go and buy from her around the corner. Her tortillas are SO soft and delicious!" Though Ana María still shopped at the AgroEco Market regularly, and to my knowledge did not speak disparagingly about Mercedes in that context; she chose to buy from another producer in her neighborhood who was selling tortillas only out of her home. Other persons at the AgroEco Market continued to laud Mercedes and her family's tortillas as delicious.

In my own observations, I never saw Mercedes add Maseca to her tortillas. It was true, however, that her production had changed. Mercedes and her daughters sold twice weekly at the AgroEco Market and they had been required to increase their output in recent years. In contrast, María Valentina, the woman that Ana María now bought from, sold tortillas out of her home, which was not a marked store. One had to know that tortillas were sold there, knock on the gate during particular hours to purchase tortillas. The differences between these two sales efforts can be viewed not only as having differences in the physical qualities of the tortillas, but also as having different qualities associated with their production. As Mercedes scaled up her production, she was seen as potentially decreased the artisan quality often associated with individual women making handmade tortillas.

At La Milpa, people generally felt that the price for the quality of tortillas was an excellent value. People often talked of the tortillas being filling, of good quality and having a superior taste. Multiple times, although people were not aware that the women were organized, I was told that the artistic black and white photos of women harvesting

corn and making tortillas made customers feel confident in the quality of these tortillas. “You can tell that the food here is natural,” I was told by one customer, “the corn comes from here, and these are good quality.” Similarly, the tortillas at La Milpa were regularly described as much healthier for both people and the environment. Roberto, a 21-year old indigenous college student, described the relationship between La Milpa’s handmade tortillas, quality and the environment as follows:

When we grab tortillas made in a machine versus ones made by hand, it’s like the difference between a napkin and a book... with two I feel full. In comparison, the industrial ones, I could eat a pound... and two hours later, I’m hungry... The difference is that handmade tortillas have more nutrients, more proteins, more vitamins, not only carbohydrates. And it has a lot to do with how the food is grown. If we produce it with a lot of agrochemicals, it loses a lot of qualities. But if it is grown organically, or at least with fewer chemicals, we can have a healthier tortilla. But, that requires the production of maize, of a milpa, that’s healthy, sustainable and organic. Why? So that later generations don’t have so many illnesses. And because the tortillas taste better.

Many customers at La Milpa wrongly believed that each of the women working in the store was the grower of all of the maize that she used to make tortillas. This belief was not consistent with reality; indeed, one aspect of the collective was to support women who no longer have land to farm. Though some of the produce was sourced from vendors at the AgroEco Market, and a portion of the maize came from farmers in neighboring Amatenango del Valle. While this worked in the favor of the women at the restaurant in some instances, it also engendered further complications. Some clients, committed to pursuing an idea of “organic” food without a clear understanding of it or of the local food production system, assumed that all of the food at the restaurant was produced “organically.” This term however, was often undefined. However, these beliefs led customers often to judge the tortillas as very high quality and worth higher prices.

At the AgroEco Market, Margarita is known to be an expert farmer of agroecological maize and also to possess a wealth of knowledge about tortilla production. Her reputation is built on the quality of her product and the knowledge that she possesses. She has given workshops at local universities on nixtamalization, serving as the expert on how and how long to cook corn to make the best tortilla or tamale masa. In 2010, she traveled as part of the Mexican delegation to the international Slow Food *Salone del Gusto* in Italy. For these reasons, I was never questioned about the quality of Margarita's tortillas during my fieldwork. Though Margarita's tortillas, which were sold at the AgroEco market, were smaller than tortillas sold in the municipal market or even at La Milpa restaurant; their price was regularly deemed to be a good deal for their quality. This was connected to the very positive perception of Margarita's skill as a farmer and tortilla maker.

This analysis shows that although the tortillas sold across these locations were the same, the social relationships and cultural history surrounding these transactions greatly impact the way that customers perceive the quality of the tortillas. Sales to customers that producers know and that occur in locations where their skills are legitimized help to promote both better prices and more favorable evaluations of their products by consumers. This supports the idea that some additional elements of connection between the producer and consumer can lead to more favorable perceptions of the good's qualities, in line with elements of social embeddedness that are evoked in relation to building more sustainable food systems. In this way, they were embedded in social contexts that were understood differently, and in which different aspects of the production and nature of the products were valued.

Location

The physical space at each location also prompted different types of social relations. This was in part due to the mobility of the vendors and the type of external validation that was available at the location of the sales.

During the days when I accompanied women selling tortillas in the regular municipal market, interactions which included these factors were exceedingly limited. Except for three women who had a fixed location outside the market, most women selling tortillas did not have a fixed stall as the butchers or produce sellers might. The women often moved around the market, or parked themselves in front of closed stalls or in corners to avoid paying a fee to the market management. Many came to sell only on the weekend or just for a few hours a day. Customers in this space typically bartered and asked very few questions of the women. The tortilla makers themselves hypothesized that this was because they were not always present at the same time of day or in the same location. They also commented that customers in this setting were most interested in cheap prices.

For ambulant vendors or those selling independently, locations are not fixed; and thus, they face similar challenges to the vendors at the municipal market. These women are unable to legitimize their production



Figure 3.2. Photos of MyM Members at La Milpa Restaurant.

practices with external indicators because they are carrying most of their wares with them. In this context, the existing personal relationships between customers and vendor affirms their legitimacy and skill as food makers. Some of these customers, however, consider it a positive that the work of these women takes place outside of so-called alternative markets. Martin, a man in his mid-30s who runs a tattoo parlor in town and regularly purchases tortillas and other food items from a member of *Mujeres y Maíz*, described the movement toward organic markets in the following way: “It is just for the rich people, this organic thing. It’s imported. If people really want to support the people here, and eat well, they should just go to the market, and buy from the women that are there selling on their tarps. Buy from the families that have had the food stands forever. Those people are the backbone, none of this rich people hippie stuff.” For him, supporting Gabriela in her rounds outside of the spaces of the emerging, self-proclaimed alternative food system was preferable. Her work as an ambulant vendor, rather than diminish her legitimacy as a producer of high quality goods, helped to establish her as part of a long-line of traditional tortilla makers. This evaluation shows distinct approaches to the elements that establish certain producers as authentic in different setting and scenarios. For Martin, the presence of particular markers of distinction like a certificate or academic language are signs of cooptation of real farmers and food producers rather than recognition. For him, the development of such spaces is more consistent with the maintenance of class status for certain people (Bourdieu 1984). Further details about how people of different classes interacted within these alternative markets will be explored in Chapter 6.

The physical spaces at La Milpa and the AgroEco Market promote interactions between customers and producers with the purpose of embedding relationships in the broader context of food systems. This is done by various means, including shaping the physical environment, providing additional information about the good's producer and elaboration, and promoting connections and interactions between people.

At La Milpa, photos on the wall attempt to make explicit the connections between the food served, the people that produce it, and the agricultural processes through which it is produced. For consumers who are not familiar with the work of the collective, these images joined the restaurant to food production. A 58-year old, working class street vendor who was visiting from Oaxaca explained that he came in because of the photos:

I was hungry, I saw this place, and the photos caught my attention. I thought, I'll just see, it says it's a community restaurant and that kind of place usually makes dishes from the region. I thought maybe they'll have these tortillas, warm, that one looks for to go with lunch. Even if they made them yesterday, it doesn't matter as long as they're the good, real ones.

In our conversation, he pulled out his wares, historic black and white photos of the city. For him, the black and white photos on the wall, showing the women making tortillas or harvesting corn, felt related to the kind of food that he hoped to find.

At La Milpa, the beautiful black and white photos of producers were complemented by images linked to other food-related, political issues. On another wall, were photos of maize of different colors, including images of "Maize of Chiapas," showing cobs of different colors, diameters and shapes. Next to this poster, were butcher paper posters made by school children who had attended a cooking class that portrayed the danger of genetically modified maize by depicting a corn cob decorated to look like a biohazard, the kernels replaced with drawings of skulls. It reads "GMO Maize: Biological

Danger.” These decorations certainly differ from Mexican sombreros or other knick-knacks that create an ambience. In this way, the images in the restaurant signaled that the people of the restaurant are uniting the space to a discourse surrounding food that is different from many restaurants.

The AgroEco Market explicitly promotes the connections that it makes between consumers and producers. The full name of the market is the “Network of Responsible Producers and Consumers of Healthy, Local Food” and it is known as a place to get healthy, sustainably grown, safe products directly from farmers and producers. In a study of 250 regular customers at the AgroEco Market, it was found that the

majority consider the food better than that available in other locations because the market is allied with organic and agroecological production methods, symbolic associations with local food production and alternative production practices that minimize the use of fertilizers and pesticides in large-scale commercial agriculture (Gutiérrez-Pérez, Morales, and Limón-Aguirre 2013). These evaluations align with the sustainability criteria explored throughout this dissertation.

The fixed space of the market made it possible to support these assertions with physical markers. The sign outside the market proclaims it to be “agroecological,” a term

Figure 3.3. Hand drawn Poster of GMO maize at La Milpa.



connected to the ideas of sustainable and organic agriculture. The term agroecological is less well-known than “organic,” but many of the vendors and founders of the market felt that the change was necessary for two reasons. One, most of the vendors are not certified as using organic production methods. Second, many worry that the term organic is being co-opted by larger scale agriculture and does not sufficiently signify the nature of this market. Margarita, one of the producers of heirloom maize, laid out for me the reasons that the market has taken the term “organic” out of its title, replacing it with “agroecological.” She explained, “We don’t use organic anymore because it is too commercial, and it doesn’t describe what we are doing. Our systems are even better than that. And I tell all of the people here at the market that they can come out to the farm and see what I do and see how I grow. That is much better than any sticker that the government can put on my food.”

Instead of an organic sticker, Margarita’s legitimacy as a producer of quality maize and tortillas is confirmed by her presence at the AgroEco market. At other tables, food is displayed without plastic bags, helping to showcase its “natural,” unprocessed origin. Radishes and carrots still have their green leafy tops, and their producers will tell you that this helps maintain their freshness. For several customers, the fact that the vegetables had a bit of dirt or their leafy green tops supported the idea that they had been picked freshly, and were not shipped long distances. For others, the use of pieces of vine rather than plastic twist ties served as another indication that these products were not industrial. These implicit markers were noted by several consumers in their analysis of what was unique about the AgroEco Market.

Margarita also displays the laminated paper that shows her to be certified through the participatory certification system of the market. The reputation of the market, and Margarita's individual reputation, these credentials and her practices affirm that the webs of relations being created at the AgroEco Market are supposed to differ from the municipal market and from the Maseca-based tortillerías down the street. In addition, the participatory certification for several customers was described as more trustworthy than organic certifications at the supermarket, which several interviewees considered more vulnerable to corruption by companies simply paying to be able to use a label.

Though indicators such as these were plenty for some customers, others felt that they were insufficient to tell the story of the collective that managed the restaurant. A 32-year old, regular customer informed me, "I know that it is a group of women that is organized and they learn about business and things. But, if you came and didn't know, there's nothing here to tell you it's a collective. You just see the women and wouldn't know they are doing something different. I only know because I live here. I'd like it if it said it was a cooperative. You can see that they are the same women as in the photos, but you wouldn't know they are organized because of that." For her, the knowledge that the women behind the counter were part of an organization was an important factor, and in her opinion the sales space should reflect that more explicitly. That, in her opinion, would make it clear that the web of relations that patrons were a part of by coming to the restaurant was different than some restaurant down the street.

This analysis shows that the physical spaces and the markers that help to legitimize the work done by tortilla makers differ greatly. These signifiers are tied to different class-related conceptions and qualities. At the municipal market, tortilla makers

usually lack a fixed location and are burdened with cultural perceptions that tend to devalue their work in that location. The ambulant vendor is connected to a tradition in which women made tortillas at home, a tradition that many associate with a time before the rise of supermarkets and one-stop shopping. For some customers, ambulant vending or selling from one's home gives a tortilla maker a particular kind of credibility, as demonstrated by Mercedes's previous customer who became suspicious after Mercedes increased her production. The fixed physical spaces of La Milpa and the AgroEco Market are able to utilize different signifiers than vendors in the municipal market or ambulant vendors. Physical markers like the photographs of women in traditional, indigenous dress and the agroecological production certificates encourage customers to engage differently with the producers and their products than people often do in other locations. These examples show how people evaluate tortilla makers differently and connect those evaluations to certain class signifiers.

Degrees of Intimacy and Personal Connection

Across these locations, the nature of the social relations promoted in each location differ. Because all interactions are embedded in social relations, understanding how different locations engender differing degrees of intimacy, personal relationships, and commitments to change help to interrogate how building different market niches can produce relationships that reinforce or subvert power relations in different ways.

In the municipal markets, relationships between the tortilla maker and customer were impersonal. Only a few vendors were present in the same place each day, and customers often told me that it was hard to find a consistent supplier within the municipal

market. The majority of tortilla saleswomen who stayed for a consistent timeframe came on the weekends, when it is more customary for families to eat at home. Many consumers informed me that they looked for handmade tortillas for the Sunday *comida*, as a special treat rather than as a daily staple. During the week, however, it was difficult to locate the same tortilla vendors day after day; many came and went at unscheduled hours, changed their sales days on a regular basis, or sometimes sent their daughters or other family members to sell. This inconsistency seemed to inhibit the development of personal relationships between producers and consumers. More than once, I saw consumers ask young women selling tortillas at the municipal market who their mother was or chastise Rocío or others for having been missing or absent on other days. These circumstances limited the ability of a social connection, undermining the possibility to get better prices.

For ambulant vendors, the webs of relations between the sellers and consumers were both more and less intimate at different points along their route. On the street, ambulant vendors were often ignored, or treated similarly to sellers in the municipal market. One time, Rocío was stopped as she and I walked together. A woman asked her about her tortillas, looked at them, declared them of inferior quality, and continued on. When Gabriela or Leticia and I undertook their routes, it was common for half of the clients not to be home to answer their door, something that greatly affected the day's bottom line. Gabriela was known to some of her clients, like those at the coffee shop, as "the woman with the tortillas," while other clients were familiar with her and her life. Both these types of clients could be consistent and long-term. At the coffee shop, Gabriela regularly sold to the girls working the counter, though they did not exchange names or more information.

This contrasted with some client relationships that blossomed into lasting friendships. It was common for Gabriela to be invited into the homes of some of her long-term clients to share some tea and conversation, as happened with Violeta. Anita, a 59-year old storeowner in the town center, commented that:

I met Gabriela through my sons. One son asked me, ‘You still eat from the tortillería? Why don’t you buy maize tortillas?’ ‘Where? I’d have to go to the market,’ I told, him, and it’s too much time.’ ‘A woman comes by our shop, should I send her to you?’ And that’s how Gabriela started coming to me... I met her, through other people, and then pretty soon she was a better friend of mine than of the guys at [the other shop].

Friendships also promoted sales in other ways. Gabriela visited a house twice weekly where we always chatted with Adelina, the caretaker of her employer’s two young children. Adelina had asked Gabriela to add the house to her route, which both allowed Adelina to supply her employer’s family with handmade tortillas and to visit briefly with Gabriela. Adelina was a friend who lived in Gabriela’s neighborhood, and through their personal relationships Gabriela had a sale and also a chance to visit with her friend in the workspace.

Sometimes, these social relationships were not time efficient. Gabriela’s ambulant vending, though it often allowed her to have a visit with friends, took up a great deal of time. One of the times that she and I walked together, I left her about 4:00 pm. At 7:00, her husband Rodrigo called me three times in succession. I returned his call to find him very distressed, wondering where Gabriela might be at such a late hour. He called me back 45 minutes later, letting me know that she had arrived home having spent a couple of hours chatting with one of her clients who is in ill health. Seen from a purely economic lens, this interaction is hardly efficient. It does, however, allow Gabriela and her clients to engage in social interactions and social care that is challenging to replicate in more

anonymous vending situations. These interactions fostered loyal customers and good friendships between Gabriela and her clients.

For Silvia at Pequeño Sol School, the web of relations in which her sales were embedded was very convivial, long-standing and stable. Silvia had been selling at the school through a special agreement with the administration that had been arranged through one of her family members who worked there as a custodian. This agreement provides Silvia with a predictable income, much more so than if she were to sell somewhere like the municipal market. Such predictability is generally very important to people who have little extra economic margin, particularly peasants and food producers, who employ varied strategies to protect themselves from market forces (Polanyi 1957).

At the school, Silvia also had a chance to develop personal relationships and rapport that turned into favors that could be offered and reciprocated. She was seen as providing a service, making snacks available for students and allowing some teachers and parents to pick up daily necessities. She and most customers spoke by name, many referring to her as Doña Silvia, a term of respect and endearment. Her products were familiar. People expected there to be steamed *chayote* squash certain days of the week and other treats on other days. For Silvia, it was also essential to build a relationship with clients through her sales style: "There is a lot to manage, and nothing sells itself. One has to laugh, and chat with people, and make them feel happy with you... It's the service that brings clients. And I know that if I give away one tortilla, later they are buying 10." She regularly got rides to the bus station after her shift from teachers at the school. She did not pay for these services, valued at between 40 and 60 pesos (US \$3.50 to \$5), but often gifted left over tortillas or cooked squash to the people that gave her these rides. In her

experience, these relationships did not extend far beyond the physical spaces mentioned here, but they were an important and rewarding part of selling at the school for Silvia.

At La Milpa restaurant and the AgroEco Market, both locations have stated goals to build relationships between producers and consumers as a means of building more just, market-based relationships. These goals are consistent with many alternative food system initiatives, in which it is theorized that re-embedding the economic in more proximate social relations will mitigate negative effects of liberalized markets by promoting alternative forms of citizenship and engagement (Seyfang 2006, Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine, and Ronan 2011). Increasingly, many alternative food system initiatives have moved from production and farmer-focused solutions to the issues of agricultural development dilemmas to consumption focused projects that imagine consumers as change agents to be mobilized (Goodman and DuPuis 2002). Within these projects, it is posited that building personal connections will engender transparency and trust between producers and consumers that can result in relations that are better for food producers, consumers, and the environment (Halweil 2002). Analyzing the nature and degree of intimacy supported at La Milpa and the AgroEco Market can show the ability of these experiments to build social relations that meet these criteria.

At La Milpa, the degree of intimacy between producers and clients was highly variable. Many customers were not familiar with the social mission or organization behind the restaurant, and many of these clients thought it was a typical restaurant. Though many were friendly with the women working, the relationships were not characterized by personal intimacy. Though people came to know each other within the

space, it did not necessarily mean that they became friends or were deeply knowledgeable about each other's lives.

The planning of the celebration of the restaurant's second anniversary is a prime example for demonstrating the varying degrees of intimacy generated between the members of MyM and patrons at La Milpa. To show appreciation for loyal customers and celebrate two years of joint work, the women at La Milpa planned a full day fiesta in November 2013.

Many of the guests had been critical to the project's success at different points. Silvia, a chef from Guadalajara, had helped to run cooking workshops for the women when they began planning to open the restaurant. Collaboratively, the women and Silvia had worked to alter several recipes to make them healthier, like preparing stuffed chili peppers that were grilled rather than fried. Celina, a young woman who had completed her masters' thesis by working with the women that lived in Teopisca, brought her one-year old baby Mateo, who was cooed over by everyone. Many of the women in Teopisca had spoken about Celina, who had spent many days with them cataloguing the herbs and plants that they cultivated in their patio gardens. Her work cataloguing the plants was often mentioned as a sign to the women that the unpaid work that many of them did to maintain small gardens of municipal herbs was important knowledge that was unique to them.

Not everyone was so well known to the women, however. During their brainstorming, the women did not know many customers' names, but referred to "the professor" or "the lawyer" who come every week. The same was true of people who had worked with the project. Not all of the women remembered the names of colleagues who

had done workshops on basic accounting, but wanted to invite “the man from the class” that they had taken. Nevertheless, this event allowed the women of Mujeres y Maíz and La Milpa to thank their patrons by providing them with a service and celebration. During the event, which lasted about 4 hours, a slideshow played photos of workshops, of the women making stuffed chili peppers, of the construction of stoves in their homes, and thereby familiarizing some people with aspects of the project that they may not have known. Of the guests, some had been deeply involved with parts of the project’s formation. Others were simply regular customers.

Though the web of relations at La Milpa encouraged some relationships between producers and consumers, and it encouraged a shorter, geographic supply chain and more direct connection between the producers and consumers in an effort to help ensure healthier food and to engender trust in the products that were available. These relations align with three of the sustainability criteria examined – it works to relocalize the supply of maize, support agroecological maize production practices and the farmers that utilize them, and generate a commitment to supporting those processes among consumers. However, it did not generate a community in which producers and consumers shared many particulars of each other’s lives, an element of social embeddedness that is sometimes assumed will accompany relocalization and direct connections. The women working at La Milpa were still preparing food during the celebration, which inhibited their ability to sit down with the guests that they had invited. The communal feeling that was generated by the event included a variety of relationships with very different levels of intimacy.

At the AgroEco Market, where many shoppers seemed to be regulars, it was very common for customers to know the names of the women selling tortillas. Questions were regularly asked about either the processes of production or other products that the women carried. In addition, it was common for customers to ask specific questions about the women's children or spouses, their daily lives and how they were. According to many AFS advocates, the development of such socially embedded relationships, which take into account additional considerations like agroecology or social position of the producer beyond price, are important for building more sustainable food systems. By my count, completed in timed recordings over multiple markets, an average of 34% of customers asked questions about the products; approximately 18% asked the women more personal questions about their lives unrelated to the products that they had on offer. These qualities tend to suggest that some of the people are at least superficially developing relationships that embed the process of economic exchange of tortillas for many with additional attention to the broader context of the producer.

At the AgroEco Market, it is clear that the customer in the anecdote feels an allegiance to both Margarita and Leticia and aims to alternate from whom she purchases. The continuity of the seller provides customers with the opportunity to build lasting relationships. As shown, however, not all customers take the time to ask questions. The degree of intimacy in this setting was less personal than between ambulant vendors and some of their clients. In the context of ambulant vending, intimacy was characterized as friendships. At La Milpa and the AgroEco Market, the idea of personal relationships was better characterized through ideas of trust in the supplier and supply chain. However, these two locations promote relations that result in some personal connections and a

valuing and awareness of the skill and provenance of producers and their products, in addition to generating increased prices and decreased market vulnerability. As such, they in some ways do generate results that align with several criteria connected to sustainable food systems.

Enmeshed in Meshwork: Broader Forces and Alternative Food Systems

The analysis of the vignettes in this chapter reveals that the social economy of handmade tortillas is varied. From the prices paid for the same goods, how the goods are evaluated, the external signifiers that help to establish the legitimacy of certain claims, and the nature of relationships and degree of intimacy established, the vignettes demonstrate that within these different locations, the market for the same goods varies considerably. The market, in this sense, is not any one thing, but rather is assemblages of relations that result in different circumstances for producers and consumers.

Within this social economy, different actors have more and less power in different locations. At the municipal market, consumers had greater leeway to demand lower prices or critique the quality of tortillas. Within the ambulant and independent vending scenarios, these pressures were mediated by personal relationships and a sense of reciprocity. At the AgroEco Market and La Milpa, fixed prices and tortilla quality were supported by the physical and social surroundings that overtly invoke several sustainability criteria, including agroecology, relocalization, and the idea of social embeddedness.

The different configurations of power in these situations occurred regardless of the fact that the women involved were the same and were selling the same products. Most

of the women that are selling handmade tortillas at the municipal market or as ambulant vendors are also involved in other locations, like working with La Milpa restaurant. The differences in power relations in different locations are grounded in the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts that people bring to bear on the situations. The interactions both form and are part of webs of relations between people. However, as shown through these vignettes, these webs of relations overlap.

Given this, it is important to use theoretical tools that help visualize the ways that people move within multiple webs of relations in order to understand such a varied but connected environment. For this, I draw on Ingold's conceptualization of meshwork. For Ingold, as explored in the introduction, beings inherently form webs of relations that shape and are shaped by the movement and the relationships developed. They undertake this movement within a "realm of entanglement," the environment within which people, organizations and entities come into contact with each other. Within a realm, Ingold states, "the possibility of entanglement, the threading together of strings, whose constituent strands, as they become tied up with other strands, in other knots, comprise the meshwork" (Ingold 2011, 70). In this way, beings, as part of the environment, "do not simply occupy the world, they *inhabit* it, and in so doing – in threading their own paths through the meshwork – they contribute to its ever-evolving weave" (Ingold 2011, 70). Through these webs, the meshwork is formed; the relational field in which people come into contact and enact varied values and practices that are shaped by the webs of relations in which they are enmeshed. This is a dual process – people exist within webs of relations and also shape them as they move through them. As such, these webs of relations consist of interwoven lines of growth rather than interconnected points (Ingold 2011, 69-70).

This social economy of the tortilla is the “realm of entanglement” that members of MyM and their customers inhabit. Within this realm, people are enmeshed in “webs of relations” that show the texture of this world, the ways that threads in the meshwork bind up with each other. Each vignette shows how particular actors thread multiple paths across the meshwork. Different interactions are promoted in certain “knots” of connection, and in the different locations in which the social economy of handmade tortillas operates.

The utility of this framework is that it enables us to see the ways that many of the varied market interactions and the people in them are interconnected. Understanding alternative food systems as interconnected and as relational helps to complicate the divide between conventional and alternative food systems (Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012). These spaces, knots, are neither bounded nor mutually exclusive. Both the women selling tortillas and many customers move in multiple locations explored in the above vignettes. Producers and consumers interact with each other within these systems in ways that are not always consistent. The same individuals employ multiple strategies and shop in multiple locations. The social economy of handmade tortillas is malleable and not limited to the process of exchange explored here. The economy is multitudinous; people flow fluidly and sometimes contradictorily between types of interactions depending on the space where they take place. As such, the social economy is part of a much broader web of relations that exists across and within food systems.

The nature and possibilities of these interactions are shaped by external forces and pressures. This meshwork of alternative food systems, which is made up in part by this social economy of handmade tortillas, is affected by forces that foster some types of

innovations and foreclose or inhibit others. To understand the relationships between these, it is helpful to extend Ingold's metaphor for meshwork. Ingold describes meshwork as like a root system of trees, grasses and plants. He posits that the lines along which beings move "become comprehensively entangled with one another, rather like the vines and creepers of a dense patch of tropical forest, or the tangled root systems that you cut through with your spade every time you dig the garden... It is within such a tangle of interlaced trails, continually raveling here and unravelling there, that beings grow or 'issue forth' along the lines of their relationships" (Ingold 2011, 71). Each of these roots, these vines and creepers, are connected to other plants and bind up with them, forming a complex web that both shapes its environment and comprises it. If meshwork is like a tangled root system of different organisms, some ecosystems are more and less amenable to different types of plants and would support different relations between and populations of plants, bacteria and other species. A black walnut tree, for instance, produces a toxin that inhibits other plants from growing underneath it, thereby maintaining access for the tree to more resources (Appleton et al. 2009). Different environments produce more biodiversity between different organisms. Within the metaphor, these environments would allow for a greater variety of knots to develop.

It is possible to think of the social economy of handmade tortillas as a section of meshwork that is like a portion of a root system growing in one part of a large garden. In San Cristóbal, several factors help to promote the development of this meshwork. For instance, the continued cultivation of criollo maize by small-scale farmers in the region supports access to this resource for women that make handmade tortillas. Similarly, the city's being host to multiple university programs focused on agroecology, sustainable

development, and alternative tourism draw people for whom topics related to rural development and support for small-scale, agricultural economies are of interest (Astier et al. 2017). Active indigenous movements and a regional office of the Vía Campesina have also helped to draw attention to issues of food sovereignty and indigenous rights that expand knowledge alternative food systems. Tourists that come to San Cristóbal to experience “authentic” Mexico are interested in these foods. All of these currents contribute to a section of meshwork in which alternative food systems examples, like these vignettes, can flourish.

At the same time, these initiatives are limited in profound ways by broader socio-economic and political forces. Handmade tortillas account for only a small percentage of the tortillas produced and consumed in Mexico; the vast majority are made with corn flour produced by the transnational giant GRUMA (Jayasanker 2011). National policies subsidize larger-scale maize production and imports that threaten producer livelihoods by increasing the supply of U.S. maize in Mexican markets (Fox and Haight 2010, Zahniser and Coyle 2004). The tortilla makers, operating in this context, experience precarious livelihoods. Challenges include finding the appropriate maize for their products, but also larger scale changes like changes to land tenure systems that promote rural-outmigration and lessen access to land and increasing dependence on earned income (Pérez 2003). Though the AgroEco Market and La Milpa present certain advantages, they are also limited and shaped by external forces. Among some consumers, as indicated here, these locations are considered too expensive, exclusive, or elitist to be for everyone. These evaluations reflect differences in price. At the time of fieldwork, a kilo of industrial

tortillas made with Maseca flour could be purchased on almost every street for only six or seven pesos per kilo.

In this sense, the patch of alternative food systems within the meshwork of the larger garden is vulnerable to shifts in the broader structures on a variety of levels. The dependence on consumers that are knowledgeable enough to adopt sustainability considerations or who have sufficient disposable income to pay more for certain goods is an important critique of alternative food systems, and contributes to wariness about the ability of these niches to produce sufficient consumer commitment in the interest of social change (Allen et al. 2003). A decline in attendance at the AgroEco Market, alterations in family structure within the household other factors could push Rocío out of producing tortillas into work at a supermarket that provides a steady, if inadequate paycheck. Were Margarita to lose her land on which she grows maize due to land tenure reforms, her ability to participate at the AgroEco Market would diminish. On the other hand, an increase in consumers of handmade tortillas could potentially induce the women to participate more in certain locations that provided them with favorable conditions. Understanding this vulnerability is critical to investigating how alternative food systems are both part of, and also shape, the larger meshwork.

Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, it has been shown that interactions take place within webs of relations. Utilizing the concept of meshwork, it was possible to see how these webs of relations are connected to each other; and how people move within, through and across multiple webs. These webs shape how the same exact goods are

judged, exchanged and regarded in different locations and affect the nature of the relationships that emerged through those webs. Price, perceptions of quality, physical location and degrees of intimacy and personal connection were all impacted by the social relations of people exchanging handmade tortillas. Class was not a consistent predictor of certain behaviors or ideologies. These differences were connected to a variety of historical, cultural, political and economic currents and forces.

The resulting interactions had different effects on the women selling tortillas. Prices and perceptions of the quality and expertise of the producers were consistently higher at two of the locations, La Milpa Restaurant and the AgroEco Market. In these spaces, food provenance and the processes entailed in the creation of the food were supported by physical markers like photos or certifications that served as external legitimizers of both agroecological practices and relocalization to many consumers. Interestingly however, though these spaces often tout the opportunity for creating direct, transparent and personal connections between producers and consumers; ambulant and independent sales seemed to foster opportunity, even if sporadically, to build relationships and multi-faceted friendships between vendors and clients. In this way, intimacy and connection manifested differently. At the AgroEco Market and La Milpa, these connections were supported by the location and external signifiers in comparison to a greater connection between individuals within ambulant and independent sales.

Though the social economy of handmade tortillas is varied, two of these locations focus explicitly on the sustainability criteria examined in the introduction – promotion of agroecological practices, embeddedness in particular kinds of social relations, relocalization, and commitment to change. At the AgroEco Market and La Milpa

restaurant, the tortilla makers get higher prices and greater stability; and customers get more consistent, convenient, transparent and long-term access to regionally-produced foods grown using agroecological methods. The settings of these locations allow proponents multiple avenues to encourage patrons – both producers and consumers – to adopt such practices. According to the analysis in this chapter, a policy implication for growing food systems that build on these criteria would be the creation and expansion of locales like the AgroEco Market and La Milpa restaurant. This would, however, require that there be a growing awareness of, commitment to and market for these products within the webs of relations developed in those two spaces. So, what contributes to the development of these webs of relations? How are actors in San Cristóbal working to expand these spaces, and to what effect? The remaining chapters of this dissertation explore these questions.

Chapter 4 : Knots in Meshwork: Diversity in Alternative Food Systems

In their roles at the AgroEco Market and La Milpa, Rocío, Fátima, Margarita, Gabriela, Silvia, Mari Carmen and Verónica are actors in a broader meshwork of AFS in San Cristóbal. Just as the social economy of handmade tortillas is represented through diverse spaces in which people engage in multiple webs of relations, alternative food systems consist of multiple configurations to advance the values and wellbeing of participants. This chapter uses the development of Mujeres y Maíz and a selection of connected initiatives in San Cristóbal to explore the natures of alternative food systems in Chiapas. The structural idea of meshwork is used to describe the ways in which certain of the sustainable food systems criteria are actualized, shared, transmitted and contested in various ways within these pursuits. In addition, I apply and flesh out the concept of engagement ladders as a means to explore how these actions fit into and alter throughout the daily lives of those who participate in them.

Laying out the history of the Mujeres y Maíz Collective shows how it emerged as part of a broader web of organizations and initiatives. In this chapter, I then situate this development in comparison with the work of several partners of MyM and the values that connect these various projects. Charting the development of these undertakings shows the varied forms that alternative food systems can and do take, as well as the practices and habits of the people that engage in them. Alternative food systems in San Cristóbal are neither static nor fixed. AFS initiatives continually evolve. Practices change, new ideas and projects are implemented, participants flow through and between them. Over time, these processes create new knots over time in the meshwork of alternative food systems.

Origins of the Mujeres y Maíz Collective

From a Basket to a Market to a Collective

Mujeres y Maíz collective grew out of previous food projects that emerged in San Cristóbal in the mid 2000s. The direct antecedent was the “Organic Basket,” or *Canasta Orgánica*, a project started by four women in 2005. The women, all of whom knew each other, had met either studying at ECOSUR, the San Cristóbal location of the progressive *College of the Southern Border*, or working in projects related to women’s empowerment, environmental conservation and economic development in and around San Cristóbal. The four were well-educated, middle class women. Three had moved to Chiapas from other parts of Mexico to study or work; and one was from Germany and married to a Mexican man. They shared a concern about the quality, health and safety of foods available for themselves and their small children. The women engaged in months of study and exchange with groups pursuing similar work in other parts of Mexico. They had two goals: 1) developing a plan for getting fresh, local, healthy food for their families, and 2) creating a space for dialogue between producers and consumers to enhance environmental awareness and responsible consumerism (Reyes Gómez 2010). The role of San Cristóbal as a center of agroecological research and alternative development discourse provided fruitful ground for such experiments.

In late 2005, the Organic Basket launched as a weekly delivery, similar to a community supported agriculture subscription (a regular share of produce purchased directly from a farm (Brown and Miller 2008)). The project began with seven families receiving product from two producers who provided grains, some meat, coffee and

honey. Each week, families would place orders through the organizers, who compiled the information on a spreadsheet. The orders were then communicated by phone to the farmers. Each Saturday, these farmers delivered their goods to a home or rented commercial space. As a group, members of the receiving families packed the orders, which were picked up later in the afternoon by those that had placed the order.

The scope and popularity of the Organic Basket increased rapidly, from seven to 30 families between July and December 2005 (Reyes Gómez 2010). As the demand grew, so did the search for additional products. The number of consumers grew by word of mouth, and so did the number of producers and the products involved. The Organic Basket included producers of goods like tortillas, tostadas, eggs, milk, vegetables, cheese and bread (Reyes Gómez 2010).

Some of these suppliers had organic certification, but many others did not. In order to ensure that the conditions of production matched the goals of the Basket, that of providing safe and healthy food that would benefit both local producers and promote responsible consumption, a participatory certification program was developed by a subset of members of the Organic Basket (Nelson et al. 2009). Working with professors and students at ECOSUR, a protocol for evaluating producers was developed (Reyes Gómez 2010). This participatory certification process, carried out by consumers and producers of the Organic Basket, was designed to address a variety of ecological, social and economic concerns. However, it was critical that the process took into account the different situations of producers involved in the Organic Basket. Some had larger plots and established organic growing practices; others were single women whose work supported themselves and their children. Attention to the capability of producers to incorporate

agroecological practices as well as good hygiene was part of the certification. At the time, an additional major concern for consumers in San Cristóbal was that vegetables and grains produced in the area were irrigated with “clean” waters, in contrast to water that was contaminated with sewage. This issue was related to a recurring public health scare in which various surrounding communities were found to make use of contaminated municipal water supplies to irrigate crops (Silva 2014, González 2013). Concern also extended to the use of pesticides and fertilizers that might be damaging to people’s health (Pérez et al. 2012). In addition to increasing transparency and security, a committee of producers and consumers involved in the Organic Basket made participatory certification visits. They were to become familiar with production processes and create information about each producer for the families that ordered through the Organic Basket (Nelson et al. 2009).

The seeds of *Mujeres y Maíz* were planted during the days of the Organic Basket. In the search for expanded products, one of the four women founders recommended a woman named Mercedes Luna as a tortilla maker who lived in her neighborhood. In addition to selling door-to-door to her neighbors, Mercedes was one of a few women who had been selling handmade tortillas continuously at the Municipal Market for most of her life. She was known to be a purveyor of quality tortillas and other maize-based products.

Following up on this recommendation, Lucy Silva, one of the other founders, went to visit Doña Mercedes at her home for an interview to learn about her tortillas and investigate their incorporation into the Organic Basket. Lucy recalls that Mercedes showed her into the house, where there were three fires and griddles going for the production of tortillas by Mercedes and her daughters. “The conditions were quite

difficult. There was a lot of smoke in the house, despite an open roof. Mercedes's children were playing nearby," Lucy remembered. At the time, Lucy had been working in other communities outside of San Cristóbal to provide wood-saving, cleaner-burning stoves to improve indoor air quality and combat the overharvesting of firewood near communities. For Lucy, seeing Mercedes's conditions right in the city of San Cristóbal was a stark reminder that the issues affecting small-scale farmers in rural communities were also present in the city. This interaction reinforced for Lucy that the Organic Basket would need to find additional ways to support food producers that extended beyond building market opportunities if they really were to enhance environmental sustainability and responsible consumption patterns. Mercedes and her family were invited to supply tortillas to the Organic Basket in 2006, increasing her profit margin and the predictability of her sales.

By this time, more than 100 families were placing orders with the Organic Basket each week. As it grew, the tasks associated with this organization grew increasingly onerous for those involved in the logistical planning. Sourcing, receiving and sorting orders were time consuming, immense tasks. Looking for new possibilities, those that bought from the Organic Basket decided to celebrate the one-year anniversary with a market-style meeting of the producers and consumers who exchanged products and money through the initiative. In formalizing the connection, the Organic Basket became the *Red de Productores y Consumidores Responsables Comida Sana y Cercana*, (The Network of Healthy, Local Food Responsible Producers and Consumers).

In 2006, it was determined that the Organic Basket had grown too big to continue in the same manner. The network *Comida Sana y Cercana* reconfigured as a weekly

market in San Cristóbal (Nigh and González Cabañas 2015). This is the AgroEco Market, short for agroecological market, referred to in the last chapter. The market, which takes place three times per week at two different locations, provides an “alternative for responsible production and consumption that respects food quality and safety, produced without chemicals and caring for the environment” (Tianguis San Cris 2016). As of 2013, the AgroEco Market included eleven agricultural producers, six artisanal food producers using mostly “clean” products, seven food producers using conventionally produced products, two stores with a shared commitment to agroecological practices, a meat producer and another supplier of fish and seafood (Gutiérrez-Pérez, Morales, and Limón-Aguirre 2013). In 2015, these included 31 producer families supplying more than 70 varieties of fresh produce, meats and handmade items like tortillas, cheeses and tinctures (Bellante 2017). It is regularly attended, and referred to around town as the “alternative market” or the “organic market” by many customers.

Roots in The Tortilla Crisis: Inspiring the Groundwork for a Regional Maize Economy

In 2007, with the AgroEco Market now in full swing, and operating as a market rather than a basket; new challenges emerged for the consumers and producers involved. The “Tortilla Crisis” in Mexico hit in 2007. Increased energy prices, market speculation, and anticipation of increased US demand for maize as a primary input for ethanol contributed to a spike in the global price of maize (Keleman and Rañó 2011). Between the middle of 2006 and early 2007, the price of industrial tortillas in Mexico rose 72%, a huge increase for a product that accounted for 32.6% of Mexicans’ daily calories that year (FAOSTAT 2007). At its highest price, between 12 and 15 pesos, the cost was

equivalent to 20% of the daily minimum wage (Keleman and Rañó 2011). For poor Mexicans, for whom maize-based products like tortillas accounted for an even larger percentage of calories, this caused a food crisis.

The government chose to deal with this issue by creating the “Tortilla Price Stabilization Pact” to bring the price for tortillas back down to 8.5 pesos per kilo. At the time of fieldwork, in 2014, the price was consistently 11 to 11.5 pesos per kilo. The government further announced that it would create a white maize strategic reserve with zero tolerance for speculation, to help alleviate scarcity-based price increases in the future (Keleman and Rañó 2011). The pact, put forth by the Calderón administration, was widely criticized for failing to address the needs of many Mexicans. As a voluntary pact that only included representatives of 10% of the nation’s points of sale for tortillas, it was also lambasted for lacking the regulatory teeth to enforce price controls. It did, however, allow the Federal Government and the Calderon administration to maintain campaign promises promoting free trade and a lack of regulation.

Lucy, one of the organizers of the Organic Basket and the founding coordinator of Mujeres y Maíz, remembered that at the time, she was struck by the ways that this crisis bore marked similarities to struggles faced by vendors selling at the AgroEco Market.

She explained:

When we got started, it was clear from [Doña Mercedes’] work and her kitchen space, that the realities of food insecurity, indoor air pollution, and the inability to get the sort of maize that she wanted was a reality in the city, similar to rural communities. At the same time, it was the middle of the Tortilla Crisis, when Maseca tortillas jumped from six pesos a kilo to 12 or 14 pesos. This is related to Mexico being dependent on maize from abroad and has a lot to do with international markets.

For her, the Tortilla Crisis helped to cement the analysis that the globalization of the

maize supply was increasing vulnerability and decreasing the autonomy of Mexico's maize producers and those who make food from maize. As a result of the Tortilla Crisis, the negative impacts of this globalized supply chain were made increasingly visible across society.

Free trade policies that contributed to the Tortilla Crisis had been instrumental in dismantling prior price stabilization programs for maize and other household staples during the 20th century. In the 1960s and 1970s, a national State Food Agency ran social welfare programs that included food subsidies for consumers who were able to purchase subsidized foodstuffs through state-run shops that sprang up in both urban and rural areas (Ochoa 2000). Beginning in the 1960s, CONASUPO, a state-run company, regulated the markets of staple crops through the creation of more direct connections between producer and consumer, eliminating inefficient and dishonest middlemen. It also sought to protect both low-income consumers by granting them access to basic foods and low-income producers by supporting pricing that allowed them to obtain a livelihood from their production activities (Yunez–Naude 2003). In 1973, the prices for grain paid to farmers through CONASUPO increased by 30%, helping to draw more producers into the national market with guaranteed prices for basic grains. In the late 1970s, these programs were expanded and renamed the *Sistema Alimentaria Mexicana* (SAM, the Mexican Food System), a state-run, innovative food security program that allocated money from the oil industry to support peasant agricultural production (Ochoa 2000). This promoted increased incorporation of peasant producers in the countryside into the national economy and improved standards of living for poorer urban and rural dwellers (Keleman and Rañó 2011). All of these programs were dismantled during the structural adjustment

period that Mexico endured in the 1980s. In 1982, Mexico became the first country to accept a bailout by the International Monetary Fund, through which international debts that the government owed were refinanced in exchange for policy changes that opened Mexico to greater foreign direct investment and de-privileged social spending (McMichael 2005, Barkin 1987). Price protections and food self-sufficiency policies were further eroded through the inclusion of agricultural goods in the implementation of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, in 1994 (Zahniser and Coyle 2004, Henriques and Patel 2004, Barkin 1987). These policies align with the commitment to industrialization and neoliberal globalization of agriculture and other industries that many alternative food system advocates decry.

The pact to end the Tortilla Crisis focused on industrial tortilla suppliers but did nothing to address the health, economic and biodiversity issues that had prompted the development of the Organic Basket. This reaction on the part of the government to the Tortilla Crisis sparked conversation and action among those involved in the AgroEco Market in San Cristóbal. Lucy, the Coordinator and founder of MyM, remembered that at this time:

The price of maize shot up, it was all going to ethanol in the United States. The women making tortillas suddenly couldn't buy their maize, and tortillas, the industrial ones, were getting more expensive. I just felt like, we are too dependent on maize from abroad when we have so much capacity to produce it here. And people are leaving the countryside because of policies that promote importing maize. How do we get back to a more sustainable way? Well, women have a lot of culturally important knowledge about maize; it's been their work for a long time. We can strengthen them by growing markets that support them. If more consumers buy maize and maize products grown here, then both can be sold more closely, and we are not so dependent on international markets.

The coalescence of health concerns, the growing presence of the national *Sin*

Maíz No Hay País (No Corn No Country) campaign (Mann 2011) and now a spike in maize prices that affected producers and consumers alike, led the patrons of the AgroEco Market to expand their support for maize farmers and those making maize-based products. Lucy had already seen that among the women making maize-based products, there was a well-developed skill to value different qualities of maize. Like other researchers have found, Lucy had observed that the women making tortillas were very discerning:

The women here use maize from here. The maize from [the government program] CONASUPO does not have the qualities that they like. The black corn comes from Zinacantán, and the yellow variety is from Amatenango. They know the local maize and that helps ensure that they choose that maize in their products. What we needed to do is explore how more maize can be produced in Chiapas and insure that more maize from Chiapas is consumed in Chiapas.

Among supporters and participants in the AgroEco Market, the Tortilla Crisis was one in a number of events that demonstrated the need to expand the spaces where food system issues could be examined and connections between different issues could be illuminated. For many people involved, the AgroEco Market and connected initiatives were creating spaces where issues of food security, biodiversity, health and support for small-scale farmers could be explored and addressed in interconnected ways. Food security and the availability of safe and healthy food had been major reasons for founding the Organic Basket and AgroEco Market in the first place. Between 2005 and 2007, the market had gained momentum and was regularly attended by a variety of people that included researchers, environmentalists, students and people interested in healthy food and in using relationships between rural producers and urban consumers as a vehicle to address problems like those that generated the Tortilla Crisis.

The Tortilla Crisis had revealed a powerful entry point through which this experiment could continue and expand building a new kind of food system. For those involved, it was thought that food system change for the better could happen through cultivating values such as direct connections, promotion of biodiversity and sustainable agriculture and establishing greater protection from the vagaries of international markets. These goals align with several of the criteria for sustainable food systems – increasing agroecological production, increasing social embeddedness with transparency and trust, and re-localizing production and consumption circuits within a defined geographic setting. Following the Tortilla Crisis, there would be an increased focus on supporting farmers, tortilla makers and consumers who form the chain of maize.

The Blooming of Mujeres y Maíz

Mujeres y Maíz sprouted from these roots. The organization began with the intention of supporting family-based economic units of women connected to the AgroEco Market. The focus on women emerged because women are the primary producers of tortillas and maize-based products. Incorporating family groups is consistent with the culturally common organization of household and kin-based networks working together in both formal and informal employment in Mexico (Vélez-Ibañez 2010). In addition, research has shown that the household serves as a long-term productive investment vehicle for family groups in Latin America, particularly as they move from rural to urban locations (Bossen 1981, Wilk 1989). In particular, women within poor households have been found to be key actors in implementing survival strategies ranging from wage work, subsistence production and social networking (de la Rocha, xe, and lez 1988). These

strategies help them manage as increasingly primary household wage earners due to migration, changes in family structure and increasing economic integration (Shin 2008).

Formed in 2008, Mujeres y Maíz is not a legally incorporated cooperative. Project funds are administered and managed through a civil society organization.³ Rather, it is a collective, a fluid group of participants who engage in various projects and strategies to promote the goals listed above. The members of MyM are kin-based groups of women who engage in the artisanal production of maize products like tortillas, tostadas, and other foods (Mujeres y Maíz 2014). These groups are made up of families: mothers, daughters, sisters-in-law and friends. The collective does not have a single headquarters where people meet on a regular basis. It is easier to understand the organization through its activities rather than as a single definable entity. As of 2014, the collective was working with 53 members located in three cities in Chiapas: San Cristóbal de las Casas, Teopisca and Amatenango del Valle.

The collective has three, part-time paid positions that have been funded intermittently by grants. Lucy Silva, the coordinator, was one of the original founders of the Organic Basket. At the time of the Organic Basket, Lucy was working on rural development projects focused on combatting deforestation through the promotion of wood-saving stoves in the homes of rural women. In her role as a founder of the Organic Basket, as stated above, she was tasked with locating a tortilla supplier, and found Mercedes. From this experience, Lucy, in conjunction with friends, raised the first funds to begin the projects of MyM, at that time limited to providing improved cooking stoves to women that were involved in the Organic Basket. To receive external funding, Lucy

³ The development and structure of Mujeres y Maíz as an organization will be further elaborated on in Chapter 5, as well as Lucy's role in its creation.

took on the role of allying herself with an existing non-profit organization in San Cristóbal that was able to receive funding for the projects of MyM. As of 2014, Lucy served as the founding coordinator for Mujeres y Maíz. In that role, she solicits and manages funds for projects undertaken by the collective, in addition to managing reporting and other day-to-day operations. She handles much of the organization's logistical planning, digital communications and much of the execution of new project ideas.

In addition to Lucy, between 2008 and 2014, several other people had worked in varied part-time capacities with the organization. In 2014, the part-time staff included a rural development student who travels between the three communities and works with participants to implement various projects and a part-time community organizer who is from and lives in Amatenango del Valle. This young woman, Mary, assists Lucy and organizes programming there and also completed her undergraduate anthropology thesis on maize cultivation and marketing in Amatenango in 2014. Previously, Mujeres y Maíz had also hosted two interns finishing a practicum for their undergraduate degrees.

The collective regularly partners with other local, national and international organizations to develop programming in line with organizational goals. The collective's members range from producers in rural areas who continue to cultivate maize on family plots of land, both for sale and for subsistence, to women located in urban areas whose primary occupation is making food products from maize. More details about these women will be explored in the following chapter.

Mujeres y Maíz seeks to strengthen these family-based food economies through a three-pronged approach: connecting food producers to each other, building an alternative

food infrastructure through varied distribution outlets and expanding a consumer base for products produced from locally grown, native maize through educational events and outreach (Mujeres y Maíz 2014). By operating in each of these areas, the organization MyM pursues an integrated approach to developing food systems that supports producer livelihoods, maize biodiversity, and consumer education (Silva 2014). As of 2014, the collective undertook various activities consistent with these three prongs.

To connect producers and tortilla makers, the organization began in 2008 by hosting meetings, workshops and discussions focused on quality, hygiene, and diversification of products for women who produce maize-based foods for sale. The idea was to develop and strengthen the ties between women who engage in the same activities, as well as to encourage solidarity and expand access to both financial resources and new buyer networks. In large part, this goal has evolved to a focus on connecting producers within the supply chain in order to build stable markets for maize grown in Chiapas. The collective connects women in urban San Cristóbal, most of whom lack land to grow their own maize, to producers in Teopisca and Amatenango del Valle, where growers produce heirloom maize varieties. As a result of this new market, many growers in Amatenango are expanding the use of “clean” production techniques that do not require chemical fertilizers, thereby expanding sustainable production methods (Bautista León 2013). A major focus has been on the preservation and production of native and heirloom maize varieties that are highly valued in the maize products made by the women in San Cristóbal. Though this maize does not always bring a higher price, having a stable market for it is encouraging producers in Amatenango to expand their production of these varieties beyond what they may usually grow for their own subsistence (Bautista León

2013). These include blue, black and yellow corn varieties that have traditionally been grown in the region; but the cultivation of which has diminished as hybrid and improved maize varieties have gained in popularity. This increase in the use of hybrid varieties is fueled by the distribution and promotion through government programs, increased migration of household members away from farms, and diversifying livelihood options and changing cultural importance of maize cultivation (Keleman, Hellin, and Bellon 2009).

To build an infrastructure through which to promote traditional maize products, the collective works to expand sales spaces, promoting products in homes, offices, organizations and restaurants. The group benefitted from being able to integrate with the existing AgroEco Market to expand demand and support for the tortilla makers. This requires both promoting different maize products and expanding sales opportunities. To achieve the first goal, members make many traditional maize-based products ranging from tortillas to tostadas, tamales, and maize-based drinks like *atole* and *pozol*. By using criollo maize varieties for these, the women contribute to other initiatives that seek to build appreciation for maize varieties that are lost in industrial tortilla making (Ramirez Leyva 2012, Hellin et al. 2013). For the past few years, catering for forums and meetings has also been an important venue for increasing sales of these kinds of items.

As the collective developed in 2010, the members expressed a desire to open a permanent retail location where they could promote their products and regularly engage with the public. This resulted in the opening of *La Milpa Comedor Comunitario*, a collective-managed restaurant, in 2011. This restaurant supplemented existing market outlets for the members of MyM; including the thrice-weekly AgroEco Market and

arrangements with schools, private clients and catering of special events for universities, conferences and individuals. La Milpa Restaurant was opened with project funding from international organizations. Details of this operation will be examined in the next chapter.

To expand a consumer base for artisanal maize products, the collective participates in and organizes public events that encourage the consumption of food made with criollo corn. These events, like the Festival of Corn and Tortilla, held in San Cristóbal, or the Festival of Taste, held in Teopisca, are often organized by partnerships that include university groups, non-profits like MyM, civil society groups like Slow Food and other environmental and peasant organizations. The events have included presentations on heritage and native maize, seed exchanges, informational posters and cultural activities. Interactive activities like “make your own tortilla” for children, comparisons of maize colors, tastings of maize-based drinks like *pozol* and other activities serve to familiarize people of all ages with different qualities of maize. Members of the collective regularly speak at these and other events to promote their businesses and describe their working conditions in order to raise awareness about food justice and economic opportunity and the possibilities of collective business models for economic development.

Knots in Meshwork: Diverse AFS Initiatives in San Cristóbal

MyM is an organization born out of the collaborative work of many different people. Begun as the initiative of the Organic Basket by a few women as a means to find healthier food for their children, it led to the identification of additional food issues. This concern with healthy food has emerged in Mexico among various groups including

“reflexive consumers”; having their basic needs met, many of these middle-class, urban consumers apply additional criteria to their food-based decision-making, including concerns like nutritional and environmental health, biodiversity conservation, solidarity with rural people, and food sovereignty (Nigh and González Cabañas 2015). Among the founders, of the Organic Basket, many of these concerns were grounded in their work as university researchers and rural development workers as well as their position as parents and community members (Silva 2014). The appeal of short-supply chains was shown to extend far beyond the ambition of the original founders, staying consistent with similar desires of consumers in many parts of the world (Renting, Marsden, and Banks 2003). Issues relevant in the countryside were shown to be relevant for small-scale producers in urban areas and prompted the founding of a new organization like MyM. Like other initiatives, MyM has evolved over time, adopting new foci and work tactics based on the needs and desires of the people involved.

This progression is a prominent feature of alternative food systems, as are multi-stranded relations of collaboration. A common way to illustrate the relationships that fortify alternative food systems has been through the use of social networks. Network analyses have become common in numerous disciplines and have provided a foundational tool for conceiving of and investigating alternative food systems. These network analyses allow visualization of the relationships between entities, showing how different organizations are connected at one particular moment in time (Wasserman and Faust 1997). This framing is very common in work on alternative food systems (Renting, Marsden, and Banks 2003).

However, the challenge is how to account for the changing nature of relations

over time, particularly since they are shown to impact how AFS grow. Mapping out the connections between various organizations at a particular time fails to capture the processes through which the relations were formed and are continued and the impact that those relations have had and may continue to have in the future.

For this reason, meshwork becomes a valuable framework. As explored in the last chapter, the idea of meshwork situates people within “webs of relations,” interconnections that are formed over time and which emanate in many directions at once. Ingold distinguishes the idea of meshwork from that of a network. According to his framing, networks have been useful for allowing us to focus on the relations *between* entities by focusing on the lines as mere indicators of the connections. However, for Ingold, this idea does not go far enough. It presupposes a distinction between things and their surroundings, as if an organism is truly separate from the environment that it inhabits. Rather, according to his idea of meshwork, “things *are* their relations” (Ingold 2011, 70, emphasis in original). Following this view, organisms cannot be represented as single entities, neither circles nor lines. Instead, it is more accurate to understand them as “not so much nodes in a network as knots in a tissue of knots, whose constituent strands, as they become tied up with other strands, in other knots, comprise the meshwork” (Ingold 2011, 70).

While the last chapter focused on meshwork as a realm of entanglement within which webs of relations exist, this chapter looks at how webs of relations form knots in meshwork, locations where different people and initiatives become bound up with each other. This framework compels us to stop seeing any of these entities as separate from each other. To extend this, we return to Ingold’s metaphor to explain meshwork as akin

to the tangled root systems of trees, grasses and plants that we may encounter when digging in the garden. As roots grow through the environment they also shape it, creating spaces for different bacteria or microbes to interact with more dirt as the roots extend, entangling with the roots of other organisms and in this way forming the environment. They are not entities that are separate from each other. At different times they are entangled with different organisms, each of which shapes the ways that the roots move in the moment and in the future. Ingold theorizes that understanding organisms (people and things) as processual and entangled, as made up of and making up the relations that enable their existence, allows us to engage with a world that is not static and is always in the process of becoming. Entities, in his words, “should be understood not as bounded and surrounded by an environment but as an unbounded entanglement of lines in fluid space” (Ingold 2011, 62). Those entities, however, become bound up with each other to form knots, and in the places “where inhabitants meet, trails are entwined... every entwining is a knot, and the more that lifelines are entwined, the greater the density of the knot” (Ingold 2011, 148).

MyM is a knot in the meshwork of alternative food systems efforts in San Cristóbal. As a knot in the meshwork, it is comprised of and tied up with other knots, other alternative food system initiatives that they developed and which influenced each other over time. In turn, these are connected to other initiatives, forming a section of a broad meshwork. As explored in Chapter 3, this meshwork of alternative food systems operates in and is influenced by a larger food systems meshwork, one in which supermarkets and tortillerías are also connected to these initiatives. In this way, the meshwork of alternative food systems is not a discrete meshwork, but is connected to

other knots by people that move within and between them, as in the social economy of handmade tortillas. As such, in looking at the knots in the meshwork of alternative food systems, it is as if one were examining the roots in one section of a garden, understanding that the larger ecosystems and broader plant structures also impact the specific area under study.

The people involved in the knots of alternative food systems, and the initiatives they undertake, create webs of relations that further values and behaviors of alternative food systems, as explored in the previous chapter. The three prongs of MyM's vision include a commitment advancing more environmentally and socially sustainable agricultural practices, promoting regional economies and supply chains that connect producers and consumers more directly, and educating people about the practices of food and agricultural systems. Over the course of fieldwork, informants identified 41 organizations and initiatives that advanced similar goals. This section explores an example of a business, an organization and a workshop series that are connected to MyM and which share these goals but actualize them in different ways. Surveying their development and activities reveals how diverse alternative food systems connect and diverge, thereby creating many paths to the generation of values and practices that participants see as promoting more sustainable food systems.

La Casa del Pan – An Established Business with Alternative Food System Values

The formation of the AgroEco Market out of the Organic Basket is one example of how particular transformations develop over time, changing form to meet the developing needs of participants. The creation of a market-based, direct to consumer path

has become a prominent strategy for alternative food system proponents. Many examples of this tactic exist in San Cristóbal. Chiapas is one of the first sites for the development of fair trade certified coffee production (Lyon and Moberg 2010), and several cooperatives maintain cafes and stores in the center of the touristy city. In addition to these providers, other successful businesses have long histories promoting food system alternatives in San Cristóbal.

A major one of these is *La Casa del Pan Papalotl* (henceforth “LCP,” The House of Bread), founded in Mexico City in 1989 by Kippy Nigh, wife of well-known anthropologist Ronald Nigh. La Casa del Pan began as a bakery that specialized in wheat breads and other confections. The restaurant’s website declares:

We are an artisanal and homemade bakery and café where we offer wholesome and vegetarian foods, produced through just, local and agroecological trade. At La Casa del Pan we know that it is possible to create alternative forms of production and consumption at the margins of the existing industrial food system. For that, we have created a community based on cooperation, collaboration and exchange, in search of a better quality of life, as well as to generate greater awareness (La Casa del Pan 2017).

Kippy Nigh’s store eventually expanded to become a vegetarian bakery and café with locations in four cities across Mexico. The restaurant in San Cristóbal is located on one of the city’s two main pedestrian streets downtown. In 2017, it was ranked #34 out of 262 restaurants in the city on TripAdvisor; showing that it was a familiar establishment to the tourism industry in the city (Trip Advisor 2017). In San Cristóbal, La Casa del Pan hosts a rooftop educational garden, a bakery and a natural food shop. A large amount of the produce served comes from a demonstration farm that is located near San Cristóbal.

Kippy Nigh stated that the restaurant “has existed since before there was a term ‘organic,’ but it has always been natural and local,” as well as entirely vegetarian (Nigh

2013). The restaurant is known for these attributes. In interviews at La Milpa restaurant, 27% of respondents stated that La Casa del Pan was a location that provided healthy, natural or organic food in San Cristóbal. The store is famous for its vegetarian lunch buffet and for regularly featuring items cooked in a variety of spices and sauces, both Mexican and others.

The identification of LCP as a location that provides healthy or organic foods is accompanied often by a sense that the restaurant caters to people of higher economic means. The restaurant is located one on of San Cristóbal's famous, pedestrianized downtown streets in a beautiful old house with a large courtyard. The location provides considerable social cachet as well as immense amounts of foot traffic from both locals and tourists. At the time of writing, the lunch buffet for which the restaurant is renowned cost 80 pesos (about US\$6.50). While very affordable for people in some class positions, this is higher than the recommended daily minimum wage for residents of Chiapas (CONASAMI 2015). In interviews, just under half of the respondents that identified LCP as a location where healthy, natural or organic food was available also commented that it was very expensive. In addition, the restaurant's original specialty, and name, "the house of bread," is tied to wheat-based food traditions that were historically in competition with Mexican maize (Pilcher 1998). Though the restaurant certainly advocates both maize and wheat-based products, its reputation as a source for high-quality breads and other non-Mexican foods contributes to perceptions that it caters to foreigners or well-to-do Mexicans. These perceptions contribute, for some, to the idea that the sustainable and organic movements are more accessible to people of higher classes than everyday Mexicans.

The restaurant and its connected entities are important players in San Cristóbal's alternative food systems. The owners have promoted short supply chains with farmers in other parts of the country, promoted organic and natural foods and supported additional initiatives. Ronald Nigh, Kippy's husband, is a prominent anthropologist whose work across Mexico has focused on indigenous agricultural practices, sustainable farming and responses to globalization. Since its inception, LCP has worked hard to identify and cultivate relationships with wheat and maize suppliers across Chiapas, Oaxaca and Guerrero to purchase grains for their breads. In addition to the restaurant, there is a small store where health food and other items can be found that are unavailable at other stores in the city. The shop sells uncertified but sustainably grown organic vegetables that are produced on LCP farms, along with a multitude of other staples and luxury imports. Excess produce is also sold at the AgroEco Market, along with breads and other goods. Peanut butter and balsamic vinegar, both products that tend to be sought by foreigners, are available. Some of these items, like the peanut butter, are produced very close to San Cristóbal. Following the creation of MyM, several of the women members supplied tortillas to the restaurant for sale to the public. In 2014, LCP also began to serve as a fiscal sponsor for La Milpa Restaurant in order to enable the smaller restaurant to meet stringent, newly mandated accounting requirements demanded in changes to national tax codes. This collaboration allowed La Milpa Restaurant to continue receiving large, institutional catering orders that would otherwise have been limited by the restaurant's lack of electronic accounting records.

The restaurant itself contains several markers of alternative food systems. The walls have murals that tell the history of *milpa*, the integrated crop production system

traditional in Mesoamerica and the Mayan origin story of humankind as created from maize. On the roof is a demonstration garden that is open to the public and that is also used as an educational fieldtrip for students. Over the course of the fieldwork for this study, LCP owners were participants and hosts of trainings for a Network of Educational Gardens Project operating through the local university ECOSUR. ECOSUR specializes in sustainable development and ecology-based studies. The restaurant hosted 30 or so members of the program, who participate in experiential trainings throughout the state. Kippy, as the founder of this restaurant, is also a prominent member of Amigos de San Cristóbal, an organization that provides mini-grants for community-based projects in and around the city. This organization has supported the work of MyM in various ways. MyM has also been the subject of articles written by Ronald Nigh. Through these various channels, LCP furthers its commitment to expanding public awareness, new production practices and new marketing outlets to support many tenets of AFS.

These commonalities of values and interconnected activities demonstrate that a simple network line between these organizations would be insufficient to chart the multiple relations that exist between the AgroEco Market, MyM and La Casa del Pan. Meshwork is more accurate imagery for how these projects and enterprises have related to each other over time.

Cacao Solidario – A Solidarity Buying Group

On Diego Dugelay, a street just north of the downtown pedestrian walkway in San Cristóbal, there is a small restaurant, the Libre Café. This coffee shop, which opened in

2014, is the home for Cacao Solidario, an independently organized “solidarity buying group.” Their principles, as laid out in the organization’s website, are:

Cacao Solidario is a responsible consumption group whose objective is to change the patterns of purchase and consumption. We seek to source quality, local products that are affordable for all, through direct contact with local producers and by eliminating intermediaries. We intend to establish a solidarity economy, fighting against genetically modified foods and exploitation, both of the land and of those who work it. Likewise, we want to create a space of social exchange and coexistence where we share experiences and knowledge, always aware of the products we buy and consume. (Cacao Solidario 2017)

This group makes direct connections to small-scale producers around the state and makes agroecologically-produced goods available in San Cristóbal through a direct purchasing club. The products available range from maize, rice and other grains to honey, tea, coffee, milk and fresh fruits and vegetables. Members can order one or two times per month and come to pick up their orders at Libre Café. The café houses a small stand offering products that are obtained through the connections of the buying group. Non-members can also purchase items from this stand; as well as obtain information about the concepts of solidarity buying groups, the producers that supply the items that are available and notices about upcoming events. Cacao Solidario partners with Mujeres y Maíz in several ways. Often, Cacao Solidario will place orders for tortillas from members of MyM. It also regularly hosts educational workshops at La Milpa Restaurant and advertises additional activities on the restaurant wall.

Cacao Solidario members are an interesting mix of people of different classes. Membership is very fluid. Over the past few years, membership in Cacao Solidario has waxed and waned, intermittently being invigorated by groups of Mexican and international participants. At the time of fieldwork, the organization had between 15-20

active buyers. The organization was started by a development worker from the Netherlands who spent a few years working in San Cristóbal. Other members tended to be very highly educated, and many had spent time in other cities or other countries and been involved in other solidarity-building groups or projects of various types. Several members of Cacao Solidario had been involved in alternative currency projects (Blanc 2011) in other parts of Mexico or part of community-supported agriculture subscriptions in other places. Many members hold a particular interest in the transformative potential of building personal relationships between producers and consumers. To that effect, Cacao Solidario maintains a website with information about producers who supply their group, and the majority of information is made available through their blog and social media accounts complemented by physical flyers posted at specific, like-minded locations around town. This means of information sharing reflected group membership, which primarily consisted of fairly young, tech savvy consumers. Within the group, the concept of class privilege and the responsibility of consumers to engage in “responsible consumption” was actively discussed. Many members of Cacao Solidario came from relatively privileged economic backgrounds, but were often working in NGOs, development projects, or entrepreneurial pursuits that did not pay well. Others were students or young professionals. One Mexican woman member in her 30s had left work as a consultant in London to move to San Cristóbal, where she was starting another small, collective café and coffee shop using her savings. Overall, the group vibe was fairly bohemian. The group sought to connect with economically marginalized producers though many members were of higher socio-economic classes, well-educated, and from a mix of national and international backgrounds.

The processes of development of AFS are not linear, and sometimes experiments are repeated at different times. Similar solutions can be re-created as people attempt to engage with alternative food systems. Cacao Solidario is in many ways a reiteration of the Organic Basket from 2005; members place orders ahead of time, everything is volunteer-run, and the purchases are based on relatively small amounts of food. The idea of groups that purchase items directly from producers has been widely explored in alternative food systems. This model was a precursor to the fair trade movement, in which church groups contracted with cooperatives to purchase goods directly (Lyon and Moberg 2010). Solidarity buying groups, in which people get together to purchase directly from producers of different goods, have a strong presence in other countries, including Italy (Grasseni 2013).

Cacao Solidario is different from the earlier Organic Basket in that it does not focus solely on consumers in the local geographic area, but also tries to get goods that are produced in sustainable ways and by small-scale farmers into the hands of consumers in other parts of the country. Cíntia, one of the current organizers, often looks for “solidarity transport,” seeking someone headed to Puebla and Mexico City who would be willing to take organic tomatoes grown by a producer cooperative in Chiapas to other solidarity buying groups hundreds of miles away for little to no shipping cost. At the time of this fieldwork, the group had also identified a producer of rice in another part of Chiapas. This producer did not have access to a machine to help her hull the rice. The members of Cacao Solidario managed to locate a rice huller and proceeded to purchase the un-hulled rice and hull it using an antique machine. The process was time consuming and produced rice that was less perfectly clean than store bought rice. However, several

members of Cacao Solidario stressed to me the importance of supporting this particular producer by processing her goods to make them ready for sale and the benefit of learning the process that was required to hull the rice.

A mainstay of the Cacao Solidario's mission is to sponsor consumer education through outreach events such as film screenings and cooking classes. At these classes and

Figure 4.1 Cacao Solidario Sourdough Bread Workshop Announcement.

Cacao Solidario
COMERCIO RESPONSABLE

Pizza de Canela

Te invitamos al TALLER DE MASA MADRE Y PROTEINAS VEGETALES

Impartido por Cristina Varotto, cocinera en "Osteria di Fuori Porta", Padova

Taller gratuito

MARTES 11 de FEBRERO (taller dividido en dos partes independientes)

MASA MADRE

- De 11:00 a 14:00 en "Panadería Los Sueños" Calle Isabel la Católica esquina Flavio Paniagua.
- SEITAN (proteína vegetal)**
- De 18:00 a 21:00 en "Pizza de Canela" Diego Duguelay #22B

PROGRAMA

- Ambientación musical con Cuencos Tibetanos
- Charla introductoria sobre alternativas a la proteína animal. (mañana)
- Taller teórico-demostrativo sobre Masa Madre y Seitan (proteína vegetal)
- Ronda de dudas y preguntas

Aprende a fabricar masa madre. Una levadura natural y autoreproducible para la elaboración de pan de trigo. Se entregaran muestras gratis.

Descubre el Seitan y sus posibilidades. Una alternativa proteínica a la carne para una dieta equilibrada.

DATOS DE CONTACTO

cacosolidario@gmail.com
cacosolidario.blogspot.mx/

LIBRE CAFE C/ Diego Duguelay #22

activities, members of Cacao Solidario often promote different kinds of vegetables. The raffle prize at the end of one night was bunches of kale, a dark leafy green unfamiliar to the group member who was giving it out as a prize. In January 2014, the solidarity buying group hosted a two-hour workshop on sourdough bread making. This workshop took place at Libre Café, where Cacao Solidario products are displayed and distributed. Utilizing the open patio

behind the small restaurant, this and other workshops on the use of mushrooms, building wood saving ovens or the production of agroecological tomatoes, are open to the public. Verónica and Gabriela from Mujeres y Maíz attended the workshop, held on a Saturday. A flyer that was posted at La Milpa had informed them it was happening, and Gabriela had confirmed it when she delivered an order of tortillas to Cacao Solidario the week prior to the event. Both Verónica and Gabriela were excited to learn about this wheat

based bread and how to make it at home.

A resident of San Cristóbal brought her sourdough bread starter for the event. The 30 or so guests of the workshop sat or stood in a semi-circle around the table where the facilitator discussed the history and variety of sourdough bread all the while kneading a ball of dough on the table. The tables and chairs in the Libre Café patio are moveable for just such an event, allowing groups to come and configure the space to meet their needs; a feature that is prized by café owners Cínthia and Marco.

The facilitator, a member of Cacao Solidario, talked about feeding the sourdough starter, explaining that the living cultures of sourdough impart the flavor of the bread. Participants could knead bread themselves to get a feel for the tension and consistency of the dough and could later taste loaves of bread previously made by the facilitator. At the end of the workshop, each participant was given a small amount of sourdough starter to take home. Verónica, who did not have much experience bread baking, was delighted. She exclaimed that, “now I take this home, and I can make a homemade bread that is healthy. I learned a new tradition of cooking that is not from here. I like the exchange.”

Through this exchange, Verónica, who is considered and considers herself a producer when selling tortillas at the AgroEco Market and at La Milpa, was also able to engage as a consumer of both bread and knowledge through this activity of Cacao Solidario. She was excited to learn about a different food tradition from her own, just as some consumers that come to La Milpa enjoy consuming the food that she makes. In her attendance at the sourdough bread workshop, she became the consumer of a different kind of food, formerly unfamiliar to her, as well as a consumer of knowledge and skill that allow her to produce that food, engaging in the processes of education advocated by

many sustainable food system initiatives. Her connection as a food producer, as the provider of food at La Milpa and as a member of Mujeres y Maíz, led her to be part of the sharing of information that happens through this kind of voluntary workshop. Members of Cacao Solidario become knowledge producers, sharing skills from their own lives. Though none of the members of Cacao Solidario during my time there worked primarily in food production, they shared knowledge of food production in this workshop enabling others to become producers of food of varied cultural traditions. Attending the sourdough bread class at Libre Cafe, Verónica the producer goes away as a consumer of knowledge about how to make a healthy style of bread that comes from somewhere else, and the facilitator-teacher expands her role beyond being only a product supplier and consumer. These experiences challenge the construct of separation of producers and consumers, engaging in knowledge sharing that reconfigures how and what food is made and exchanged.⁴

Direct monetary support for small-scale farmers, building a cohesive economy where producers have greater ability to determine their prices, and educating consumers in order to promote participation in AFS networks are activities of Cacao Solidario that align with tenets of AFS related to sustainability, including social embeddedness, relocalization, consumer education. Clearly, hulling rice constitutes a different kind of participation in an alternative food system compared to shopping at the AgroEco Market. This demonstrates the variety of actions and possible engagements within AFS in San Cristóbal. However, Cacao Solidario, also connected to MyM, promotes similar values of

⁴ Initiatives of this type can and do have the potential to fetishize or further commodify goods through these types of practices. The different class positions of different members can and do reproduce relations of power that are beyond the scope of this chapter. For more information, see Lyon (2006) and Luetchford (2012).

building direct connections between producers and consumers, supporting agroecological production methods, and using educational activities to support these other efforts.

Meal Vouchers and Healthy Eating Workshops at La Milpa

Mujeres y Maíz is also part of various other small “projects” that cement ties between different groups and organizations. An interesting example is a series of workshops for indigenous college students sponsored by MyM that take place at La Milpa Restaurant. This project, entitled “Strengthening local ties through healthy, conscious, and creative eating: La Milpa Community Restaurant and University Youth,” is a program in which university students participate in workshops on healthy eating and food production. The students also receive meal vouchers redeemable at La Milpa restaurant, run by MyM, thus supporting the work of the collective through education and increasing students’ access to the healthy, nutritious food advocated in the workshops.

The idea for the program arose because a professor at the UNICH, the National Intercultural University of Chiapas, noticed that many of her students seemed to be ill and to miss class frequently. Micaela Álvarez, the professor, recounted her experience, “Ever since I arrived at the university, I saw that my students were not doing well. They were sick all the time. They asked me permission for missing class because of stomach problems. I started to see it as a recurring issue, and it seemed like one of the main explanations had to be food.” Micaela undertook a survey of her students regarding their eating and health habits. She found that most came from communities around the state, and lived in San Cristóbal in rooms with little access to cooking equipment. They ate out often, at locations where food was inexpensive and not very healthy. The survey showed

that 65% of the students reported gastrointestinal issues that caused them to miss class or work each month.

To address this issue, Micaela reached out to her friend Í, a nutritionist; and in 2013, they began offering workshops to students at the UNICH on cooking healthy meals. Student interest was high, but the students, Micaela and Ísabel, had trouble running the four to five hour workshops without money to pay for supplies or space. This prompted Micaela to approach MyM, which had recently opened La Milpa Restaurant, a space that could serve as a location for the workshops. The workshops revealed that a major barrier for the students was lack of access to a kitchen to prepare healthy food. Micaela was searching for a way to increase their capacity to cook and eat well.

It was at this point that Lucy, the MyM coordinator, submitted a proposal for a funded project to formalize the workshops and pair them with meals supplied by La Milpa. The project was funded by the non-profit organization Amigos de San Cristóbal, which is a non-profit organization that “provides financial support to projects focused on improving the health, education and economic well-being of vulnerable groups in Chiapas, Mexico. Proven, well-established projects pass an annual screening process to ensure that funds will go directly to these goals” (Amigos de San Cristobal 2016). The members of Amigos de San Cristóbal include local volunteers, both Mexicans and expats, principally from the US and Germany, who live in the city at least part-time. Individuals, couples or businesses pay to be members (from US\$25 to \$80) and thereby support projects. Funds for projects are raised through grants, private donations and events like concerts and flea markets. Several members of Amigos, including the owners of La Casa del Pan, are also involved in other food system related projects in and around San

Cristóbal, though the Amigos funds are not limited to food-related work.

This project covered MEX\$25,000 (approximately US\$2,000) in meals and also funded time, supplies, and space rental for the workshops; most of which took place at La Milpa. In 2012 and 2013, through the Voucher Program, twelve to fifteen students were invited to participate in four workshops over the course of a year. The first workshop consisted of a self-analysis of one's food habits in relation to one's identity. The second focused on different systems of production, looking at local and global food systems. The third was often a tour of urban farms and an exploration of food policy as it shapes decision-making, availability, and consumption choices. The last workshop was typically a collaborative cooking session. At each workshop students were given certificates to eat two meals at La Milpa during the week. The next set of certificates was distributed at the end of each workshop to incentivize attendance. The income from the meal tickets was a boon to La Milpa, and scholarship students redeeming their meal tickets formed a regular set of patrons.

Over the course of conducting short interviews, it came out that many of these students enjoyed the workshops immensely, speaking eloquently about issues related to food, often connecting them to broader social issues. Judith, a 27-year old Tzeltal woman from near Palenque explained that, "Before these workshops, I wasn't really interested in what I ate. I just ate so that my stomach wasn't empty and often thought 'eating is so boring!' But now, I try to vary what I eat. I shop more often at the market, and I try to prepare more of my food at home. After the workshops, I think that it's really important to change my shopping habits to make healthier and fairer choices." Imelda, a 21-year old student of sustainable development at the UNICH, explained that, "There are two

workshops per semester and they are about eating. More than anything they are about taking care in what we eat, so they are really useful. It's like an exchange... and the students that come are really interested in watching their diets and knowing about their food.”

Others associated the knowledge that they gained to issues of health, as well as enjoyment, and felt more empowered to produce their own food. Roberto, a 21-year old student, said:

I'm a scholarship recipient of this collective. I've learned a bit about the collective through some participatory workshops on diet and food. What kinds of foods we eat, that sort of thing. And thanks to that, personally, it's helped me a lot. Now I'm not someone that just goes to the store and buys my potato chips or my Coca-Cola, I see now that they're toxic things. So now I see the better thing to do is to buy fresh produce, or plant my own produce that I want to consume. Fruit too. I plant it and then I can go out to my yard and harvest what I want. Depending on if I'm here or where it's hotter, there are mangoes, bananas, a whole variety of fruits and vegetables. And by doing so, I reduce my consumption of these other toxic products by a lot.

Another 31-year old male university student also cited a change in his thinking about women's roles as a result of his experience in the workshops and coming regularly to La Milpa:

I'm interested in this collective because when I started with the workshops, I thought, it's really important that these women have a role and a collective. You have to involve women because in a lot of ways, they are the ones that watch over our food. They are the ones that say what we are going to eat today, the ones that decide what to make so that we as scholarship recipients or parents eat. And that's why the focus of this collective is so important, food sovereignty and also sustainable production. Why? So that we can all take care of our health and live a little more life.

Micaela and Lucy both asserted that the workshops integrated the students into additional networks in San Cristóbal related to food and eating. This result was not

accidental, as Micaela explained: “This is another important element that has happened; growing from the workshops, I’ve looked for ways to incorporate the students in other projects related to food... this expands the links that these students have with other networks.” In 2013, youth participants in the workshops had volunteered to help organize the National Celebration of Corn and Tortillas in San Cristóbal, taking care of much of the management and creating programming for the event. One student did a lottery game using different types of maize, and another created a children’s activity in which kids learned the names of all parts of the maize plant. Many did not believe that the blue corn was natural and had never made their own tortillas. Other students were involved in Slow Food or had been volunteers at the International Conference on School Gardens in Latin America, which took place in San Cristóbal in 2013. At the university, the students and Micaela have also started a small garden, focused in particular on medicinal plants and herbs. At the time of the interview, Micaela hoped that the garden could be expanded during the following semester.

A number of the students used aspects of what they learned in the workshops and through eating at La Milpa to do projects in their home communities. Judith explained that her studies, and participation in the networks of Mujeres y Maíz and Slow Food, had reminded her of desires and objectives she had when she was in high school. Now, she was working in her community to create a cooperative garden to plant vegetables. A group in her community had already come together to designate the land and to put up a fence; they hoped to start planting in the next couple of months. She reflected that, “In the last few months, I feel like I’m more alive than before, because I’m opening my eyes. And, any chance that I have to meet organic producers, I like to visit and learn from

them.” These experiences inspired Judith to press her father to let her have a small section of his land to grow some of her own vegetables, though it was a challenge for her to get home (about four hours away by bus) often enough during the school year to take care of what she planted.

Micaela’s vision certainly extends beyond teaching the students to simply eat more healthfully themselves. She explained that:

It is my intention that some of the youth that have participated in the workshops become pillars in the formation of a club or group that can push forward activities at the university. I hope to serve as a bridge for other students at the university who are implementing their own strategies to work on food-related concerns.... It’s an ambitious dream, but my hope is that the university can have a space for action and reflection that allows us to retrieve local knowledge about producing and eating food, and that that strengthens the students, and not just them, but us as professors, in our eating and consumption habits so that we are more responsible and respectful of life and also of the environment.

She was hoping to use the workshops as a way to galvanize student participation at the university toward a greater focus on food and sustainability. Micaela viewed this as important, because she saw that there was a dismissive attitude that she and her students experienced from some other professors: “The hidden discourse behind the closed attitude is that if these students really want to achieve something, they will have to sacrifice. And if that means that they don’t eat, then they don’t eat. But, I think that in the end, that is really damaging to them and their academic performance. And it is also not necessary, nor is it coherent with a discourse on inter-culturality and sustainable development. It’s important that we reflect on that.” Some students had already begun to address these issues by conducting a survey of students’ eating habits at the university, compiled in a report and presented to the rector. In these varied ways, the workshops create new knots of knots within the meshwork; and they support the expansion of

activities through which the values of those involved in these alternative food systems spread.

In late 2014, the meal tickets for scholarship recipients were discontinued, to the dismay of many students and a significant loss of capital to La Milpa. At the time that the grant applications were due, Lucy was working in another part of the country and did not complete the application. It could not be accepted late. In 2014, the scholarship portion of the program was discontinued while Lucy and Micaela sought additional funding. This is an example of how certain projects within alternative food systems exist for short periods and fail to continue because of volunteer leadership.

The workshops, however, continued with a small amount of funding. They took place at La Milpa on weekends when the restaurant was not open. Student participants in the cooking workshops had a lot to say about the role of these workshops in expanding their understanding of the food system more broadly. I attended two workshops held in the spring of 2014, which were open to friends of students who had participated in earlier workshops, some of whom were working on projects related to food and nutrition with NGOs in San Cristóbal. The workshop that I attended had eight participants. Three worked for international organizations like Save the Children. Another participant had a small farm, and the others were friends of people who had participated earlier. All were between the ages of 21 and 26.

The day consisted of various exercises designed to encourage participants to think about their household economies and what food choices were open to them. The exercises included simulations of choosing healthy foods on a limited budget, analyzing food ingredients; and at the end of the day, cooking and enjoying a meal together.

One exercise entailed analyzing photos of families in different countries, each surrounded by the food that they would consume in a week. The families included were from Mexico, the United States, Guatemala, Mali, France, Greenland, and Ecuador. Looking at the photos, the facilitators asked these questions: Where was there most abundance? Where were foods more processed? In which places do you see a lack of real food? These questions prompted a conversation centered on value, and on defining the difference between lack and abundance. The students, most of whom had grown up in rural towns outside San Cristóbal, began to relate the questions to their own experiences. Rosario mentioned that her parents now buy much more than they used to, though not always in the ways that programs aiming to bring them into the cash economy intended. Her parents, for instance, buy low quality maize distributed to rural areas by the government but use it to feed their chickens. They would not consider giving up their own maize crops that were raised for their own diet. However, some changes in the local labor pool, such as her leaving for university, have meant that people with agricultural knowledge do not pass it on. She cited that very quickly the young people in her community could not distinguish between weeds and edible plants. She recounted a time that a visitor from another community came and informed her and her sibling that the weed they were removing was a plant that he ate in his community.

Huli, a young man dressed in a traditional embroidered shirt, laid out some of the tensions that he experiences in the communities where he works:

Where I work, we have a project that is trying to increase agricultural productivity, and part of the project is to make a list of species that grow in the *milpa*. The people in the community eat all that diversity, but they are stuck in the same thinking. They believe they are poor because they don't have money to buy. Their fields are full of animals, and we identified twelve foods, different greens, *huitlacoche* (an edible

mushroom that grows on maize) and beans, all in the milpa. But we always say that we are poor. In terms of food, we are not poor.

These examples demonstrate ways that these workshops prompt students to think about richness and lack. Though most of them identified themselves first as consumers, they also enjoyed thinking about the abundance in their places of origin in new ways. “We’re looking at the difference between abundance and lack. It’s like we’re poor, but that idea is related to the idea that I can’t buy things, instead of looking at what is available. In the communities, there are mangoes on the ground and edible greens all over... these systems that function so well. It’s important to reflect on what part of that production goes to the people themselves rather than the market.” From here, the conversation turned to questions of food sovereignty, what it was and what constituted it. One participant explained that in his community there are two kinds of bees:

The one kind produces a special honey, and a kilo of it is worth 600 pesos (about US\$50). To be both the producer and consumer of your diet, that would be the idea of sovereignty. Those of us that make money, we eat honey that isn’t that good of quality. So how much of the richness that we have do we keep for ourselves? We sell the good honey and then buy refined sugar.

The changes in awareness and eating habits expressed by voucher recipients and workshop participants appear to have lasting impact. Judith left university in the summer of 2014 to return to her hometown, where she was advancing a community garden project while working as a community health promoter. Others spoke powerfully about the needs for change that they saw in the food system and the impact that this had on their own decision-making. Fernanda, a participant in the workshops, reflected that she used to regularly buy her vegetables on Wednesdays at the supermarket, when they are severely discounted. However, since these workshops, and visits to La Milpa and the AgroEco

Market, she questions, “What is [the supermarket] paying the producers? Sometimes, it would be better not to ask why the AgroEco Market is so expensive, but why the supermarket is so cheap. Who is really making up that price difference?” Asking these questions encouraged her to buy fruits and vegetables in locations other than the supermarket.

These questions, and the behavior changes that they propel, are also spread through social networks. Selena, another participant, closed the workshop reflecting:

Changing how I eat requires a lot of changes in our household economy, which is hard when both my husband and I work. I have managed to make us eat less processed flour, for healthier substantive foods. I am going to address these issues with my own family, and also with a group of students I tutor at the university. [I want to] to remind a bunch of the students that come to the city that they should stay connected to the knowledge that they have about local food and diets.

In these responses we see some results of alternative food network initiatives. Through these workshops, the students are encouraged to connect their own life experience and knowledge of food production to reframe what is desirable in a food system. These students occupy a fairly unique social location in this respect; most are of indigenous heritage and lower socio-economic status but have come to the city to gain the education, degrees, and experiences that will allow them to work in professions that have more monetary and social prestige than agriculture. Within these workshops, the need for this transition is critically evaluated as students are encouraged to re-define resources in their home communities and the political, economic and cultural histories that have shaped and continue to shape them. Rural-urban power relations and frames of modernization are discussed and troubled, exposing students to academic, political and cultural economy frameworks that for many, resonate with their own experiences of

changing food systems dynamics in moving from rural to urban locations. Even as these workshops change form, these initiatives contribute to building a social context that reinforces consideration of several of the criteria of sustainable food systems among this group.

Engagement Ladders: Understanding Participation in Diverse Food Systems

The above examples demonstrate various approaches to actualizing several values associated with alternative food systems. The six initiatives described – the Organic Basket, the AgroEco Market, MyM, La Casa del Pan, Cacao Solidario and the Healthy Eating Workshops and Voucher Program – promote several values common to many AFS projects and that meet the criteria often explored as operationalizing sustainability in food systems. Within each, there is a focus on environmentally beneficial agricultural production, fostering connections between producers and consumers through relocalization and increased social embeddedness, and education as a means of promoting long-term behavior changes. These goals are consistent with many streams of thought within alternative food systems (Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012).

I draw on the concept of engagement ladders as a means to understand the diversity of initiatives and approaches. Using this conceptual tool, it is possible to show how the dynamic organizations adopt different approaches to actualizing these criteria and allow for people to participate in different ways. Additionally, this concept is useful for troubling the idea that participation in AFS initiatives is a linear progression for any one person, and is a better description of the ways that individuals move in and out of engagement with particular initiatives, ideas and practices.

The idea of engagement ladders is drawn from recent work on individual's engagement with social media. In *The Networked Non-Profit*, Kanter and Fine (2010) generate a schema for understanding the varied ways that people engage with organizations. On their "ladder of engagement," they identify five levels that constitute the varied types of supporters that organizations have, "from the lightly touched to the superenergized" (Kanter and Fine 2010, 68). These supporters range from bystanders (those who are least engaged but may be familiar), through spreaders (willing to share information), to donors (people who contribute financially), and then to evangelists (people who use their own networks to grow support for a cause) and finally to instigators (who create their own content on behalf of the cause).

Though the particular categorizations and activities that Kanter and Fine refer to may not be appropriate for the initiatives under study in this chapter, the analogy of a ladder that allows for different approaches and intensities of engagement is descriptive of the initiatives analyzed. To build more direct connections between producers and consumers, the AgroEco Market has thrice-weekly dates at which producers and consumers come together. It has also developed a participatory certification system for producers and vendors in order to build relationships and trust between consumers and those producing food (Nelson et al. 2009). La Casa del Pan states on its menu that much of the food is grown on proprietary farms, with the example garden on the roof of the in-town restaurant. For Cacao Solidario, these more direct connections are promoted through field trips that are open to anyone who is interested. However, for Cacao Solidario, trust is paramount to the idea of solidarity buying even more than is the geographic connection between producer and consumer. The organization seeks to

connect willing consumers to agroecologically grown products through donated transport, even if this produce is halfway across the country. La Casa del Pan serves many tourists and wealthier Mexicans, promoting an “alternative consciousness” (La Casa del Pan 2017) and exposure to new foods. La Milpa Restaurant, on the other hand, caters to people in a working class neighborhood. The Healthy Eating Workshops serve only a very specific group, the college students, but engage them over an extended period of time. These initiatives thus demonstrate that there is not one, but several ladders of engagement that differ between these organizations and through which different approaches to the sustainable food system criteria are explored. The varied initiatives invoke their own daily activities, forms of sacrifice, judgments of good and evil, and embodiments of virtue and may adjust to meet the needs of different participants to enact their ideas of those forms.

As seen in these examples, the diversity of these initiatives also makes them vulnerable to broader external structures in different ways. MyM, as we will continue to explore in Chapter 5, both benefits from and is challenged by having a broad membership and mission, as well as a wide variety of projects that it undertakes. La Casa del Pan in some ways has been very successful within existing structures, even as it attempts to disrupt them. The restaurant is economically viable and has managed to integrate various aspects of its production in ways that are synergistic, like the owners maintaining a farm that provides part of the production. In contrast, other initiatives like the Organic Basket and Cacao Solidario relied or rely on volunteer labor. For some participants, this quality helps to legitimize their alternative aspects, but also threatens their viability if the initiatives expand too quickly, as the Organic Basket did. In contrast, the AgroEco

Market has flourished in many ways, and now operates with various volunteer committees that help it to serve a broad number of people while providing different people many options for engagement. The Healthy Eating Workshops, as shown in this chapter, are vulnerable due to their existence as the brain child of a very small number of people who sometimes cannot attend to all of the aspects to muster necessary resources. In varied ways, all of the initiatives are vulnerable to broader structures and challenges posed by the systems of power in which they are embedded. In a sense, the idea of engagement ladders helps us to understand how this diversity can help mitigate this vulnerability since different initiatives face different challenges related to how they have positioned themselves in relation to the broader structures.

Engagement ladders are also helpful for extending the analysis of how people are involved in these initiatives beyond people that organize these initiatives. Within the initiatives explored in this chapter, it is possible to identify warriors, builders and weavers Stevenson et al. (2007). In various facets, the proponents of the AgroEco Market have built alternative food system initiatives. People like Micaela and Ísabel weave together different projects and topics. Many of these initiatives are informed by the warriors fighting to change agricultural policies at the state or federal level.

However, many other people participate in other ways. Within each initiative, diverse forms of participation are possible. These forms require different levels of knowledge and commitment. People who simply wander into La Casa del Pan or students who apply new knowledge to their own purchasing decisions may not become warriors, weavers, or builders, but they do engage with the AFS as bystanders or low-level supporters. At La Casa del Pan, people can walk in and have the opportunity to engage

with the restaurant's supply chain if they wish. Signs direct a person to the educational rooftop garden, where more information is available. The simplicity of this procedure is a sharp contrast to the involvement of the students in the Healthy Eating workshops. To encounter these workshops, students must already have sought some information about these issues and make a choice to learn more about AFS in greater depth. The concept allows for the visualization of varied means of engagement offered within different initiatives and which differ between initiatives. These processes are explored further in Chapter 6.

In this way, engagement ladders concretize the concepts of the knots in meshwork by showing how different knots have emerged and entail different but related practices. According to the concept of meshwork, this diversity is expected. Different initiatives and people create many varied entry points and means of addressing issues based on different lines of growth and the binding up of different people within these knots. For Ingold, meshwork is constructed as paths of movement. He argues that it is along these paths that we move, that "...lives are lived, skills developed, observations made and understandings grown... [in this way, we are] not to be *in* place but to be *along* paths. The path, and not the place is the primary condition of being or rather of becoming" (2011, 12). People coming together, participating in activities, and separating leads to the evolution of different initiatives. Conceiving of participants in alternative economic experiments as subjects in the "process of becoming" rather than as consistent, finished advocates of one position or behavior, is common among theorists who privilege the relational aspects of alternative food systems (Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012, Gibson-Graham 2006, 2008).

Conceiving of these as initiatives as processes of growth also necessitates a way of understanding how particular initiatives and means of engaging change over time. Some projects exist for short periods of time, like the scholarship vouchers for meals at La Milpa. Others morph into a different form, as in the arrangement by Cacao Solidario for MyM to make and deliver tortillas to fill its orders rather than identifying a tortilla maker from scratch. The student workshops too have resulted in many students gearing their final university projects toward agriculture either in San Cristóbal or in their home communities. All these changes in configurations establish new knots in the meshwork that people move within and between.

Engagement ladders are useful for demonstrating how people move between activities over time, engaging at different levels within different organizations in ways that are not a linear progression. Lucy, for instance, was originally very active as a founding member of the Organic Basket and the founding of the AgroEco Market. However, later, she moved into working as the coordinator for Mujeres y Maíz, and her participation at the AgroEco Market dropped down; she became a regular shopper but did not serve on committees or as an organizer. The idea of engagement ladders helps to show what Kanter and Fine contend regarding this variability. They state that:

The ladder is not a linear progression from one step on the ladder to another. People can start anywhere and work their way up or down. They can take one step at a time or hopscotch their way around the ladder. Again, organizations cannot control what people do; they can only provide ample opportunities for people to enjoy where they are on the ladder and become more engaged if they so choose. (Kanter and Fine 2010, 70)

In this way, engagement ladders help us to account for movement and fluidity that has been well-documented in AFS. Lucy has become more and less engaged in different

initiatives over time. According to the engagement ladders, this is not necessarily a critique. Through a very small group of supporters will always do the majority of the work, it is crucial for organizations to have supporters at all levels in order to better comprehend and intentionally engage people at each of these levels (Kanter and Fine 2010). The Organic Basket arose and required intense work on the part of a few organizers. As it gained in popularity, the people involved found a way to alter its form. It eventually became the AgroEco Market, which provided many more people with engagement points as shoppers, as well as in the participatory certification system, on committees and as organizers of educational activities. Several of the people who were instrumental in starting the Organic Basket moved into other organizing structures that now support the AgroEco Market. Some have taken leadership positions in other organizations, like Lucy did at Mujeres y Maíz. Undertaking a new direction, Cacao Solidario now provides different people with the opportunity to experiment with a logistical organization and make new connections to producers, which were opportunities that the Organic Basket formerly provided. People like Verónica are animators in one activity through MyM, but engage as supporters in another with Cacao Solidario. Other people, like Heidi, one of the original founders of the Organic Basket, drop out for periods of time according to their life circumstances. Heidi was busy managing her small children for a period and was unable to participate as an organizer, but she continued to shop regularly at the AgroEco Market and to work in other organizations promoting organic agriculture.

In her ethnography on Italy's solidarity buying groups, Grasseni (2013) discusses how many members participate in fluid ways, people moving from one group to another,

finding a new group, and sometimes stepping out of participation for periods of time. These processes, which she terms budding, often occur when groups have different philosophies. While the budding process could be seen as a weakness, it can also be seen as strength. This continual adjustment of participants and practices permits many different people to plug-in to the meshwork of AFS according to their own skills, interests, creativity and life demands. People who bring their unique ingenuity and connections to the issues engender new unique initiatives, like the food workshops launched by Micaela and her friend Ísabel. The emergence of Cacao Solidario is another example; in part it met a need of some people to be more involved in producer support, undertaking activities like hulling rice that were not available through existing initiatives like the AgroEco Market. The people that are most involved in these organizations recognize and debate these differences in approach, but through their variation provide more people with the opportunity to engage and perhaps, absorb new values and knowledge that will build commitments to these alternatives.

In this analysis, I utilize the idea of engagement ladders in the plural, rather than a single ladder. Every organization, business, project and workshop has its own engagement ladder or ladders, based on the activities undertaken by that organization. Within alternative food systems, it might be possible to map out an engagement ladder identifying different organizations and entities with which one could become involved and different levels of involvement. Such a process could also be applied to individual initiatives that form the knots in the meshwork, as has been explored here. Such an understanding, by organization, is explored for *Mujeres y Maíz* in Chapter 5 as well as for consumer engagement in Chapter 6.

Conclusion

The view of meshwork adopted in this chapter makes it possible to understand the diversity of AFS initiatives that are present in San Cristóbal. AFS are not any singular thing, but rather are a collection of emerging relations. Different people advance values including support for sustainable agricultural practices, the development of shorter, more direct producer to consumer supply chains, healthier eating, and increased regional autonomy from global market forces. However, they understand, prioritize and pursue these goals through different activities. Through analyses of these examples, we see that initiatives are evolving, creative manifestations of peoples' desire to produce meaningful, healthy options for themselves and others. These varied manifestations increase the number of people that are exposed to new ideas and practices. Such a wide variety of initiatives has the potential to be responsive and to meet people where they are.

Making sense of AFS through meshwork and engagement ladders enables us to understand that these initiatives, and what emerges from and because of them, are organic, continually morphing and in process. Like the root systems to which Ingold refers, these initiatives and the people in them both exist in the environment and create the environment in which new webs of relations can be formed. As they manifest this duality of being and forming in myriad ways and with varied audiences, they generate unique local expressions of systems, which are not separate from each other, but rather connect and enmesh with others. These entanglements shape the ways that the organizations, and those that interact with them, move both in the moment and in the future.

Chapter 5 : Skill, Benefit and Engagement in Mujeres y Maíz

Mujeres y Maíz is a place-based, small-scale food system initiative. Projects like it are occurring in many parts of the world. These initiatives align with theories positing that sustainable solutions to current crises in food systems can only be developed at local, community levels (Gibson-Graham 2006) and must scale up from there (Friedmann 2007).⁵ Many of these responses to corporate-driven food systems are embedded in the idea of sustainable development; approaches that seek to balance economic, social and environmental concerns in responding to issues connected to neoliberal globalization (Hopwood, Mellor, and O'Brien 2005, Giddings, Hopwood, and O'Brien 2002). However, as explored in the Introduction, these initiatives do not have simple roadmaps to follow along a path to sustainable agricultural developments (Robert, Parris, and Leiserowitz 2005, Redclift 2005); rather, small-scale initiatives are in the process of developing these alternatives and learning along the way (Seyfang and Smith 2007).

As alternative food movements engage producers in collective efforts, knowledge sharing and its impacts on values and behavior are seen as a key factor in getting more people involved (Allen et al. 2003, Hassanein 2003, Morgan and Murdoch 2000). For producers, these efforts often require new alliances, livelihood strategies, relationships and ways of working (Hassanein 1999). However, the intricacies of developing alternative livelihood strategies and creating opportunities to develop new webs of relations, are challenging. The particularities of each case reveal how individuals and

⁵ Though sometimes employed uncritically, the concepts of “local” and “community” are very complex and should not be imbued with implicit, positive attributes. Even within initiatives that promote these ideas, it is crucial to examine how these concepts can be mobilized in ways that are exclusive and sometimes anathema to the ideas of justice or connection that they may seek to advance (Alkon and Agyeman 2011, DuPuis and Goodman 2005, Guthman 2008a).

groups respond to shifting economic, social and political conditions. Understanding how these initiatives develop, and how people participate in them, are critical steps in linking changes to the macro forces and large-scale changes decried by alternative food systems advocates to the lived experience of people in different parts of the world. If these micro projects are to construct viable alternative food systems, charting and connecting the paths of particular initiatives can reveal how the praxis and theory of alternative food systems meet (Baker 2013).

Working in a collective is a way to develop new skills for participating members, and this requires attending to the different advantages that individuals seek and are able to attain through working together. In this chapter, I examine the processes of growth and enrollment of members in MyM through the organization's history, as well as the achievements and challenges that it has faced. The process of growing the collective is about much more than spreading knowledge or promoting particular behaviors; it also includes emotional and relational components. This chapter explores how these logistical and affective dimensions intertwine in the building of alternative food systems.

Mujeres y Maíz: A Growing Collective

MyM is committed to strengthening the livelihoods of women who work with heritage maize in Chiapas. The goals of the organization, according to its website, are to foster viable livelihoods that promote sustainable maize production in Chiapas and to build alliances between rural and urban communities in order to build “the culture of corn” that revalues the production and consumption of heritage maize (Mujeres y Maíz 2014). In this way, the organization's aims, to promote food sovereignty for the region

and economic development for women food producers in urban and rural areas through a re-valuation of sustainable production methods for criollo maize and a re-enlivened food economy in Chiapas (Silva 2014, Alvarez 2013).

As explored in the last chapter, *Mujeres y Maíz* is a collective and a civil society organization, but is not legally defined as a cooperative. The ways through which people become members are relatively loose and informal. All the members are part of the group but usually do not participate in all of the same programmatic offerings. Over the course of their involvement, different women may move within and between projects, choosing to participate in some and not others. These decisions often reflect the class positions and physical locations of members.

The organization began as the brain child of Lucy Silva, a founder of the Organic Basket and the woman who visited Mercedes in an effort to recruit her to supply tortillas to that initiative. At the time, Lucy was working with women in rural areas outside of San Cristóbal, installing improved cooking stoves in order to lessen the need for wood as fuel and to minimize indoor air pollution. Lucy is a skilled project manager and coordinator, skills that helped her to see the connections between the rural and urban issues and to work on finding ways to address them. Her leadership allowed for the formation of the collective and its expansion over time, and she is integral to maintaining and developing many of the relationships that support it.

As of 2014, the organization consisted of 53 women members. Since its inception in 2008, the organization expanded from working with individual families in San Cristóbal to working with women who are part of numerous kin and friend-based units. Depending on a woman's residence and activities, some members in the organization

knew each other better than others. The first phase of the collective began with two families, each of which participated in projects to better the conditions and quality of their in-house tortilla production. Membership in the group was fluid, as individuals and families attended the trainings and meetings as they were able (López 2014). Two other families that began working with the collective at the beginning ceased participating over the following months.

The second generation of the project began by incorporating additional women who were involved in the production of maize based products. These women, two family units and one individual woman, were already involved in the AgroEco Market. In order to expand skills and increase the diversity of experiences that could be shared, they joined the collective in 2009. In 2011, two additional groups of women began participating in the collective activities. This third generation consisted of Group Linda Vista, based in Teopisca, a town about 33 kilometers from San Cristóbal; and Group Amatenango, a group of women based in Amatenango del Valle, located 38 kilometers from San Cristóbal. The women in Group Linda Vista included maize farmers, producers, and tortilla makers. The group in Amatenango consisted primarily of producer families. In 2013 and 2014, there was an expansion to a second generation of women in Amatenango del Valle.

Since its inception, *Mujeres y Maíz* has been supported by external funding. Lucy, the coordinator, explained that: “propos[ing] projects and find[ing] financing make it possible for us to have the economic resources to build stoves, pay the rent here at the restaurant, and pay for the water filters. Everything here we have bought with financing

from projects.” Such funds have covered the cost of infrastructure projects and provided some compensation for the project coordinator, minimal staff and members.

In order to receive funds from external sources, it was necessary for MyM to become a formal project and to have a legal connection to an established organization. In order to meet this requirement and validate the group, Lucy took up the role of Project Coordinator; and in 2008 she partnered with CAMADDS (Capacitación, Asesoría, Medio Ambiente y Defensa del Derecho a la Salud, *Training and Consulting on the Environment and Defense of the Right to Health*), a civil society organization based in San Cristóbal that had the capacity to receive funds from abroad. Lucy works out of the office of CAMADDS, a house around the corner from La Milpa Restaurant, in one of San Cristóbal’s working class neighborhoods. Lucy’s primary role, as she describes it, has been to find financing to support the projects of the collective. In addition to soliciting funds, she has been an active and driving force behind the collective’s projects; doing everything from networking, to developing workshops, organizing meetings, and the day to day logistical management of projects. For periods since 2008, coordinating the group’s activities has almost required the time commitment of a full time job. Funding, however, is insufficient to pay Lucy a substantial wage. She supplements her income through additional jobs such as teaching university and high school courses part-time.

The projects that MyM initially undertook were privately funded by a group of American retirees who lived part of the year in San Cristóbal and part of the year in the United States, in Colorado. The result of a personal connection, the first grant was to cover the cost of new, reduced-smoke stoves and some health-based classes for the women involved. Since 2008, the organization has received financial support from the

Kellogg Foundation in the United States, the government of Chiapas and local philanthropic organizations like the Amigos de San Cristóbal charity. In 2010, Mujeres y Maíz received funding to begin a restaurant from the Volkart Foundation, a Swiss philanthropic foundation that primarily funds organizations and projects promoting sustainable water use and women's empowerment. The Volkart Foundation "supports projects and organisations that empower women and provide them with tools that enable them to determine their own lives. The aim is to ensure women receive recognition and respect and can access their rights without discrimination" (Volkart 2016). Support from the Volkart Foundation was instrumental in making the operation of La Milpa Restaurant possible by covering its rent (Volkart 2016). These relations challenge the idea that MyM is a geographically-limited project, as it connects to people and supports all over the world.

In many ways, the collective has positioned itself as a development project, equipping the women with additional skills and opportunities that help them to succeed and become less vulnerable. External funding through public grants and philanthropic foundations has been critical for making this initiative possible, just as it has been in other parts of the world. For MyM, the idea has been that certain projects of the organization may become economically self-sustaining, like the restaurant. Other pursuits, like the stove project, need preliminary infusions of materials and funding; and then can and should be maintained by participants without additional financial support. Some initiatives move to models that limit the need for external funding, like the Organic Basket becoming a self-managed AgroEco Market. However, educational workshops, training sessions and infrastructure supported by MyM are always likely to require

external funding. While this structure in some ways makes the organization or particular project streams precarious, this funding model is consistent with many non-profit organizations. Linking with CAMADDS has helped to decrease this precarity by building the projects into the structure of a diversified and established civil society organization.

Table 5.1 Timeline of Mujeres y Maíz Expansion

Date	Event
2005	Organic Basket founded
2008	Mujeres y Maíz was founded, focused on training for improved hygiene in food production, including installation of improved cooking stoves, water filters, and electric mills for grinding maize. The project began with Generation 1: four family units, two of which later ceased participating.
2009	Three additions were made to the group to form Generation 2: two family units already selling tortillas and tostadas at the AgroEco Market and one individual woman who sold sauces and maize-based prepared foods.
2011	The Restaurant <i>La Milpa Comedor Comunitario</i> opened. Five different family units, all from Generations 1 and 2, staff the restaurant. Group membership expanded to include two subgroups, Generation 3: one in Teopisca and one in Amatenango del Valle. Their participation began with a project to provide improved cooking stoves and training on the use of homemade organic fertilizers. This also connected tortilla makers from Generations 1 and 2 to maize producers located in Amatenango. The goal was to increase access to locally produced heirloom maize for tortilla makers and support producers using more environmentally sustainable practices.
2013	Generation 4, a second group in Amatenango del Valle joined, also focused on improved cooking stoves and training on the use and making of homemade fertilizers. Several family units also began supplying maize from their farms to the tortilla makers in San Cristóbal.

Roles and Relationships within MyM

Members of MyM have different roles that fit broadly into three categories: animators, landed producers and urban tortilla makers. The first group, animators, consists of a coordinator and advisors to the project. These include Lucy Silva, the coordinator who has secured funding for the project, as well as others who have provided trainings on specific subjects and who continue to be involved, or who handle individual programs within the overall organization. The women members of MyM work primarily

in two spheres: as producers, those who continue to have land and cultivate their own food for sale and home consumption, and tortilla makers, who live in the city but still make their livelihoods by creating food products. Producers still grow some portion of their own food and complement their agricultural production with sales of artisan foodstuffs. The tortilla makers have little or no access to land for subsistence production, but they make a living that includes selling foods made with maize.

Class, life history and geographic location affect the livelihood strategies of collective members. The animators tend to be women who are highly educated. Many have college or even masters' degrees. The organizers and trainers of many of the workshops in which these women participate tend to be of higher socioeconomic status. Most have moved to San Cristóbal from other parts of Mexico. Many of these women are in San Cristóbal separated from broader kin networks, and are engaged in forming support networks through chosen social relationships. Many have nuclear families in San Cristóbal, but not extended families. They have developed personal networks that often have arisen from past social and professional networks; they share roles like babysitting, as well as providing each other with emotional support. Several of these women have come up with additional ways to generate social bonds as friends. They have a monthly meeting of the UniFem, or Feminist University of Life, which provides time to get together and enjoy each other's company. A few of these animators are starting a consulting organization called *Nosotras Todas* (All of Us), through which they hope to collaboratively advertise and contract out their varied skill sets as part of a more formal joint working group. Each of them has additional paid employment in other sectors, as professors or nutritionists, for example. Only one is the paid coordinator of MyM.

In the three cities where MyM members live, people have different levels of access to the activities of tortilla sales and maize production. Some tortilla makers continue to cultivate very small patches of land and have to buy the majority of the maize that they use in their products over the course of the year. Producers principally are farmers but may also sell value-added food products. Thus, the distinction between producer and tortilla maker is more like a spectrum on which different women utilize different strategies depending on their circumstances.

When MyM began, tortilla makers were the original intended beneficiaries of this project: family-based economic units of women who support themselves and their families as producers of tortillas and maize-based products. Over time, some women that work on their own have joined, though most members of the organization continue to work within consanguineal units. For the most part, these units work as collaborations of mothers, sisters, sisters-in-law and cousins.

At the time of fieldwork, tortilla makers who participate in MyM are primarily located in San Cristóbal and in Teopisca. The partnered status of these women varies (about half have a cohabitating partner), but at the time of writing, almost all of the women are primary breadwinners even if their husbands occasionally work in construction or other odd jobs. One had a husband who was a carpenter. Often times, these women cohabit with their male partners and their extended families, with more than one nuclear family living together in the same house or on the same street. This is the case for the two main family groups in San Cristóbal. Each of these families used to have access to land outside of or in San Cristóbal, but have become increasingly urbanized in the past generation. Both extended families now rely primarily on wage

work and informal labor to meet their families' subsistence needs. Family members sometimes fill in for each other at different activities depending on necessity.

Producers primarily live in either Teopisca or Amatenango del Valle. Their families continue to produce food, particularly maize. The cultivation of the *milpa* is traditionally men's responsibility, and land held by these producer families is typically legally held by male family members. As part of the collective, women who live in Teopisca tend to participate in trainings and occasionally in catering events, but not in daily collective work of the restaurant though members of one family unit from Teopisca did work several restaurant shifts. They tend to rely more heavily on making independent sales rather than wage earning work through the collective projects like La Milpa. In Amatenango, many of the women sell pottery but support agricultural production. As members of the organization, they often also participate in trainings on biofertilizer and they benefit from projects that install water filters and improved stoves. Some of these women sell maize to the tortilla makers in San Cristóbal, thereby creating another relationship. These women are less dependent on wage work outside of the house to provide for their families, though all still engage in the production and sale of maize-based products in addition to their work as cultivators. The majority have male partners with whom they live.

Fitting into the Mesh: MyM Membership as Part of Diversified Livelihood Strategies

Though they are independent working women employed primarily in the informal economy, MyM women did not feel that they were lacking work opportunities.

Margarita, when I asked about her work life, stated, “Work? I have plenty of work. It’s time that I am lacking.” She often feels like she needs to be in many places at once, at home making tortillas, in her field tending her maize and cooking for her children and grandchildren. Mary, a 25-year old with three children who lives in San Cristóbal, explained, “I don’t really like to cook at home, but it doesn’t matter. We don’t have any time to rest. We get home and then it is time to make dinner for the kids, or prepare coffee, or make dinner for everyone. There is no time to rest.” Regardless of these competing pressures, participating in *Mujeres y Maíz* is one of many livelihood strategies for those involved.

All members of MyM undertake many different activities to piece together economically viable livelihoods. In this way, many have entered a neoliberal economy that promotes economic organization that emphasizes labor flexibility (Barndt 1999). Within this paradigm, changing economic forces encourage people to be willing to adapt to changing job requirements in an increasingly fast-paced economy (Freeman 2014).

This is the situation both animators and collective members. Lucy, the coordinator, is a single mother of two daughters. She teaches courses in both college and high school diploma programs related to sustainable and rural development, and she also acts as an advisor to other academic projects. Various people who are hired to run workshops for *Mujeres y Maíz* work primarily as researchers or nutritionists. These women also work to balance multiple income streams and activities. For tortillas makers, the combination of formal and informal work has helped them to support their families over long periods. Mercedes, now in her late 60s, has a long history of work for pay outside the home. Beginning at age 14, she worked as a domestic servant and nanny for a

family, raising their small children. There, she cooked, and learned many of the recipes that she later used with her own family. At age 21, she left that position to marry her husband. Shortly afterward, she started working selling tortillas at the municipal market to help bring in money. At the time, she had one child. Her tortilla making continued throughout her life, while she raised her four children. When she was in her 50s, her husband, formerly a day laborer in various jobs, became sick with diabetes. Making tortillas allowed Mercedes to be at home most of the day to care for him, leaving only during short periods to sell or make deliveries.

Entering the labor force has not freed these women from household constraints and caretaking, most of the women are primary breadwinners and mothers. Fulfilling these multiple roles requires that they have a level of flexibility that would be hard to achieve through working in traditional wage-labor jobs. Therefore, they use varied strategies; particularly informal work and flexible jobs, government assistance and familial networks to make ends meet. As presented in Chapter 3, all of the women members of the collective actively cultivate additional sales outlets for the foods that they sell. In addition, many have other part-time paid work; such as work as housecleaners, independent caterers, home cooks, and care takers for children. Many have worked at other times in small shops as cashiers or bakery employees. In Amatenango, many women make pottery to sell, a craft for which the city is well known (Nash 1969). A portion of the women still have some access to farmland, and so work actively with their husbands, partners or children to cultivate limited amounts of maize and beans or coffee and other crops.

Concurrent with these pursuits, many of the members of MyM qualify for

government supports. All of the women in this study who have school-aged children participate in the Program *Oportunidades* (Opportunities), which is a government funded, conditional cash transfer program designed to support mothers with school age children. According to Gloria, a MyM member, the program provides “support for mothers with few resources” (*apoyo a las mamás de bajos recursos*). Though the *Oportunidades* program in urban areas had a relatively low enrollment rate (only about 50% of eligible households (Angelucci and Attanasio 2009)), all of the MyM members with school aged children participate except for Mercedes who is in her late 50s, and Mari Carmen in her early 70s. This program is one example of the varied strategies that the women involved in this organization utilize as a way to piece together their livelihoods.

Balancing the necessity for paid work to support their families is often in conflict with the requirement to perform care work as mothers and family members. Though more than half of the women are married, many of the women’s husbands are day laborers who lack consistent employment. Given fairly precarious economic arrangements, the member families of Mujeres y Maíz operate largely as consanguineous economic units and use these existing networks to make it possible to make ends meet. Most rely heavily on the support of their familial networks, asking sisters, mothers, or sisters-in-law to aid with childcare, share in deliveries, switch out work days or help with food preparation at home. Most of the women experience working in a combination of formal and informal economic activities through which they try to meet their economic necessities.

Table 5.2 Examples of Livelihood Strategies and Roles of MyM Members

Person	Categorization	Situation
Lucy	Animator	Lucy works as the Coordinator and Founder of MyM. In this position, she seeks out funding for projects, writes reports and manages many of the administrative aspects of

		projects. In addition to this, Lucy teaches both high school and college level courses and diploma programs. She gets some salary from the projects and bears the responsibility of managing MyM as an organization that receives funding.
Margarita	Producer/ Tortilla Maker	Margarita and her husband cultivate two parcels of land outside of Teopisca to maintain their own family production of organic milpa. She sells tortillas, made by herself and her daughters, at the AgroEco Market. These are out of their own maize and complemented with other products from their land, like beans and limes. She strongly identifies as a producer and <i>campesina</i> , a peasant.
Fátima	Tortilla Maker	Fátima and her four children also live in Teopisca but are no longer owners of agricultural property. She and her daughters make tostadas from maize that they either purchase from her brother, through MyM, or at the market. She still identifies as a <i>productora</i> , a producer though she is not engaged in her own agriculture.
Verónica	Tortilla Maker/ Blurry	Verónica lives mostly in San Cristóbal, where she does not have any cultivatable land. However, she travels various times per month to her husband's parcel, a few hours away, where he grows coffee and some staple food crops. By traveling there, she continues to work some days per month in agriculture though she does not live on her productive land. Verónica's primary income stream is from her work as a tortilla maker and cook with MyM and through additional pursuits like housecleaning.
Adelina	Producer	Adelina lives with her mother and sisters in Amatenango del Valle. As part of MyM, she has been trained to make home-made fertilizers and compost. She is working to pressure her father, who is responsible for the maize that they grow on their communally held land, to use these inputs rather than purchased chemical fertilizers and pesticides. A portion of their maize is sold to tortilla makers in San Cristóbal. She also earns money making pottery for sale.

Programs and Projects of Mujeres y Maíz

Mujeres y Maíz has adapted programmatic offerings to meet different needs of the collective's members over time. The variety of projects has been crafted in order to cover skills along the entire chain of maize elaboration, ranging from the cultivation of maize to

its storage and to turning it into maize-based edible products like tortillas and tostadas. Support has spanned various sectors of maize production, including projects related to home infrastructure like mills for grinding maize into dough or clean water filters and catchment systems. Other activities have included personal development workshops, trainings on sustainable maize production, hygienic food production, and attendance and demonstrations at special events like the National Day of the Tortilla.

In 2010, following two years of workshops and increased sales through the AgroEco Market, members of four of the family units expressed a desire to have a sales locale that could be open every day. This was the organization's first major push into a more extensive, collectively-run activity. Over the following year, the group determined that they would open a restaurant. This became the *La Milpa Comedor Comunitario* discussed in the last two chapters. La Milpa opened in November 2011.

At the time of fieldwork, the organization had several different branches of activities in which members could participate, as shown in the following figure.

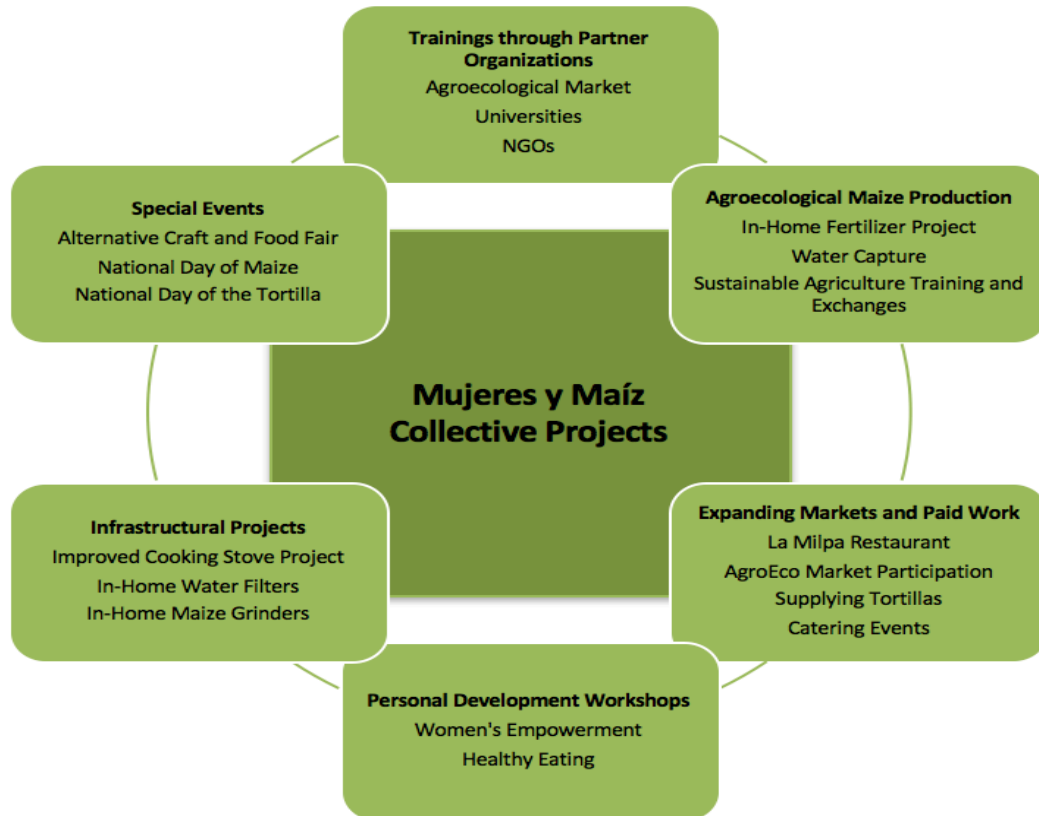


Figure 5.1 Mujeres y Maíz Collective Activities as of 2014.

Note: This image includes some of the major work areas and projects of Mujeres y Maíz in 2014, but is not a comprehensive list.

From Connection to Action: Skill Development and Agency in Meshwork

The past two chapters have explored the webs of relations in which people and organisms move within the realms of entanglement that they inhabit. We have also examined how actors in alternative food systems are shaping webs of relations to become knots in which different values and behaviors, consistent with some criteria of AFS, are being experimented with and actualized. A major component of Ingold's idea of meshwork is that actors have different abilities to affect and shape the meshwork, and that they are able to increase their skill at doing so as they move along the many lines of their development, within the realms of entanglement that they are both part of and part

of constructing. In this chapter, I apply Ingold's understanding of the role of skill development in meshwork to examine the benefits and challenges of participation in the collective work of MyM.

Through different projects, members of MyM have opportunities to engage in collective projects and gather new skills. For Ingold, the ability of an entity to move within, expand and create lines of connection within meshwork is enhanced by the development of skill. Skill increases one's ability to perceive connection, action and movement within the meshwork. To explain this idea, Ingold uses an allegory of a spider sitting in its web. The web, which the spider has spun itself, connects it to the world. These lines create the possibility for interaction. They are lines along which the spider perceives and is thus able to act. This web is an allegory for the meshwork that each individual creates as she moves along her path, binding up in some places and unraveling in others, and thereby making connections. Actors like the spider develop their ability to perceive and respond to information that is relayed along the lines of the web. This ability, according to Ingold, is the prerequisite for the exercise of agency; that is, one's ability to shape and move about the web. The spider, in the story, explains this process:

When I crouch at the centre of my web... I am sensitive to the slightest movement or vibration... every movement that I make is also a movement of my attention. It is the attentiveness of this movement that qualifies it as an instance of *action* and, by the same token, qualifies me as an *agent*... All action is, to varying degrees, *skilled*. The skilled practitioner is one who can continually attune his or her movements to perturbations in the perceived environment... but such skill does not come ready-made. Rather, it *develops*, as part and parcel of the organism's own growth and development in an environment. Since agency calls for skill, and skill arises through development, it follows that the process of development is a *sine qua non* for the exercise of agency. (Ingold 2011, 94)

This understanding of the relationship between agency, perception, and skill

development is helpful for understanding how the projects described above generate new conditions of possibility for action among members of MyM. According to Ingold, action “emerges from the interplay of forces conducted along the lines of the meshwork... Living systems are characterised by a coupling of perception and action that arises within processes of ontogenetic development. This coupling is both a condition for the exercise of agency and the foundation of skill” (2011, 65).

The various activities that the collective undertakes intend to help the women to *salir adelante*, to advance or move ahead. Through participation in collective activities, it is asserted that members will expand their abilities to be better able to realize their own goals and increase their opportunities. These goals include having access to clean water at home, expanding their tortilla production or learning new methods of fertilizing maize. Availing themselves of projects and avenues that the collective creates, members develop greater skill and capacity to move, bind up with others and construct the meshwork of alternative food systems.

The processes entailed in developing these skills and capacities are, however, inherently grounded in relationships that are shaped by both existing power relations and external structures. Within the organization, members have different skills, education levels and life circumstances. This reality affects how projects are chosen, received and evaluated, and how relationships between members continue to develop, as will be further explored later in the chapter.

The organization aims to combat these power differentials through various means. A major strategy is through the creation of structures that allow different members to participate in activities that meet their needs, and to choose the extents to which they

want to be involved. To understand this, I utilize the concept of engagement ladders.

Engagement Ladders: Movement Within the Meshwork

An integral aim of the project has been to promote women's ability to access different kinds of resources while allowing them to choose the level at which they would like to participate. Participation in the collective can be performed on three levels: individual, group and full collective levels. These levels correspond to rungs on the engagement ladder. Individual participation includes work at La Milpa Restaurant or participation in workshops that are open to collective members. Group participation entails a whole family staffing at public education events like the National Day of the Tortilla, in which familial groups maintain their own sales but share a tent from which they sell products. A workshop on biofertilizer held in Amatenango del Valle would be another example of a type of group participation. It would be unlikely that MyM members from another city would travel for that workshop; such an event would take place on the level of one of the collective's geographic groups. Events that engage the whole collective are rare since they require both greater coordination and funding. In the past, full collective activities have been limited to larger events like the Festival of the Tortilla held only once a year.

Table 5.3 Engagement Ladder – Type of Participation

Level of Engagement	Examples of Behavior
Individual	Daily work shift at La Milpa Producing tortillas for La Milpa
Familial Group	Selling food at the Alternative Fair
Geographic Group	Making food for a catering event Hosting visitors from schools or other collectives
Full Collective	Hosting the Fair of the Tortilla

The different levels of engagement require different amounts of coordination, time and energy. Participating in workshops on hygiene, through which one received a water purifier to be used to increase food safety, requires a different level of commitment than taking on shifts in La Milpa restaurant. Work at La Milpa requires additional meetings and trainings in order to participate. The different pathways and types of participation are meant to allow women to engage with the organization in a manner that works for them, and it is understood that people have different abilities and face different circumstances that will affect their involvement.

Just as members of MyM may participate in some projects but not others, not all projects of the collective are ongoing. Prior to opening the restaurant in 2011, many of the women participated in a series of workshops on Healthy and Conscious Eating that were open to all members of the collective. Through these workshops, several vegetarian recipes used at La Milpa were developed, but many of the women also applied several of the lessons to their kitchens at home. Since then, some versions of these trainings have been held with newer members of MyM. These workshops have been held for educational purposes without the intent of opening a restaurant.

While this approach provides major benefits for the organization and its members in terms of allowing for flexibility that they require, it also generates some tensions and conflicts. In order to build collective knowledge, solidarity and membership, the collective has attempted to operate with a fairly democratic decision-making structure. Schedules and other decisions are supposed to be developed through group meetings. However, the structure of the engagement ladders, through which different members choose their levels of participation makes implementing such a decision-making process

exceedingly complicated. As such, the organization faces a major tension in terms of who has the power to decide and shape its direction since members who participate more or less in particular projects feel different levels of power and ownership over them. In speaking of the potential incorporation of new members, one very active collective member said to me, “New people cannot just come and join. We have all done a lot of work to get to know each other, and someone without that experience and personal growth cannot just start from there.” Given this, the collective and its members are consistently managing relational power dynamics, informed by class, race, and geographic location, that influence how the benefits of participation are distributed and understood.

Benefits of Participation

The extent to which members participate in the organization would likely impact the kind of skills developed during the course of engagement with the organization’s activities. It is important to remember when examining engagement ladders that more engagement is not necessarily better. As Kanter and Fine (2010) explain, in any engagement ladder, there will be more people who engage in limited ways and fewer as the amount of engagement increases. For some, engaging with MyM projects is a daily or weekly occurrence. For others, the collective is more distant; it is the purveyor of monthly trainings on technical assistance of making fertilizer. This variation does not have to be considered a weakness. Rather, there is no one-size-fits-all relationship (Kanter and Fine 2010). Because relationships change over time, and people’s knowledge and desire to engage alters, maintaining a diversity of levels for engagement leaves the

door open to people at various points. Whatever the participation in collective activities, the main benefits obtained can be divided into several categories, each of which will be examined in turn:

- Paid work
- Infrastructure support
- Skills acquisition
- Expansion of social networks
- Personal development.

Paid Work

Most activities of MyM are not monetarily remunerated. Members of the organization sometimes have their wage covered for a day when they participate in a workshop. Typically, the cost of transport to and from the workshop will be covered as a stipend, and food is usually provided. Lucy, the coordinator, is paid through the project funds, which she both solicits and manages. The project has also sometimes managed part-time staff to support particular activities, such as running workshops or helping to install stoves.

Those who choose to work at La Milpa restaurant are all tortilla makers. One family comes from Teopisca. The death of the father of that family three years ago means that they no longer have access to the land that he used to work for an extended family member. Each day that woman comes to work at La Milpa, she receives a wage of 100 pesos plus the cost of transport to and from the restaurant. The 100 peso per day wage is higher than the nationally mandated minimum wage for the area, which is 66.45 pesos,

but it hovers just above the nationally recommended minimum for 2015, which is 98.15 pesos for cooks or restaurant workers in Chiapas (CONASAMI 2015).

This salary covers the whole day's work. On a typical day, the women meet at the Municipal Market at 8:00 am (often traveling between 15 and 45 minutes to arrive at that time). At the end of the day, they finish cleaning the restaurant between 6:00 and 6:30, sometimes later depending on how deep a clean is necessary. Their payment is thus regularly 100 pesos for a 10-hour workday, coming out to approximately US\$0.83 an hour. The women who make the tortillas to be used at the restaurant, both sold and to accompany meals, also receive 100 pesos per day, and usually turn in 100 tortillas. The cost of the materials is not covered above and beyond the 100 pesos. These women make tortillas at home and deliver them fresh to La Milpa each morning.

In addition to daily wage work, the women get opportunities to increase their earnings through catering events for which the group is contracted. These events have included international conferences or parties in the past. However, this only happens about once a year. In these events, both tortilla makers and producers can and do participate. Event days often require very intensive workdays. According to Mercedes, for instance, the women have to go shopping the day before; if it is a big order, "we are here in the kitchen at 5 in the morning, and we don't finish until late. If they want to use our plates, then there is a lot more cleanup to do. So yes, you likely earn more, but it is not a normal work day at all."

These events also occasionally were a major source of conflict within the collective, as members attempted to determine how people should be remunerated for their participation and who was invited to participate in catering certain events.

Discussing who would staff and at what hours often became contentious, as some members thought that those that worked most often at La Milpa should have first rights to these more lucrative events. Others felt that these opportunities should be available to members that might not be able to fit daily work at the restaurant into their schedules. Typically, Lucy, as the coordinator, left these questions to the women themselves to decide at group meetings. The results were not always favorable to everyone. Alondra, a member of MyM who farmed in Teopisca and who worked regularly at La Milpa at its outset, but had since stopped, explained that:

The fact is, we stopped working at the restaurant but we didn't disappear! There are some periods where we have a ton of work and others where we have very little, but I just don't feel comfortable there anymore. There isn't a level of communication where I could go and see about working a few days. I feel like it's so much jerking around.

These issues demonstrate tensions that arise over how opportunities within the collective are allocated. Although the idea of the collaboration is to advance everyone's earning potential, difficulties arise in determining how to distribute these opportunities. Members' different senses of ownership over certain activities, as well as privilege based on geographic location, affect how these opportunities are allocated and sometimes produce friction.

The sales locations themselves also help women to grow their own income. These outlets have altered many of the women's livelihood strategies. For Margarita, being a part of MyM has altered both her work and her own evaluation of it:

Selling to the organic market has been a great help to me. Unlike when I was 23, I no longer have to go out and sell tostadas door to door, carrying a baby on my front, bags of tostadas on my back, and buckets with masa in each arm, hoping always to sell a bit more in order to lighten my load. Organizations like this one for me are so important.

We're very proud of the value that is placed on our work. I'm thankful to God, they've changed my life.

For Mercedes, selling through MyM was also very important during challenging times. Her husband was sick with diabetes for the last ten years of his life and in a wheelchair for the last five. Caring for him made it very difficult for her to sell daily at the municipal market. After she was incorporated into the AgroEco Market and MyM, she was able to limit her sales to a few days a week and be out of the house less. For her, the renown that she has received through these outlets has altered how much she has to go out to sell: "Thanks to the project, a lot of people know me. Before, only people in my neighborhood and near my house knew to come buy tortillas from me; but thanks to [the project], now a lot of people know." In these ways, then, MyM provides some opportunities for expanding paid work through the direct activities of the organization.

Infrastructure Support

The work of MyM has included support for infrastructural changes related to food production in the women's homes. These changes have been designed to alleviate health concerns, promote food safety and hygienic food production and facilitate the expansion of food production as a livelihood stream. Involvement in the group has led to more direct connections between maize producers and tortilla makers.

The stoves built by the project minimize the amount of wood necessary to cook tortillas and lessen indoor air pollution from smoke. Such stoves have been commonly promoted in rural areas across Latin America to reduce deforestation and improve health outcomes (Romieu et al. 2009). Within MyM, the women worked together to adjust the stove design to make it most appropriate for making tortillas. The process of adjusting

and redesigning the stoves included changing the height, shape of the griddle and other preferences of the users. This project was used as an entry point for several women to begin attending MyM events and workshops.

The group has also worked to address the need for water. Each family in the collective has received water filters in each home. This reduced the need to purchase water and also helped to address hygiene and food safety concerns related to the home production of foods for sale. These filters were donated to the families who participated in a series of workshops, thereby incentivizing them to learn about other issues such as waterborne illnesses.

Another effort supported by the project was securing upfront financing for members to purchase electric maize grinders for their homes. This purchase has two benefits. First, it limits the time and investment that it takes for the women to turn their cooked maize into nixtamalized dough. Typically, women making maize-based products at home had to grind their maize by hand or take it to a tortillería to have the maize ground. With these grinders at home, they are able to grind their own maize at their convenience. Secondly, having these grinders increases the women's income and standing in their neighborhoods. Rather than take maize to a tortillería, many neighbors of MyM members now bring maize to the MyM members' homes to grind it. The women usually charge one peso per bucket of maize to offset the cost of the electricity. This is less than the amount charged to grind the maize at a tortillería and is more convenient for many neighbors.

An additional benefit for both tortilla makers and producers is a direct supply chain for maize produced without industrial fertilizers and pesticides. The women get to

purchase maize from trusted sources, and the producers get an additional market for maize that they grow using new processes such as the application of homemade fertilizers and compost. The implementation of these alternative production practices are adopted by some families and not others, an example of the contested and evolving forms of agricultural production as farmers search for markets and balance different motivations for cultivating different types of maize and utilize differing production practices (Bautista León 2013).⁶ As part of the project, Lucy and other staff visit producers in Amatenango and Teopisca. Lucy pays for 50 pound sacks of maize that have been ordered ahead of time by collective members. She delivers the sacks to the women in San Cristóbal at the end of the day. Each woman pays for the maize outright and uses it throughout her sales channels.

This connection is beneficial for both the producers and tortilla makers. Finding the appropriate sustainably produced maize can be a challenge for the tortilla makers. Many buy from family or friends but sometimes find it difficult to secure maize from Chiapas that is sustainably grown. Since there is an agreement ahead of time, families of women producers can anticipate earnings by selling to MyM, rather than being beholden to a fluctuating market. They also have power to change the amount of maize that they intend to sell, depending on their needs and the harvest.

A benefit of the direct connection held by MyM is that the production processes for the maize are more knowable than that purchased from someone random at the municipal market. This direct connection creates a trusted source of maize for women who cannot

⁶ An examination of the overall effect of these changes in production methods and market access on communities like Amatenango is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, it is very likely that access to differentiated markets, like the AgroEco Market in San Cristóbal, affects relations between farmers and families in rural communities, as has been demonstrated in communities where portions of members are involved in fair trade certified or organic farming activities, as explored in Jaffee (2007).

produce it themselves. This is a benefit they pass on to consumers who seek a more transparent supply chain, desirous to know the who and how of the maize that they consume. Though this maize is not certified organic, several of the women were very familiar with the agroecological production methods. Verónica explained that she buys maize through the collective, and also from a friend in Zinacantán, a neighboring city. Based on what she had learned in the collective, she insisted that the maize producer uses compost and worm castings rather than chemical fertilizers in his maize.

This has also proved challenging in other ways, shaped by the broader context of agricultural production in the region and country. At La Milpa, and within the women's own production, they have been encouraged to source products that are produced using agroecological methods. The goal of the restaurant was to use farm-to-table foods, pairing tortillas made with heirloom corn and other "traditional" dishes that highlight local edible herbs, plants, and recipes. However, there is not currently sufficient production of either maize or vegetables that meet these criteria. Rather, farmers are encouraged by state and federal extension programs to adopt hybrid and improved seeds and to use chemicals and pesticides to increase their yields. Though the collective is working on building up these supply chains, the existing structures are insufficient to meet their needs and the women often have to rely on the municipal market in which goods are less traceable.

These tangible, in-home infrastructure benefits support the members of MyM and facilitate several of the project's overarching goals, which include supporting economies based on these family units and increasing access to more sustainably produced foods in the region. Connecting producers and tortilla makers promotes greater integration of the

entire regional economy that supports alternative agricultural practices, builds connections between people, and mitigates market inconsistencies through the generation of these more stable supply chain connection. These activities attempt to imbue market relations with several of the non-market based sustainability criteria explored throughout this dissertation.

Skill and Experience Acquisition

In addition to the infrastructural changes outlined above, participation in the organization leads to many of the women acquiring new skills in various arenas. These include concrete business skills like accounting, expanded cooking skills and public speaking experience. Participation also leads to inclusion in other organization's trainings, opportunities for travel exchanges and increased knowledge of food and food systems.

At the start of MyM, most of the trainings pertained to the installation of the stoves and water filters, but were coupled with classes on boosting food hygiene, getting maize produced with fewer chemical inputs and avoiding gastrointestinal infections from polluted water. Other workshops focused on healthy eating and on how to grow sales of maize-based products.

A major project of the organization that required developing diverse skills was the establishment of La Milpa Restaurant. Lucy envisioned La Milpa as a space to advance a new model of support and skill development for both the women members of Mujeres y Maíz and the customers that might be interested in supporting a women's collective, a regional maize economy and healthier eating. Her hope was that, "La Milpa

serve as a space from which to educate people,” and to provide “a school for reflection and practice with women around issues of food and diet.” For Lucy and the women of MyM, having a physical space in which to serve food, as well as hold workshops and other events, could serve as an educational and transformational space for many of the people who attended.

Opening a restaurant required the women to learn many new skills that had not been part of the early trainings. In order to run the restaurant, the members of MyM were trained in necessary skills like basic accounting and food safety. They also expanded their cooking skills. Classes promoted hygienic food production and the creation of new recipes. As Mercedes, one of the women, stated in discussing the formation of the restaurant:

We started with the idea of having a place to make and sell tortillas and atoles, but it's grown. We are trying hard to use natural products. We also have learned how to make many things from scratch, even up to making our own gelatin to avoid the processed stuff. We've changed recipes to make them healthier, like here we don't do fried and breaded *chiles rellenos*. We also strive to create an experience where people don't leave without learning something. That's one reason we don't have straws or soft drinks. We also try to use more vegetables always.

Mary also explained that part of the role of the restaurant is to rescue traditional recipes that are not commonly found in restaurants. She said, “I didn't know many of the recipes that we make here. It's not only that we are serving food that doesn't harm people; but also that we are trying to rescue earlier foods, from before, that many people are not familiar with. Foods that our grandparents made, like *sopa de masa*” (a soup with balls of cooked, nixtamalized maize dough).

For those with limited formal education, an important course was basic accounting, addition and penmanship so that the restaurant's books could be maintained.

Opening the restaurant also generated large catering orders and parties that resulted in the organization hiring the women for additional work. These orders required that the women work in teams to plan menus for up to 350 people, undertake the shopping, create schedules and manage deliveries. Though many completed these tasks individually on a regular basis, working with ten to fifteen other people to increase the scale of these operations provided a lot of learning opportunities.

Other skills furthered by the organization encouraged more sustainable maize cultivation. A major project of this type has been training on how to make natural liquid fertilizers and compost from products at home including food scraps, ash and other household waste. This reduces the need for purchased, industrial pesticides and fertilizers and is considered safer for the environment, farmers and consumers. Primarily, women from Teopisca and Amatenango chose to participate in trainings on how to make and apply compost and biofertilizer, due to the fact that they still have access to productive lands and are growing crops. Most of the women in San Cristóbal have only small patio gardens and have engaged in this project in limited ways.

Making fertilizer at home has led to some changes in the relationships around maize production within participating families. Though male household members are typically responsible for maize production, several women from these trainings have convinced their fathers or husbands to use these fertilizers on portions of the land that they cultivate. For many, this technique was unfamiliar and switching over has been a slow process. However, most of these test plots for more sustainable maize production have been very successful, and they supply the maize for tortilla makers in San Cristóbal. María Bautista, a 28-year old woman from Amatenango who helped to organize the

group to take the class, explained the effects:

Though not everyone in the group is using the biofertilizer, those that are, try to motivate the others.... The men say that it is very costly and hard to change, so it is a slow process, but we are moving in the right direction.... It's a team effort to educate those that work in the fields about the damage to our health and our environment done by the chemicals that we use. But sometimes, since it is the men that work the fields, the women let them do it. One woman told me that she doesn't like her husband using the spray backpack, but she didn't have to use it. But now, she's one of the ones that is really committed to the biofertilizer. She thought that because she wasn't working in the fields, he wouldn't listen to her. But he is. Not 100%, but more than before.

MyM members also attend trainings with other organizations. Lucy elaborated that these links provide opportunities: "Some of the women have joined other groups and done courses on subjects like leadership and gender equity." For example, María also discussed how working in the collective had advanced collaboration and led to new shared experiences: "We have learned to collaborate with other women, to work together. We've been visited by people from many parts of the world, and we had workshops where we learned to cook new things and others where we have taught people to cook other things. I have really enjoyed that."

In spring 2014, Verónica and Gabriela were asked to take part in a training at CIAM, the Latin American Women's Center for Research and Action. As a result of this, they participated in monthly trainings addressing everything from personal development to the history of patriarchy. This education has been helpful for Verónica in convincing her husband of the value of her participation: "We've had to overcome machismo. My husband didn't want me to work outside my home and didn't know why I had to go to so many meetings, many more than when I worked cleaning houses.... That is the patriarchy, and that's what we get to look at. It comes out in the reflections, that we have all lived

with that, and it continues. But it's not for anyone else to impose on us. It's for us to decide." These trainings, usually offered without charge, become available to MyM members as part of the organization.

Some invitations to the group include attending events outside of San Cristóbal, including travel to conferences and visiting to other collectives around the country. This results in new experiences for the women. One such event was to travel to Tapachula, a city on the coast in southern Chiapas. Six members of MyM attended. In addition to exchanges with a cooperatively run ecotourism project and a discussion with other local market producers, there was a free afternoon excursion to visit the ocean. As we progressed along the 45-minute ride, I asked the MyM members, "Who has been to the ocean before?" Not a single hand went up. "No one?" I asked again. "No, Hilary, I only know the route from my bedroom to my kitchen, and from Teopisca to San Cristóbal," said Silvia. Traveling to the beach was a highlight for her and an experience that otherwise would have been monetarily impossible. Another even more stark example of this was the trip by three of the women from MyM to represent Mexico at the 2010 Slow Food International Terra Madre Conference in Turin, Italy. In that trip, all three women became the first members of their families to fly in an airplane and to leave the country, facts that they and their families proudly recounted. Experiences like these help to increase the women's social standing within their communities and to develop connections to other people and places in which their skills and knowledge are valued, and which open up possibilities that were previously unavailable within many of the women's class context. In this way, many of these activities reinforce the development of

a context that may support these activities, building and strengthening knots in the meshwork.

Expanded Social Networks

Participation in the collective expanded many members' social networks. Through participation in different activities, they built new friendships and social connections and grew knowledge of other alternative food system initiatives and their proponents. An important element of this social network enlargement was the construction of connections for many of the members across social class boundaries, leading to opportunities, experiences and support that may otherwise have been difficult to access.

Over the course of fieldwork, I identified 41 organizations connected to and working to promote values related to alternative food systems in San Cristóbal. These organizations were identified through free-list activities with animator informants. In addition, over the course of fieldwork I compiled a list of 38 individuals who were currently or in the past had been what I term animators, people that organized initiatives that my informants considered to be part of groups promoting values related to alternative food systems. While I am sure these lists were not exhaustive, after interviews with the women, animators and some consumers, very few new initiatives were mentioned.

I proceeded to ask the women that regularly worked at La Milpa restaurant about their knowledge of these organizations and relationships with the people identified through these activities. On average, 74% of the organizations with which the women were familiar came through their involvement with MyM. Of the people that they could identify, on average, 58% of them were people that they said they did not know or know

of before beginning to participate with MyM. This shows that through the collective and its activities, the women expand their knowledge of and connections to an array of organizations and people involved in food systems in San Cristóbal. Many of the actors listed are university professors and activists, not necessarily people that the women would have encountered or befriended in their everyday lives outside of these initiatives.

One example of multi-layered social connections facilitated by the collective was a rotating savings and credit group at La Milpa. Each Monday, one of the multiple notebooks and manila folders would be brought out from under the counter, the *tanda* booklet. The *tanda* is a mechanism by which a group of people that know each other come together to collect money at a set interval and help each other financially (Vélez-Ibañez 2010). Typically, each participant agrees to put in a set amount of money at each interval. Each week, one member receives the total of 1000 pesos. In this way, the whole group helps each other to save during a set time frame, and the *tanda* continues until everyone has received the total sum.

Most tandas operate with people from a single class background. However, the *tanda* at La Milpa connected women who worked in the restaurant, local development workers who were regular customers and the coordinators of the project. Participation in the *tanda* gave people an additional reason to visit the restaurant and to interact, thereby strengthening the social relationships and generating customers. Benito, who worked as the coordinator of another development project, would often use his payment as a reason to come have lunch. Paying his bill would turn into a longer chat. This created social and monetary connections between white-collar development workers with Masters degrees and blue-collar workers.

The strands of the meshwork are generated by people connecting in various ways. Owing to these social relationships, members of MyM gain access to additional networks of people, bringing about other opportunities. Margarita, for example, due to her friendship with professors at ECOSUR and within Slow Food, was asked to host a workshop on nixtamalization at a visiting international conference of school garden advocates in fall 2013.

Personal Development

Working with the collective has also occasioned opportunities for personal development; particularly in terms of public speaking, working with others, and coming to re-value their work as food producers.

The members have developed skills in dealing with the public, including both patrons of the restaurant and groups that want to learn about the work of the collective. Learning to interact with customers was challenging for some of the women. Mercedes was very shy and had to practice being proactive in asking people what they wanted to order. Being present and working with the public was enjoyable for other women and affirmed their capacity for social interface. Mari Carmen felt buoyed by the opportunity: “I love it. I am not embarrassed by interacting with people, I like to be with them, and everywhere I go I am chatting with people. I am friendly, and they like that.”

When visitors come to the collective, the women tell their stories publicly. When visited by a group of mango farmers from neighboring Tabasco, the women were asked to cater a meal and talk about their experience. Previously, it would have been unthinkable for many to talk in front of a 30-person group. But, because of their

experience, each spoke eloquently about the achievements and challenges they faced individually and as a group. Mari Carmen, aged 72, talked about learning to cook vegetarian dishes at her age: “We all like to learn new things, and here we have learned many new recipes!” Mary, aged 25, talked about how this group has lightened her mother’s workload. She went from selling at the municipal market daily to having more free time because she worked at the restaurant. Her family also now had more stoves that she and her sister could use to also make tortillas, which helped to lighten the load on everyone. After the event, Mari Carmen stood with me. She remarked that before joining this group, she had never spoken in front of so many people. She would have been too scared to stand up and talk. Now, however, she felt that she had valuable insights to share about her collective and her ability to learn new things as an old woman. These skills and revaluations increase many of the women’s self-esteem and sense of their own power.

This visit, and others like it, expand the renown of the organization and fan a feeling among collective members that their work is important. Lucy explained how working on the formation of the collective had allowed her to learn and share with others: “I am most proud of having learned to share what I know and to share it with people from other places. Through this restaurant and from this dream, we have served clients not only here in the dining room, but also in the meetings of ECOSUR where people come from all over. Through that, I have met people from many places and been able to share my knowledge of food and tortillas.” During one such visit, a female farmer endorsed the work of MyM: “I congratulate you all. As a woman, I feel proud of you and what you have achieved. You are warriors with a vision.” Mary, the 28-year old group organizer in Amatenango, discussed her experience in this way:

With the groups, we have gotten to know each other through the workshops and exchanges. We got to travel to Tenejapa. But we haven't gotten organized just to get material benefits, but to get a new consciousness and to learn more. In this space we get to listen to each other and to see the value of that. In my opinion, it is a possibility for us as women to give ourselves the freedom and the right to time and space, to go out and share ideas with other people and groups and not to stay stuck at home. And giving ourselves that space has been really enjoyable for everyone.

For many of the women, the skills that they gained extended to acquiring knowledge about organic food and food sovereignty. Mari Carmen developed strong opinions about the use of GMOs, linking them to the government and exploitation of small scale farmers. She felt that the work of MyM was important in combatting this:

The government brought in the GMOs so that we lose our *criollo* seeds. And the GMOs, once you plant them you can't save the seeds, it won't reproduce. We don't want that seed. We've seen the news, and in the workshops here. They say that it brings problems. The maize is pretty, but it doesn't have good flavor and it is bad for our health. It's just sent out to the farmers and the poor. We let ourselves believe it. The government deceives the farmers, and many don't know. But here, we don't want those seeds. It's much better that we keep our *criollo* seeds, from our country, from here in Chiapas.... It's my dream to have a greenhouse so that I could grow the vegetables for here in La Milpa, broccoli, squash, everything... and then we could know it was organic, because I know that the things that I grow are organic. I have beans that I plant, but it's not enough to sell. But I want to plant more to serve it here. I have my worms, and I use the compost. Anyone can come see it.

In this way, Mari Carmen is also committed to the vision of a robust, transparent, regional food system.

Gabriela, one of the primary workers at La Milpa who also maintains her own ambulant sales, applied her knowledge of "healthy" and "good" food to her children's diets. For a school celebration, Gabriela's children Rigo and Lily were asked to bring a snack to school to share with their classmates. Gabriela prepared *tinga de zanahoria*, a mix of shredded carrot cooked with onions and chili that is typical at La Milpa but is not

a widespread food, in part because it is vegetarian. This has become the staple that Gabriela sends to events like this since it is both cheap to make, and, in her view, much healthier than the selections typically provided. Rigo backs up this assessment. As he seals the plastic Tupperware container full of tinga, he proclaims that last time, he was the only person to bring any type of vegetable to his class party. "Everyone brings hot dogs, and everything has meat in it!" Gabriela went on to say that, "the kids, they all eat junk food; but I like to put the example that they can eat more vegetables, more natural foods. It doesn't have to be potato chips." Along with the tinga, Rigo takes a few dozen blue corn tortillas to make tacos. When I asked Rigo if he had other thoughts about being the only one to bring vegetables to the class party, Rigo told me that he preferred these tortillas to those from Maseca flour, consumed by his classmates, due to "the care and happiness that my mother takes in making them."

Greater participation in collective work requires more social and emotional commitment on the part of members. As a result of this project, families have become friends and begun to invite each other to family celebrations and to call on each other for favors, though to varying degrees. These interactions help to generate new understandings of oneself as well as one's work. Mary from Amatenango described these realizations as follows:

It's possible to make changes for ourselves. We have to figure out where we are going and not get off the path. We have to keep in mind what we want to do and get well organized. More than anything, we have to value ourselves. We often don't trust that we ourselves can do things, and we don't give ourselves the opportunity to believe that we can. I feel like getting organized like that and being in the group makes us stronger.

The Affective Dimension of Collective Building

The benefits of working in the collective are demonstrable across the above dimensions. However, as discussed in the introduction, the process of building capacity for collective work is not only about the provision of particular benefits. All of the processes imagined within this collective, from the construction of new supply chains to training in public speaking, require members to learn new skills within the context of *Mujeres y Maíz*. A large portion of these skills are affective and relational, relying on and made up of particular ideas of what it means to work together and shaped by feelings and emotions. Through these shared experiences, members of MyM encounter differing visions of and approaches to collective building. These differing visions and approaches influence the transformative potential of MyM within the meshwork of alternative food systems.

One day, part way through fieldwork, I was driving with Lucy and discussing interpersonal challenges that were on-going between different members of the collective working at La Milpa. Several of the women had had disagreements and were no longer willing to be on the schedule together. This was causing Lucy distress because it was both making it hard to ensure that there were two people available to staff the restaurant each day and because it seemed to her to mark a failure of the group to work across their family-based economic units. After all, La Milpa had been posited as a collective space. In the discussion, Lucy exclaimed, “People are so complicated! Some days, I am so happy that I am a biologist, and at least I can go out into the woods, and look at insects and firewood and forget people’s craziness for a little while. Anyone who wants to do this work should really study psychology.” This quote came to me to be a marker of

differing approaches to solidarity building between members of the collective in ways that demonstrate how class position shapes notions of solidarity within alternative food systems. These notions impact the ways that people work together, reinforcing certain power dynamics and failing to account for external pressures that limit the scope of existing alternative food systems.

As previously explored, the members of MyM come from different class backgrounds. Animators, for the most part, have come to Chiapas from other parts of Mexico or other parts of the world. They are well-educated and tend to be partially separated from their extended kin-based networks, though several of them are married and have children. Though Lucy is the only one that has a regular paid connection to MyM, several other animators are regular contributors and supporters through providing workshops, attending and helping to plan events, and additional activities. Among these women, there is a commitment to building non kin-based solidarity, through activities like the monthly Unifem meetings and also through the development of new support configurations such as a civil society consulting organization as a way to combine their expertise and allow them to work together more formally. They are friends and also work together.

In contrast, most of the members of MyM, whether producers or tortilla makers, work and live in close quarters to their kin and utilize those networks to manage their daily responsibilities. Mothers, daughters, daughters-in-law tend to work and live in close proximity to each other and to rely on each other for support. For instance, during the time of fieldwork, three family-units including thirteen women worked at La Milpa Restaurant. These 13 women live in only four different houses. Regularly, within family

units, women shift to cover each other's work schedules or pick each other's children up from school. Often times, they make tortillas together in a central location in the home. The women rely heavily on their kin-based units for economic and social support, and this support was aided by communication that was facilitated because people either lived together or very close.

These differences of ideas about who forms the basis of one's social support network impacted the kind of solidarity networks that these two groups envision for the collective. Among the animators, ideas about the collective are often imbued with ideas of a new way of being. One woman that regularly held workshops with the group and was an avid supporter explained that MyM was, "a good initiative for showing the importance of working in a collective, for highlighting the importance of food and what is local, and for generating a new way of being for the people that come here. A new way of being with respect to food, and with respect to consumption in general."

Among the producers and tortilla makers, these more intangible benefits were mentioned always alongside the access to resources that the organization provided, most of which were accessed at a household level. Infrastructure supports like water filters and stoves were attained by household, allowing the kin-based units to benefit by sharing equipment that supported the work of the family-unit. This focus on family unit also extended to visions for the future by some members. Maria Elena, one of the matriarchs, spoke about her hopes that in three years she and her daughters would be supported by the collective to open a small restaurant in their neighborhood. This family-based vision differed from the one often expressed by Lucy, which was to have another La Milpa run by various families in the center of the city.

The difference between these visions of solidarity has created tensions as the collective has expanded its work to projects that require greater collaboration and coordination across kin-based groups. This has been particularly visible in the running of La Milpa. The restaurant, which is open five days a week from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm, is designed to provide a more stable market for the women and an opportunity to work together to learn new skills. A description of the project from a funder states that the project “promotes the preservation of the region’s cultural diversity and the additional income earned in the communal kitchen enables the women to improve their economic situation” (Volkart 2016).

Within this group endeavor, several challenges and discomforts emerged due to the women’s increased need to work with other collective members outside of their kin-based units. For many of the women, it was challenging to work with and develop rapport with women from different families. Since the women work in pairs each day, interpersonal relationships have a great impact on working conditions. Mari Carmen explained that, “Getting to know people is hard! If you are going to work in a group and have to get to know everyone, it takes time. If everyone is good-natured, quickly you can get along, but it depends on one’s character. We all have our quirks.” Alejandra, a young member of the Teopisca family, informed me that she preferred to work with her own family or with women she felt were more friendly. Alejandra confided that she liked working in the restaurant, “but some people you get along with more than others.” She went on, “Often I feel like I don’t know what I’m doing, and some of the older women are just less patient.” Hashing out the ability to work together across family units was uncomfortable enough that for certain periods, different women refused to work together.

Coordinating information sharing was another challenge. Many of the members often lacked credit on their cell phones to call women from other families at the end of the day to discuss what was needed the following day at the restaurant. Similar issues stopped people from alerting others if they would be late, a common occurrence given members dependence on public transit that was not on a fixed schedule, leading to anger and hurt feelings. For others, it was difficult to understand why communication was lacking. Verónica explained that: “We try to send each other messages about what we bought today and what we need for tomorrow, but it doesn’t work. People come late. They don’t plan together. It is hard to be in touch. To me, it seems easy. One message, what you made, what we need, but then people don't send it. I don't know why.”

Such divisions were exacerbated between geographic groups. Margarita and Alondra, the matriarchs of two of the families that maintain their own maize and other crop production, worked originally in La Milpa during the first months it was open. They stopped working after that because according to them, “we had too much work to do, too many commitments in Teopisca and it was hard to commit to being there in La Milpa so much.” One of the other families, Las Espinoza, still sent three family members to rotate working on different days at La Milpa. However, in conversation, the reasons for leaving, and the challenges of continuing involvement were shown to have more personal causes than simply a lack of time. Interpersonal relations also influence the ability of the collective to build solidarity between individual members. In discussing the restaurant, Margarita lamented, “They don’t even think about us anymore. Like yesterday, it was the second anniversary of La Milpa and we were not even invited. I only heard there had been a celebration because I ran into someone at the farmers’ market.” Lack of time,

insufficient communication and dependence on emotional and economic support from family units challenged the vision of the collective as a supportive unit through which people from multiple families worked together.

These challenges were summed up in an evaluation by a student volunteer in her undergraduate thesis, who stated that, “In the general workshops, derogatory comments were made between women from different groups... they need to get to know each other better, share commitments, and really work together to understand and support one another... a challenge that I do not believe is exclusive to this collective, but one that needs prompt attention” (López 2014, 67). Within this framing, the core obstacle that the women face in building on the success of the collective is a need to know each other better so that they can support one another.

This framing as primarily about people’s need to better understand each other is grounded in middle-class conceptions of the role of emotions and psychology in promoting well-being. It fails to take into account the structural challenges like a lack of cell phone credit or reliable transportation that tortilla makers and producers face in being able to collaborate outside of their kin-based units. The conceptualization of these issues as primarily psycho-emotional and affective on the part of the animators results in approaches to dealing with conflicts and challenges within the collective that utilize middle-class strategies focused on the role of emotions.

To address this perceived underlying issue, Lucy regularly chose to focus on workshops that sought to share information and provide the women opportunities to know each other better as a tool to overcome the division between groups. However, because these strategies are based on the concept of solidarity as cross-kin-based units,

they are less well received by members of the collective and less attuned to several of the underlying challenges faced by members.

The first strategy utilized by Lucy was to use semi-regular meetings as a means of sharing information and planning collaboratively. This was designed to address communication issues and transparency that caused friction between group members. However, given the class positions of many members, giving up part of a day to attend a meeting was very difficult to do. Members of MyM are not only spread across different geographic locations spanning some 40 miles; they are also exceedingly busy women, balancing multiple livelihood strategies and family care obligations. These conflicting obligations often resulted in a lack of consistent attendance at meetings, which exacerbated the sense that the meetings were a waste of time. Though communication issues were cited repeatedly as a frustration, the thought of scheduling a monthly or every two-months “state of the organizations” had been floated, but collective members had declared additional meetings untenable. In this way, the strategies employed by Lucy to share work and information between the women failed. The women often felt that other needs, like taking care of their children or doing housework, needed to take priority over the planning and group work that Lucy saw as integral to the functioning of La Milpa. In this way, members daily economic realities clashed with the visions of solidarity and of what was necessary to run the restaurant collectively. For Lucy, this resulted in frustration: “It’s really hard to get the women to want to organize themselves, and we have to work on that. It’s true for all women. We are accustomed to working alone, and it is very different to work in a collective. For me, it is hard to find the balance between supporting their work and letting them manage the restaurant themselves.” Lucy often

felt that the women were not interested or committed to learning more about project funding or reporting, which would have increased their input on and control over the project. To address these issues, Lucy often looked for people to host workshops that would build the women's capacities for the required skills for running the project – things like reporting, computer skills, management and record keeping. However, these workshops often resulted in additional conflicts because they required greater time commitments, were intimidating to some of the women, and exacerbated issues about who had responsibility for taking on these additional tasks in the face of their other responsibilities.

The second strategy that was utilized within the collective to address challenges was group therapy-type workshops. These were intended to increase the women's self-understanding and thus ability to work collaboratively but were received differently by members compared to animators. These workshops grew out of thinking in line with Lucy's comment about psychology being a most useful tool for understanding people and their motivations. Following a series of confrontations between the coordinator and one of the older women working in the collective, an 8-hour workshop titled "Healing the Heart" was organized. The idea of the workshop, run by Paulina, a 30-year old Tzeltal woman, was to provide the women with tools to develop greater empathy for themselves and for each other. It ran from 10:00 am to 7:00 pm, with childcare provided. Elena explained that the purpose of the workshop was to engage in:

... very important personal work, the work of strengthening and healing our hearts, giving us the opportunity to know ourselves a little better. That which we carry deep inside affects our daily life, leading to disproportionate reactions, as if we were carrying a heavy weight. By getting to know ourselves better, we can find more happiness, and more

strength to work through pain and sadness. But the fruit of this labor depends on you all, it depends on how much you are willing to let go.

This workshop, given this description, was integrally bound up with the idea that managing one's internal space is a precursor to being able to work collectively with others. This idea has been shown to be connected to ideas of the self-as-project that are emerging under neoliberal capitalism (Freeman 2014). Within this context, people are increasingly expected to perform emotional labor, labor requiring one to "induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild 1983, 7). The use of therapy as a tool to overcome personal challenges and develop one's self has been tied to the role of emotions as an increased focus within work life and has largely emerged within middle-class groups (Illouz 2008, Freeman 2014).

Explicit here is the case that this work is necessary and its success depends on the commitment of the women involved. These workshops were valued by animators invested in working on themselves to be able to work better with others, according to their vision of solidarity. Lucy, the coordinator, began by saying, "I enjoy these workshops... because it is important to get to know yourself deeply. It is a shame that Mercedes is not here, she would be served by this work. We have to get to know ourselves to have more self-esteem, which affects how we work with others." Such comments were often similar at the meetings of the "Feminist University of Life," which Lucy regularly attended.

The older matriarchs, at whom these workshops were often aimed because of interpersonal issues within the collective, were not as receptive. Over the course of the eight hours, the women drew and made models of their childhood homes with clay, and

spoke aloud to an empty chair imagined to hold family members that had hurt them. Various confided experiences of domestic violence and deep stresses about money and interpersonal relationships. One woman, after refusing to attend, informed me that she did not “have time to sit around and cry all day.” Another, a Jehovah’s Witness, attended part of the workshop but left after lunch later confiding that she was uncomfortable with the lighting of candles and the manner of talking which felt to her disrespectful of God because it was focused on honoring one’s ancestors in Mayan traditions. The younger generations of women, aged 21-34, did tend to participate in these workshops and to cite them as helpful, even when they often said that it was difficult to make time for them. After a very intense exercise, one young woman informed me that she was very grateful to have had some time to think about how sad it made her to have lost her father to a heart attack the previous year, and to cry about it. “It is important that we give ourselves this time,” she stated.

In this way, these workshops call on the members of MyM to mobilize a new understanding of the role of their emotions in shaping their ability to create and maintain the collective endeavor of La Milpa Restaurant. Paradoxically, however, this form of emotional labor plays into the idea of “self as project” that allows very individualized, neoliberal notions of self-making to sneak into this supposedly anti-neoliberal, collective project. In her work on entrepreneurs in Barbados, Freeman observes that “new concepts of the self are vital to the broader workings – and power – of the political-economic and social order. At the heart of the entrepreneurial ethos is an entanglement of *selfhood* and *labor* for envisioning and making one’s self entails particular forms (and intensity) of work” (Freeman 2014, 3). The processes of self-making implied in entrepreneurial

endeavors are increasingly applied to one's concept of self as people cultivate who they are through what they do. In this workshop, the closing statements by Paulina, supported this view. She stated that, "it is crucial to let wounds heal, and our hearts are like a mountain spring. It takes patience and collaboration. But together we are cleaning the garbage out of our hearts."

It is posited within this framing that in order to overcome the challenges of working in the collective, the women need to work on themselves and their ability to understand themselves, work on addressing their internal issues, and use this as a tool to allow them to build greater solidarity, that will eventually, help to promote more economic security. These divisions determine the ability of the collective to create solidarity because some of the members literally do not have the time nor inclination to invest energy in the relationships that are part of the collective. While it is understood that a lack of money is a major reason for the promotion of the collective in general; so far, the tension of balancing money-making and care activities within a family unit, with the commitment to attend collective meetings, workshops or work, is not resolved. The current focus on the use of additional meetings and group therapy as means of addressing these issues fails to take into account how class positions may shape the kinds of relational work that collective members envision. The focus on self-as-project as the means for urban women to generate solidarity across kinship units in some cases may exacerbates the atomization that members feel and fail to meet more pressing needs in the face of structural violence and marginalization. In this way, the relational and emotional aspects of building the collective are complicated by existing class dynamics.

Expanding the Utility of Engagement Ladders

The achievements and challenges of the organization within MyM show the need for constructing multiple avenues of engagement, even as the broader class dynamics shape the ways that people participate in the initiative. The collective has succeeded in building supply chains for native maize by connecting women tortilla makers and producers in different cities, recognizing the need to include groups with different skills in order to succeed in the collective's goal of building a regional economy for sustainably-produced maize. However, partnering with groups and individuals across a wide geographic area makes it challenging to build connections between members. These seemingly conflicting goals may be in opposition, but the engagement ladder concept can help show how they can be reconciled. Engagement of different women more or less at different times, and promoting a variety of ways to be involved, makes this possible. For example, Lourdes, one of the main workers at La Milpa for a time, left when she had a baby. At that point, her sister, who had been away for a few months taking care of her own children, came back to work regular shifts. Allowing for such flows enables the organization to be more resilient and maintain members.

Engagement ladders are not only descriptive tools but strategic devices, aiding organizations to be more intentional about the ways that they interact (or do not) with their members and supporters (Kanter and Fine 2010). They can be useful for determining what skills or supports members of the collective need in order to increase participation at different levels. They are also helpful to see how these skills and supports interact with the challenges and tensions experienced by members. By looking at the engagement ladder, it is possible to outline both barriers and solutions that may help or

hinder collective members from participating in different ways. For instance, one of the major issues for women who wanted to work at La Milpa was the ability to get to and from the restaurant. In order to address this issue, which allowed women to move into engaging with the collective in an additional and more substantial way, it was decided that the daily wage would include the cost of travel to and from La Milpa. Regardless of distance, the full cost of travel was reimbursed. For one family, this was 12 pesos total, the cost of one bus ride each way. For women coming from Teopisca, the total reimbursement was 46 pesos, obviously much higher. This is a concrete example of an instance in which the collective made a decision to support women participating in an additional way by eliminating the cost of transportation as a barrier.

Barriers might be logistical, like the cost of transportation eating into the value of the wage that individuals receive. However, barriers might also be psycho-emotional, like a discomfort working with different individuals, as explored above. The organization has undertaken different strategies to address different challenges over time. Below is an example of how an engagement ladder for MyM might be expanded to promote insight into barriers and possible solutions for certain challenges.

Table 5.4 Engagement Ladders to Uncover Barriers and Solutions for Collective Activities

Level of Participation	Examples of Activities	Potential Barriers	Potential Solutions
Individual	Varied women take daily shift at La Milpa	Transportation Cost	Cover transport cost
Individual	Varied women take daily shift at La Milpa	Discomfort between group members	Workshops to promote group solidarity
Individual	Producing tortillas for La Milpa	Inability to spend all day (childcare, etc.)	Delineation of Roles (Tortillas can be dropped off)
Familial	Selling food at the	Full Group cannot	Allow family units to

Group	Alternative Fair	attend/is not interested	represent MyM
Geographic Group	Making food for a catering event	Insufficient members to cover necessary work	Allow additional family members to join for events
Full Collective	Hosting the Fair of the Tortilla	Transportation Cost	Cover transport cost

Using an engagement ladder in this way makes it possible to visualize pathways within the MyM organization and to see what activities are cut off or blocked. Such a visualization is a complement to meshwork, a way to not only notice the directions in which people move through life and connect with each other, but notice the directions that are blocked or obstructed. Engagement ladders like this can be used both top to bottom and side to side. In making a list of barriers, it might be possible to generate ideas for new activities or types of participation that would not entail an identified barrier. Similarly, if working with existing activities, one can brainstorm both barriers and potential solutions. In terms of expanding how members engage with the collective, using a version of this engagement ladder may also be useful. Laying out the list of activities at each level of participation may show how, where and why people may not engage in more than one way or may reveal that there are many more ways to engage individually than as a group. This could enable group members to respond to and re-shape the existing structure. Enumerating these activities can furnish a way to generate ideas based on the goals of the organization and the people making and using the engagement ladders. This can also call attention to the need for the formation of additional avenues for engagement. Such considerations were common for the collective organizers, though they did not use or think of these in terms of the engagement ladders discussed here.

Conclusion

The challenges and tensions encountered by members of the collective reveal how subjects can be “both powerfully constituted and constrained by dominant discourses, yet also available to other possibilities of becoming” (Gibson-Graham 2006). Laying out the processes involved in making the MyM collective work and how it has developed over time, reveals how small-scale initiatives can grow and the ways through which participants gain skills that they may not have developed along another path.

The collective MyM engages women in a wide variety of ways. A strength of this approach is that it makes possible the engagement of women at levels that are appropriate for them, allowing them to select events in which to participate, days to work, or projects in which they want to take part. The organization has done a good job of maintaining and developing engagement ladders that provide multiple entry points, and allows women to get benefits from participating without requiring that everyone engage in the same way. These quotidian changes shape how each engages with the world around her. These changes occur across a broad spectrum of dimensions, from infrastructural to forms of personal development; from having new stoves in their homes to making a practice of speaking in public. They learn new skills like practicing accounting and develop relationships with people from many other walks of life.

These changes continue to be constrained by the larger systems in which they are embedded. While MyM works to address members needs and concerns across multiple dimensions, many of the larger issues continue to challenge their strategies. Along the organization’s three pillars, broader economic and political forces shape the environment of the AFS meshwork. To return to the root system metaphor, the broader ecology makes

it difficult to support such activities. Connecting farmers and tortilla makers to each other is difficult due to logistical challenges as well as differing views and pressures related to seed selection and production practices that are less supported by agricultural development programs. In the realm of building market infrastructure, members differing needs, perspectives and multiple responsibilities threaten the stability of initiatives like La Milpa. Failure to take into account the needs of today's economic reality in the interest of building a different one for tomorrow may not be manageable for some members. The work of building an educated consumer base is also challenging, as many members of MyM also work to express and communicate the value of their forms of work over other options. Each of these areas are further affected by the affective, relational and emotional requirements of constructing new ways of working together in an economic context that promotes atomization (Freeman 2014). Within all of these realms, MyM has achievements but these are limited in scope to a smaller realm of possibility due to a larger-scale structural system in which these initiatives are less supported. Their section of the garden may be just a little too shady, or oversaturated with other species of projects or initiatives, for it to spread quickly.

Many of these changes are processual, and it is not possible at present to know where they lead. Ingold argues that skills are “capacities of movement and feeling that have been developed through a life history of past practice” (Ingold 2011, 58). Through participation in the collective, members gain new skills that they are then able to exercise to shape the meshwork of which they are a part. Using these skills, they participate in and develop webs of relations that may re-shape other webs in which they are enmeshed. In collaboration, they build and expand new “knots of knots” in the meshwork or alternative

food systems. The results of these interactions are not entirely foreseeable. The growth in certain skill sets and exposure to different value streams alter class dynamics in some ways and reinforce them in others. New kinds of emotional labor are mobilized in service of different visions that both complement and undermine certain member' visions of what a transformational project looks like. It is through these contestations that means of operationalizing different criteria of sustainable food systems interact with, shape and re-shape existing webs.

Chapter 6 : Storied Knowledge in Meshwork: Consumer Engagement with Alternative Food System Values and Behaviors

At locations like La Milpa and the AgroEco Market, contributors make efforts to differentiate the contexts and provenance of the foods sold and producers who actualize its existence by connecting them to larger stories (See Chapter 3). Using photos and posters, they highlight where the food served comes from, how it was produced, the negative consequences of genetically modified seeds and the labors of small-scale farmers and tortilla makers. In a way, these activities are like advertisements, attempting to communicate particular stories about a place, its meanings, and what happens there. Each of these pieces form a larger story that many members and proponents expect will influence people to want to engage with AFS. However, these locations offer a seemingly simple service to consumers: they provide access to a certain type of food regardless of how much of this broader story the consumer knows. Through strategies like this, some AFS locations encourage consumers to engage with elements of sustainable food systems including agroecological practices, increased social embeddedness, relocalization, and education to build commitment to change.

This chapter explores the connections and disconnections that occur at La Milpa in relation to awareness of and action on these criteria. Ingold argues that the ways that we come to know things about the world, and the ways that we interact with it, are products of “*going around* in an environment” (Ingold 2011, 143). Knowledge, he argues, is not so much about classification as it is about understanding and applying knowledge in context. For Ingold, this means that knowledge is *storied*. It is acquired by

people along the paths that they walk in life. Through that process, “the knowledge that [people] acquire... is integrated not *up* the levels of classification but *along* paths of movement, and people grow into it by following trails through a meshwork” (Ingold 2011, 143). Ingold refers to this process of going around as *wayfaring*; and it is through the process of moving through time and space, coming into contact with other people and their contexts that we acquire knowledge about the world and how to make sense of it.

Utilizing the concept of storied knowledge, a component of meshwork, this chapter examines the themes that customers at La Milpa draw on in reference to food and food systems. La Milpa Restaurant, though familiar to some San Cristóbal’s AFS proponents, serves a largely working class neighborhood that is a 20-minute walk from the city center. As such, it provides an excellent sample from which to investigate both the knowledge that patrons have of alternative food systems and the ways that they connect, or fail to connect, this knowledge to practices around food. Exploring how and to what extent different elements of sustainability criteria circulate, or not, among customers may be helpful in evaluating the capacity and value of locations like La Milpa to enroll consumers as active participants in alternative food system initiatives.

Storied Knowledge: Knowledge and Engagement in Meshwork

Within the social economy of handmade tortillas, examined in Chapter 3, it was demonstrated that people’s knowledge of different processes related to tortilla production influenced the meaning that they ascribed to buying and eating tortillas in different locations. Roberto, for instance, a 21-year old indigenous college student who was a recipient of La Milpa’s meal vouchers talked in Chapter 3 of handmade and industrial

tortillas as like a book versus a napkin. He grew up in an indigenous community where his mother and sisters made tortillas from maize that he and his father cultivated. Roberto connected food system changes to much larger shifts in social and cultural life:

Preserving cultural food traditions depends on the individual. Aspects of modernity have arrived all over, and produced cultural change... the machines for grinding maize... they change a community. For example, my mother and sisters used to get up at five in the morning to wash the maize. My sister would take it to be ground. My mom would start to make the tortillas, real ones, from maize, and we would all gather around the stove while they cooked. But the technology, the tortillería, changes so much. What happens when a tortillería arrives in a community? People stop planting maize. They buy their tortillas.... In the production, the farmers don't know too much about the hybrids and the GMOs. They buy maize that says "quality maize" and they plant it. But it only produces for a year. After that it just rots or doesn't grow. And that makes us more dependent on buying maize, forgetting our own seeds and also forgetting the practices of our ancestors. They cleaned the field with a machete, made terraces and fertilized the land without chemicals. Now we have the backpacks and pesticides. These changes affect what we produce, what traditional knowledge we have, and the good, sustainable practices that farmers used to have.... These cultural changes are drastic. They change the community. The community becomes more dependent on the outside.

Given his life experience, Roberto connected the making and eating of tortillas to much larger social and cultural processes, the connection of food not only to his own health, but to sustainable production systems. His context, having grown up in a rural area within an agricultural family, meant that for him that the cultural and social changes tied to the practices of maize cultivation and tortilla making were very apparent. For him, his life experience impacted his knowledge of what was possible for him, and his family, to lose and gain in a transition away from maize cultivation and tortilla making.

For Ingold, knowledge is integrated along the paths that we travel during life, as shown by this example of Roberto. Knowledge is something that we build as our lines of experience cross with others, binding up to create the meshwork in which we move.

Within this meshwork, beings are their relations, and as such, Ingold argues, “things *are* their stories, identified not by fixed attributes but by their paths of movement in an unfolding field of relations... where things meet, occurrences intertwine, as each becomes bound up in each other’s story. Every such binding is a place or a topic. It is in this binding that knowledge is generated” (Ingold 2011, 160). Through the movements and relations, people develop means of understanding the world, and these shape what they see and how they see things. Rather than being transmitted between people, knowledge is the product of complex and inter-related processes; it is reproduced rather than replicated and shaped by people’s life experience.

On the ground, alternative food systems compete, collide and collaborate with conventional and industrial food systems. Within alternative food systems, such contestation is visible at varied levels. Groups like *Sin Maíz No Hay País* connect the production of maize to larger stories about modernization and cultural practices (Mann 2011); fertilizer companies attempt to embed their story in a different narrative. In this way, the storied knowledge acquired within meshwork is political; the contexts in which people embed their stories shape people’s actions and perceptions.

People’s storied knowledge affects their interaction with food systems. If the only option available to people is Maseca tortillerías, fewer and fewer people will have the possibility of experiences like Roberto’s through which the production of maize or particular foods to broader social systems can be connected and understood. To expand the meshwork of alternative food systems, increasing the patch of the garden in which such initiatives can proliferate, it is posited by proponents that practices related to sustainable food systems need to expand and reach more people. Given this,

understanding who engages with AFS in San Cristóbal, and what knowledge and themes they connect to that engagement becomes useful. Through interviews,⁷ this chapter explores who the consumers at La Milpa are and the ways in which La Milpa interacts with the storied knowledge that consumers possess. By examining the diversity of knowledge and behaviors, I interrogate the impact of spaces like La Milpa and alternative food systems more broadly on the processes through which people come to adopt, dabble in, repurpose and reject new political and personal stories and understandings.

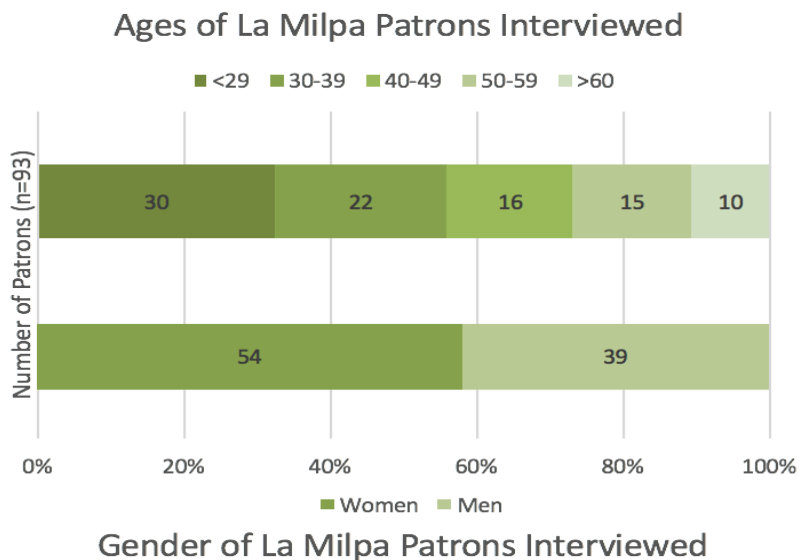
Demographics of La Milpa Patrons

The majority of the people that I interviewed at La Milpa were women, 58% and 42% men. The national population is 55% women and 45% men (INEGI 2010b). The ages of people attending the restaurant skewed younger: 56% of my interviewees were under the age of 40, and only 10% over the age of 60. This is consistent with generalized demographic data for Mexico as a whole. According to the 2010 census, at that time, 9.1% of the population was older than 60, and 26.8% were between the ages of 15 and 29

⁷ This chapter draws on two sets of interviews and participant observation. The first set of 107 interviews includes 93 casual consumer interviews conducted at La Milpa and 14 at the AgroEco Market or with long-term clients of MyM members. Following the casual consumer interviews at La Milpa, I completed 25 in-depth interviews with consumers from the first group who expressed knowledge of and commitments to alternative food systems. All of these interviews were then coded for themes to identify contrasts, comparisons and shared understandings between and among participants. Observations and practices uncovered in these in-depth interviews, casual interviews, as well as through participant observation, are included in this chapter. Casual consumer interviews all followed the same semi-structured interview guide. At La Milpa, interviews were conducted before, during or after meals, and I approached every table that I could on the days when I was doing these casual consumer interviews in an effort to ensure a cross section of patrons in terms of time of day, age, and other factors. My study hypothesized a relationship between the practice of seeking out handmade tortillas and additional “storied” knowledge that would shape engagement with AFS. For this reason, I asked interviewees who regularly consumed handmade tortillas to participate in a second, in-depth interview. In total, I conducted 21 with patrons from La Milpa and four with customers who bought tortillas from ambulant vendors who came to their homes. The demographics section of this chapter includes only data from La Milpa interviews, but some commentaries from other interviews are included in the analysis.

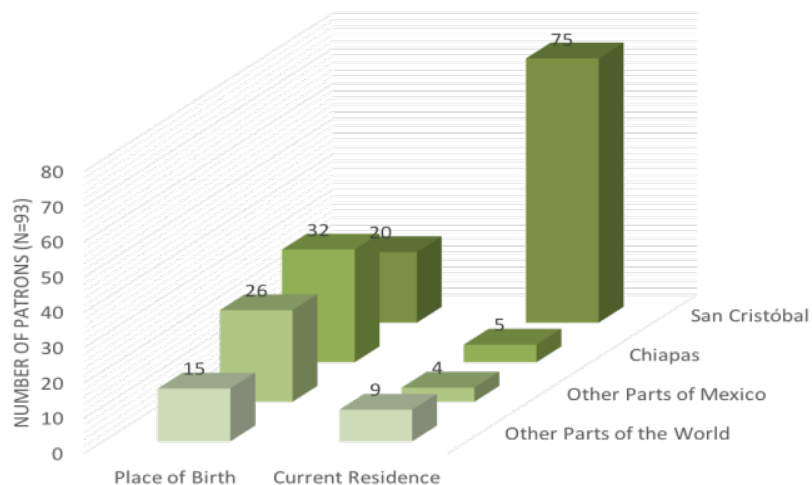
(INEGI 2010b). Of my sample, almost a third was between the ages of 18 and 29. The range in reported household size was from one person to twelve people. The mean was 3.4 members per family. This is slightly lower than the national average household size of 3.8 people (INEGI 2014). Just above 35% of respondents were part of households with 4 or more members, and 41% of households reported having two or three members. Many respondents, twenty of the 93, reported a household size of one; most of these were students living apart from nuclear families during their studies. The fact that many of the respondents were young may have impacted reported average family size. These profiles, particularly related to gender, align with studies of AgroEco Market patrons (Gutiérrez-Pérez, Morales, and Limón-Aguirre 2013).

Figure 6.1 Age and Gender of La Milpa Patrons Interviewed



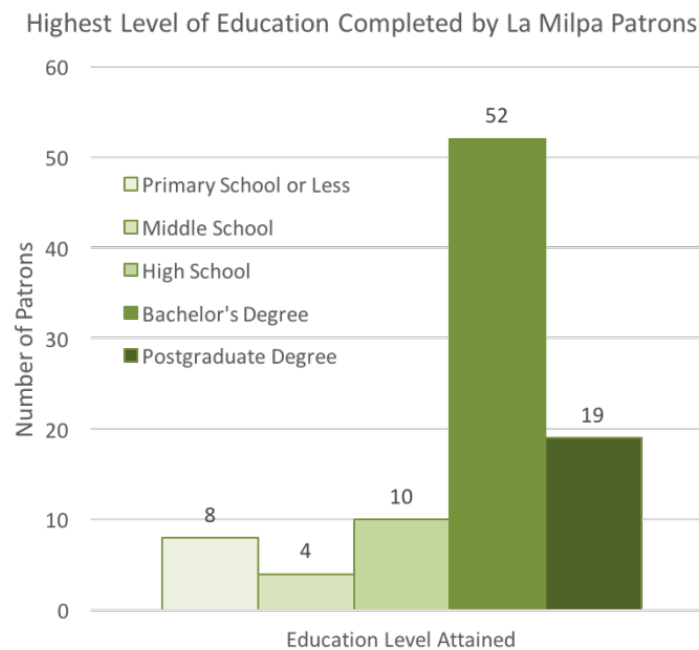
Of the patrons interviewed, the vast majority (75 of 93) were residents of San Cristóbal. This suggests that, as intended, the restaurant primarily serves city residents rather than tourists. Of the five people that currently live in other parts of Chiapas, three regularly visit the restaurant when they come to San Cristóbal for work. Half of the interviewees that currently reside in other states of Mexico or in other countries had also come to the restaurant with friends who live in the city. Though many of the patrons live in San Cristóbal, the birthplaces of patrons reflect the shifts in the population of the city overall. In the last two decades in particular, San Cristóbal has become increasingly international, building on a history of tourism and academic research that had long placed it on the proverbial map (Van den Berghe 1994). More than 44% of the people interviewed were born in parts of Mexico other than the state of Chiapas, and an additional 16% were born outside Mexico. A third of respondents were born in Chiapas (not in San Cristóbal), but only five currently resided in parts of the state other than San Cristóbal de las Casas. This may reflect increased migration from rural areas to the state's larger metropolises, particularly for school and work.

Figure 6.2. Place of Birth and Current Residence of LM Patrons Interviewed



Educational attainment of interview participants was much higher than national averages. Almost 75% had completed at least some post-high-school education, compared with less than 10% across Mexico (INEGI 2010b). Nineteen percent of patrons interviewed had completed or were enrolled in post-graduate study; nationally less than 1% of the population has a graduate degree (INEGI 2010b). Of those that have completed some college, common courses of study included programs in rural and sustainable development, ecosystem sciences and alternative tourism offered at universities located in San Cristóbal.

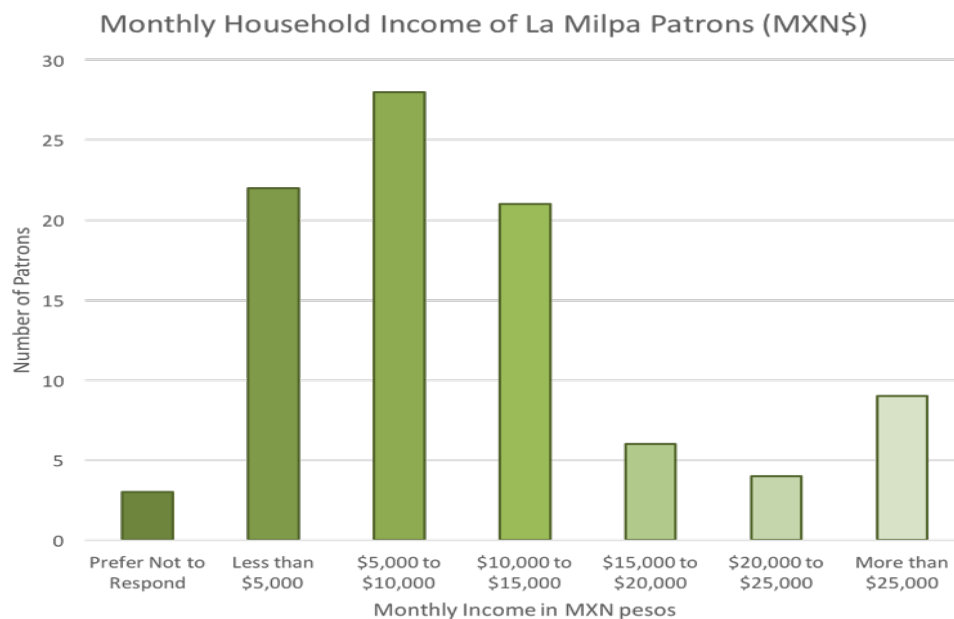
Figure 6.3 Educational Level Attained by La Milpa Patrons Interviewed



Many patrons' occupations required higher education. Student was the most common occupation, with 15 respondents. An equal number were teachers, professors or educators. Eight women responded that their principal work was as a homemaker or housewife. Other occupations mentioned included food producer, farmer, anthropologist, engineer, yoga instructor, secretary and domestic worker.

The above-average education levels did not correlate with higher wages among restaurant patrons. The median monthly household income in Mexico in 2014 was \$13,239 pesos (INEGI 2014). As seen in the graph, approximately 75% of respondents indicated that their household income was approximately at or below the national average. Of the 19 respondents earning more than \$15,000 pesos per month, six were expatriates that were visiting San Cristóbal from either the US or Western Europe where such high wages are more common. Many respondents, a total of 22, made less than \$5,000 pesos monthly. A possible explanation for this is that many interviewees were relatively young and often students living on very little income.

Figure 6.4 Household Income of La Milpa Patrons



These demographic indicators align with consumer profiles connected to AFS in other parts of the world. A 2012 literature review of 22 studies of farmers market shoppers in the United States found that within those studies, 64% to 77% of respondents were female (Byker et al. 2012). In Italian solidarity buying groups, members are

disproportionately female (70%) and more highly educated than the national population (holding a master's degree in a third of cases) (Grasseni 2013). A survey of Community Supported Agriculture initiatives in the state of California showed both high levels of education and high income: 99% of CSA members had attended college or graduate school, compared to 61% of overall California households that have some college education; 92% of respondents made more than \$35,000 annually, and 72% made more than \$75,000, substantially more than the median annual income in the state of \$61,400 (Galt and Christensen 2014).

The demographic makeup of the consumers interviewed at La Milpa for this study suggests that consumers in AFS in Mexico share several characteristics with those in other parts of the world. In this sample, there were slightly more women than men. Many are highly educated. Interestingly however, La Milpa patrons were also younger than and not as wealthy as AFS supporters in some other parts of the world. These characteristics provide an interesting example from which to explore the storied knowledge of La Milpa patrons.

The Storied Knowledge of AFS: The Many Paths of La Milpa Patrons

The development of storied knowledge relies on the experiences and movements of people within the meshwork. Experiences shape the kinds of data that people have and how they choose to apply it. The diversity of preferences, concerns and knowledge expressed by patrons at La Milpa reveals a plethora of ideas that different people engage as they think about food and their food choices. Through coding the interviews, I have divided up the major streams of ideas that people discussed into six principal themes:

Taste Preference, Health Concerns and Promotion, Economic Support and Solidarity, Cultural Heritage, Care for the Environment, and Food Sovereignty and Anti-Globalization.

Across these dimensions, each person has developed his or her own story over time, influenced by his or her relations with others. This section provides an overview of varied motivations people have for coming to La Milpa and the wide-ranging depth of storied knowledge that shaped the meanings that they ascribed to their actions. These themes are not mutually exclusive. For many people, they made connections across and between many of them.

Food and Taste Preferences

In answering questions about why people came to La Milpa, the vast majority said that it was because they liked the food. The restaurant was applauded by many for its vegetarian options, homemade food and fresh produce. About 10% of people stated that they liked the fact that all of the drinks were made from fresh fruits rather than sodas. Generally, liking the food was the primary reason for attending the restaurant.

For many, the availability of handmade tortillas was a major factor in this preference. Due to the centrality of tortillas to *Mujeres y Maíz*, I asked all customers if and how these tortillas differed from tortillas that they received at other stores or restaurants. All but two of the interviewees stated a preference for handmade tortillas to industrial tortillas and came to La Milpa because there was a consistent supply of these tortillas. Almost three-quarters of the interviewees ate these tortillas at least weekly, and 63% ate them at least every other day. The tortillas were given as a primary reason that

the majority of people came to La Milpa. They distinguished between “tortillas” and “tortillería,” referring to the tortillas made from dehydrated corn flour available in mechanized tortilla shops. As one interviewee put it, “There is a huge difference between real tortillas and Maseca tortillas, which really aren’t tortillas at all.”

These preferences related to both the nature of the tortillas and the taste. Many described these tortillas as larger and heavier. Most people noted and enjoyed that they varied in color and taste, sometimes yellow and sometimes blue depending on the kind of maize that had been used. It was regularly cited that these tortillas did not fall apart when filled or dipped into sauces and other dishes. Many customers also mentioned that these tortillas could be taken home and kept in the refrigerator, and that they did not get hard and inedible when reheated. Over the course of all of the interviews, only one person responded that these tortillas were “nothing special.” Freshness was also a valuable aspect of these tortillas. Many people mentioned that they were made the same day, and that it was easy to tell that in their consistency. A majority of customers preferred handmade tortillas because they filled one up for longer, as opposed to the Maseca tortillas. “I never get full on Maseca” and “I eat a kilo of Maseca and am hungry an hour later” were repeated refrains.

The ability to notice these differences in taste and the type of food available was a product of storied knowledge. This type of homemade cooking is thought to be wholesome. The women were generally acknowledged to be good cooks. Serving handmade tortillas connected the restaurant for a lot of customers to ideas of real food, often reminding them of eating at home, something that many stated they no longer had time to do. Since everyone has storied knowledge related to eating and to food, it makes

sense that positive assessments of the food quality and taste featured in many people's reasons for coming to the restaurant regardless of any other information that they had.

Health Concerns and Health Promotion

Health was a primary concern for many of the consumers interviewed and a reason that they cited for choosing to eat at La Milpa. People framed the idea of health both negatively and positively and spoke of avoiding things that were bad for them and also seeking out foods that were healthy. Many described the food available at La Milpa as healthy and homemade, citing that the tortillas and vegetables, as stated above, were natural and that the menu included vegetarian options and fresh food.

People connected unhealthy diets to illnesses, including obesity, diabetes and cancer. During the time of fieldwork, the connections between food, diet and health were a large topic of conversation. In 2013, Mexico surpassed the United States in rates of obesity: 32.8% of adult Mexicans were obese, according to the FAO (2013). This statistic was important to many people and was reflected in their concerns about food. Thirty percent of respondents mentioned obesity as a primary problem for the country and related it directly to diet. Similarly, 30% of respondents mentioned soft drinks as a major health concern, tying them both to obesity and to general illness in the population. I heard many variations on the characterization by a man in his mid-50s who said, "It's hard to have a healthy diet in Mexico. Much of the food is fried, and people are not used to eating vegetables. They drink a lot of soda that is full of sugar."

For almost a quarter of interviewees, a desire to change their eating habits was a result of personal illness or illness of a family member. Imelda, a student of sustainable

development, explained that she had worked with her sister to make changes in their diets after her sister got sick. Imelda, who was also a recipient of meal vouchers through the workshops on healthy eating discussed in Chapter 4, applied the knowledge that she had gained about healthy foods and eating in her shopping:

My sister goes to the market, and sometimes I cook now, but I tell her what to look for, the characteristics that foods should have, because there are fruits and vegetables that have a lot of chemicals on and in them. I have to tell her because I investigate more what the [organic] ones should be like. Before, we used to be really lazy about cooking. We bought instant noodles and all that. But then we kept learning about how it was harmful to our health. Also, there was a time that my sister got sick, and maybe that's part of why we changed. She also decided that we should eat mostly vegetables and that started to change our ideas.... I look for the places where I can buy things that are healthy... and seasonal.

Others attested to the difficulty of staying healthy given prevalent food options. A 62-year old urban resident of neighboring Tuxtla Gutiérrez stated that, “[The government] keep[s] telling us that we have to eat healthily to avoid all kinds of sicknesses. But unfortunately, we don't have that practice. If we are out and about working, we eat on the street: tacos, fast food. We don't maintain a healthy diet, and we don't have much control. We gain weight. Our lives today are very sedentary.”

In characterizing the national diet, people said that there was too much meat, too many fried foods and a shortage of vegetables. People generally cited fast food and street food (*comida chatarra*) as a major contributor to negative health outcomes. These foods, along with many available at supermarkets, were contrasted with “fresh,” “natural” foods. Foods available at the grocery store were equated with preservatives, frozen and canned foods; often said to contain chemicals. Time and time again, people stressed the danger of

pesticides and agrochemicals. Participants expressed concern that foods in the supermarket were full of chemicals they did not trust.

Shopping at La Milpa and the AgroEco Market was a major way to foster personal health. Many people believed that the food available in these spaces was more “natural,” free of chemicals and pesticides; and that it was not irrigated with water contaminated with sewage. For others, it was a way to avoid modern processing techniques that affect nutrition. One man in his mid-30s, who worked on rural development, proclaimed, “It is almost funny to me, everything has its nutritional properties. Now what they sell doesn’t have anything and they add it from outside. Calcium, vitamins A, B, C.... All of that was in the food before! Now they take it out, they make it into a powder, and then they add another powder. And I have no idea how my body assimilates that. Sum it up to say that I have no idea how healthy that is, but I don’t think very.”

In contrast to these ideas, many people characterized what they considered to be traditional Mexican food as intrinsically healthy. The combination of maize, beans and vegetables from which La Milpa got its name, was brought up as something people could still eat in rural places. However, for many customers, finding time to cook or places to buy healthy food was challenging. A 62-year old urban resident of neighboring Tuxtla Gutierrez stated, “Things have changed a lot. Before, from what people say, food was healthier... there weren’t so many fertilizers and pesticides, and everything was more organic. People cooked at home. Beans, eggs, wild herbs. People made everything at home. Nowadays, we are running around all the time for work, separated from family, and we eat wherever.”

Ideas about food and nutrition are obviously informed by many sources. However, patrons of the restaurant expressed a belief that the food available there supported them in eating healthily by incorporating more vegetables and unprocessed foods and avoiding chemicals, pesticides and preservatives that might be harmful or lead to disease. These concerns were primary motivators for many people to seek out food that they thought related to their own conceptions of what was healthy.

Economic Support and Solidarity

A major indicator of storied knowledge in this particular meshwork knot is an awareness of the organization behind La Milpa. Social relationships were most influential in getting patrons to the restaurant. Two-thirds of people had come to La Milpa on a word of mouth recommendation or accompanying someone who had come before. Another third of patrons interviewed passed by and decided to enter. A few people had heard announcements on the radio or Facebook page, where information about healthy eating, sustainable agriculture; and the menus were posted daily.

Knowledge about MyM, however, was not widespread among patrons. Almost half of the people interviewed had no knowledge of the organization behind La Milpa. Eighteen percent knew that the restaurant was run by a women's organization, and an additional 15% connected that groups work to "natural" or "organic" food. The remaining fifth of those interviewed identified the women as members of a group or collective, mentioned natural or organic food, and connected this work to additional elements like food sovereignty, maintenance of cultural traditions, or improved livelihoods.

For those familiar with the organization, supporting the women involved was often a major reason for coming to La Milpa. Others felt an affinity with the women as working women. A 32-year old woman business owner, who considered herself of limited means because she makes less than \$5000 pesos per month, reflected that: “They are... a network of women that work making corn tortillas. I don’t really know if all of them are from here, or where... I really like to support people like me, from here. It’s sometimes harder to make that kind of business work.” The storied knowledge of the group behind the restaurant allowed them to situate their attendance at La Milpa as in support of something that was beyond a regular business. René, a doctoral student from northern Mexico, explained that for him:

It’s not a business, it’s not just a project, it’s had a ton of work behind it. I mean, a business would also have a lot of work behind it, but the relationships wouldn’t be the same. For example, the last time that I came here, with [my friend], who comes a lot, he has a different relationship with the women here... That makes us part of the different relationship with the women who are cooking, and with others who are eating. And from what I’ve been told, but haven’t seen, there are also the maize producers who are connected to the women who cook here. I don’t know, that creates a different kind of relationship, and cuisine!

For René, the socially embedded nature of this location enriched his experience of the food. For others, this attendance was also in service of a larger vision for social change. Armando, a 41-year old farmer who sold at the AgroEco Market and regularly came to eat at La Milpa, explained:

Even more important than providing us consumers with the opportunity to access this kind of natural product – which is excellent – I see that the women here are really well organized. That gives them another way of looking at their own lives. It opens up new opportunities. Sometimes [ordinary housewives] are really stuck in their own kitchens, and this [restaurant] gives them the opportunity to be businesswomen in another way. And it would be amazing if something like this could be replicated

all over the place. Whenever [my wife and I] come across a woman that makes tortillas we always ask, ‘Have you heard of the group Mujeres y Maíz and La Milpa restaurant?’ We try to send them here so that they can find out how to get organized to do this kind of cool thing.

The half of the patrons that had no knowledge of the organization were told a brief, three sentence explanation at the end of the interview, comprised of the fact that the restaurant was run by a collective of women farmers and tortilla makers that privileged the use of natural and organic foods for sale. Once informed about its history, those patrons that were unfamiliar almost universally recommended that information about the group be more visible. Some of those that were not familiar with the organization claimed that aspects of the physical space suggested that something was different about this restaurant. For some, the title “community eatery” implied a social mission and drew them to enter. One man said that though he did not know about the specifics of the organization, he had noticed that different women were working each time that he came. Others commented on the photos on the wall, showing the processes of making tortillas and observing that sometimes the women working were also those in the photos. “You could also have a big poster that told us more who these women are. There are photos of some of them, but they are kind of out of context,” stated another. A woman visiting from the United States opined that, “They could do more to make clear that it is a project – like have a table tent that described the organization or more information about the women. People want to have a stake in something that they support.”

The consumers who come to La Milpa are on different levels of an engagement ladder related to their knowledge of MyM; they engage with the story of this place differently. People that knew more about the organization perceived more benefits to their patronage of La Milpa, typically connecting them to taste preference, health and

economic solidarity. In contrast, those who knew nothing about the organization spoke less often about economic solidarity as a motivating factor.

Cultural Heritage

For many customers, the role of the restaurant in maintaining a cultural heritage based on the making of handmade tortillas was important. However, people had multiple levels of knowledge about the extent to which the restaurant and those that worked there engaged in activities connected to broad ideas of cultural heritage.

The fact that La Milpa sold handmade tortillas was enough of a signal for some people that this place was worth supporting. Numerous people commented that making tortillas required specialized knowledge that was being lost. People remarked that relocation from the countryside to the city meant that many women no longer learned to make tortillas; and several commented that in urban areas, most people no longer had space for the wood-stove on which tortillas are traditionally cooked. Some people felt very little connection to any sense of cultural heritage. Though it was only one respondent, for one person the tortillas “did not strike him as anything special” compared to tortillería tortillas. Another man, who came fairly often said that, “The most important thing is just that the food tastes good.”

For others, the connections went deeper. Among people that knew that the restaurant was part of an organized project, appreciation of the ways that MyM engaged with cultural heritage was more important. Women who made handmade tortillas and cultivated maize made many customers feel that their support aided in the maintenance of important cultural traditions. A 25-year old male chef, born in San Cristóbal, explained,

“Eating and shopping here, we are supporting our community so that these traditions don’t disappear.” Such a sentiment was voiced by almost 80% of interview respondents.

A 62-year old man made further connections to the threats to these traditions, citing that:

History has a lot to do with today. Our roots have a lot to do with who we are. If we maintain these traditions, today’s generations can learn about how things have evolved. They can learn how things have been done. But, today we are in the inertia of globalization. It’s a different situation. We have to produce so much; we have to compete, and making tortillas by hand isn’t very efficient.

For him and others, providing a location through which people could support women economically in the work of making tortillas was valuable.

For Armando, a 31-year old student and father, the role of handmade tortillas and their consumption was tied to much larger cultural questions. He explained:

Without a doubt, culture is always changing. We can’t close off from change. But every culture has an essence that is important to maintain. In our case, it’s the tortilla. I imagine my life without tortillas, something that seems more and more likely as there are more hybrids, more GMOs, and more patented genes. In the future, there won’t be criollo maize; when that maize is lost, we will also lose part of our culture, the part where we make tortillas at home, which men can also do. Part of maintaining that essence is to continue conserving and appreciating that work.

The assertion that men can also make tortillas at home shows ways that new cultural patterns can also be mobilized to “preserve” traditions. Though tortilla making historically was women’s work, Armando told me that he was learning from his mother and wife about making tortillas and encouraging his four-year old son as well. In this way, the gendered history associated with this specific food preparation was being altered within Armando’s household in an effort to preserve the essence of which he spoke.

This kind of knowledge, however, was not as widespread. Many people had only a vague idea about what kinds of cultural traditions were being preserved by the women's participation in this collective. Three times, I was asked if the women used presses instead of patting out the tortillas by hand, and these customers appeared a bit affronted that the women were using any type of mechanical advantage.

This suggests that many consumers bring their own ideas about what particular practices are being utilized, drawing conclusions either from the space, what they have heard previously, or simply their own ideas. A glaring example of this was a man who told me when I asked him about his knowledge of the collective that the women produced all of the food that was sold at the restaurant on their own land. I informed him that they did not, though they did produce a portion of the food and explained that many no longer had access to land on which to grow food. He then proceeded to ask me questions, to which I explained that the women buy some food in various places and are working to build supply chains. As I explained this, the man talked over me, exclaiming, "Imagine! The vegetables and everything are also organic! In the market there is a lot of produce but it is very hard to know which vegetables are organic." This exclamation was particularly noteworthy as I had just explained that *not* everything was organic for precisely the reason that he was noting.

These different accounts reveal different levels of storied knowledge among patrons of La Milpa. For some people, their own life history connects them deeply to the ways that cultural traditions like tortilla making or maize cultivation can be lost, and they pair this knowledge with familiarity with the restaurant. For others, the story of cultural preservation performed here is unknown beyond the fact that a cultural artifact,

handmade tortillas, remains available. People also make up their own stories about the cultural traditions that are being maintained.

Care for the Environment

Interviewees spoke of environmental preservation largely as connected to sustainable agriculture. The most common concerns related to environmental pollution from agrochemicals and pesticides. Additionally, a minority of consumers were worried about the effects of genetically modified foods on the environment. A smaller number of respondents spoke about care for the environment as part of a larger system.

In the casual consumer interviews, when asked open-ended questions about food and food production, just over 53% of people talked about concerns related to the planet or the environment. Typically, people mentioned agrochemicals and pesticides in connection to worries about their own health and perceived connections between disease and chemicals. Among this 53%, the primary environmental issues cited were the dangers of GMOs for the environment, including their potential effects on maize biodiversity (mentioned by seven people), and the need to maintain natural production systems that did not harm the environment. In relation to this, three people mentioned permaculture or agroecology, and an additional 30 talked about different elements of natural systems, ranging from maintaining soil nutrients to speaking generally about maintaining balance in natural systems. An example of this framing was shared by a 44-year old female therapist. She declared that:

A healthy diet has to be nutritious and to take care of the environment. It also has to be respectful of the land and take care of the water. You have to care for the natural world that nourishes you, and it can nourish you more. If the land has nutrients, so do you. That gives energy. As I kid, I

always felt better eating what there was. If you were where there are mangoes or jicama, you eat them. Otherwise, eat what there is where you are to feel good. It feels good to respect the environment around you.

The term “organic,” for many, connoted a lack of agrochemicals and pesticides. When asked about what organic meant, 15% of those interviewed had no knowledge. Almost 40% of people cited that organic products were “natural” and/or that they were produced without pesticides. The remaining 45% of people connected the term organic to specific growing practices, and a third of these cited that there were technical certifications and definitions for the term. In this context, 85% of respondents had an element of shared discourse, a term that most connected to some ideas of natural production methods but beyond which they had little knowledge. Many people have little factual knowledge about some of the words that they use and connect to their own ideas of particular practices. This connotes very different levels of understanding among people that may purport to support a practice or idea with which they are not actually very familiar, suggesting that there is a shared discursive framework and a language of involvement covering very different levels of knowledge.

Mariah, a 34-year old visitor from Switzerland, laid out her reasoning for supporting La Milpa and businesses that focused on agricultural sustainability this way:

It seems really important to me to maintain traditional practices that we know are good for people and the environment. It's stupid to change things that we know work. Everything that they have and do here is knowledge that doesn't exist in other parts of the world. I've been to the [supermarkets] here, because I feel like I run in a circle that's really educated about these issues, but I just don't understand why people go there when they have so many other options.

In her home in Switzerland, Mariah had a few sheep that she was learning to herd. She connected the work of MyM to the practices of conservation and sustainable

agriculture that she was trying to apply in her own home.

In discussing the importance of the work of Mujeres y Maíz, Gerardo, who teaches classes on permaculture, a form of sustainable farming, discussed connections between the practice of making tortillas by hand in relation to health and sustainability:

It's not about a tradition. It's about a culture and a practice that is extremely old. It's not just about maintaining that tradition, but using it to maintain our community's health. If you think of it just as 'tradition' then you fall into this idea of folklore. But we're not talking about folkloric tradition, we're talking about health, planetary health and human health. Producing clean tortillas without chemicals, made of maize produced without chemicals and without monoculture is talking about the health of our planet and the health of the next generations. The only way that the next generations are going to have access to these healthy foods is by cultivating them now, cleanly, in polycultures, without chemicals, as food forests, in a more permaculture way... a sustainable way.

The interviews revealed that while care for the environment is an important theme for some people, fewer people expressed these concerns outside of effects on human health. Though many people said that pesticides were poisonous, only a portion of these spoke about the effects of this on planetary health, suggesting that there is less concrete awareness among people about these ecological relationships than those of health, taste preference, and economic solidarity.

Food Sovereignty and Anti-Globalization

A last important but less prominent theme from the interviews related to the role of food decisions and food systems as part of a globalized economy. For about 30% of interviewees, transnational corporations posed a threat to the livelihoods and lifeways that were promoted by La Milpa and MyM.

Several people mentioned that eating here seemed to them a way to combat the

global corporate influence that threatened Mexican agriculture and the livelihoods of farmers. A 26-year old from San Cristóbal who works in Cancún, sitting with her father and sister, reflected that maintaining a tradition of making tortillas by hand was important “as part of our culture, which we are losing due to the transnational corporations and foreign businesses, because they can make things faster and easier. But it’s important to maintain a culture.... Maize is a job for a lot of people.” In this context, she connects the idea of culture to a kind of work and an independence from transnational business.

Similarly, another women customer explained that: “Through these local purchases, from small-scale producers and in a local economy, we also try to confront economic globalization.” Another 21-year old student similarly identified that this opposition had additional benefits: “I’m not really in favor of monopolies. I don’t like Maseca. I think that eating handmade tortillas helps the communities. And for me, I think that the nutritional aspects are better. You are also supporting the crops, the people that cultivate their own maize and helping to conserve Mexico’s maize.” Common statements included that people were against monopolies and concerned about the influence of corporations and media advertising. The attitudes of many of these people can be summed up in the commentary of Claudia, a native of San Cristóbal in her early 40s, who explained the importance of La Milpa Restaurant as follows:

It is important that the people that grow maize keep growing it. And that their work is appreciated... that they feel proud of it. I’m pro-local, because I know that in this way I contribute to people not having to leave the countryside. This is about sovereignty – and eating three times a day. We don’t want to depend on the outside, on people that aren’t from Mexico, on companies that import food; because that goes against our sovereignty. And it’s important, we have three opportunities a day to eat in certain ways!

The idea of sovereignty here appears to be invoked in relation to the discourse of food sovereignty, the term used by the international peasant organization Via Campesina. The definition of food sovereignty is the “right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (Via Campesina 2007). According to Claudia’s perspective, choosing what she eats is a way to support her local maize economy and to re-build a certain independence for Mexico, defined in this case as the opposite of “people that aren’t from Mexico, on companies that import food.” In this particular instance, her contextualization for the scale at which she wants to support sovereignty is national, but this is an interesting paradox since the companies that make Maseca also fall within this national sphere (Jayasanker 2011). Through examples like this, it is possible to identify inconsistencies in the worldview that underlies storied knowledge in some cases.

Several consumers also expressed a desire to increase connections between producers and consumers as a tool to build solidarity. Luís, a 26-year old student who had been working with non-profit agricultural organizations off and on for the past two years, expressed this sentiment:

I believe that we should start with urban centers not being so separate from where food comes from. There must be a link there. It should matter to us where our food comes from and what we consume, the lives behind it. Right now, depending on where you live, we forget all of that. We don’t care about it, but it is so important because that is how society keeps unraveling our way of life. Many people think that the problems in rural places don’t hit us here in the city, but they do.

For these consumers, economic solidarity was framed in a broader context, one in which the role of corporations and international trade posed a threat that could be

ameliorated through the construction of AFS. Reflexive consumers of this kind connect their practices in support of AFS to a defense of local systems and practices in the face of global capitalist agro-food systems (Nigh and González Cabañas 2015).

The Context of Knowledge: Engaging with the Themes of AFS

The interviews reveal a wide variety of levels of engagement with ideas, themes, motivations and behaviors among patrons of La Milpa. Some have a broad knowledge base, incorporating many issues and connections to themes of AFS. Others focus more concretely on single aspects, like a commitment to one's own health. In this context, it becomes clear that "motives are continuous variables, not types of behavior or types of people" (Wilk and Cliggett 2007, 194). Rather, individuals may apply many or few insights and analyses.

For most patrons, the themes above were not discrete or singular. Particular life experiences led people to connect different ideas about the roles of food and food systems. For some people, multiple criteria and considerations were important and often mutually reinforcing. For many consumers, purchasing food at La Milpa and from Mujeres y Maíz was considered a "mutual benefit" between producers and consumers. Consumers gained access to healthy, trustworthy, cleanly produced food, and producers had access to more stable and better paying customers who knew and appreciated their work. Efraín, a man in his late 30s who worked in rural development and came to La Milpa on a regular basis, said that buying tortillas directly from these women was:

...[B]eneficial on every side. It has the personal benefit that is about your health, your joy in eating good food. And on the other side, it supports the local economy. It supports an alternative to big business.

And that can really strengthen your community and your neighborhood. Consumption between pairs of people, between you and those that are close to you.

A young woman visiting Chiapas from Chile, who came to the restaurant with a friend who lived in San Cristóbal, described a healthy diet in the following way: “Vegetarian, organic, fair trade... fair treatment for everyone... for my body, for other people, for those that cook, for those that eat.” For her, as for Efraín, many of the motivating themes identified above overlapped to shape the storied knowledge that influences her engagement with food systems.

The varied themes above show that people can engage with AFS through many and multiple entry points. For Ingold, the process of acquiring knowledge occurs as people move through their lives, encountering information as they do. For him, it is through walking along the paths of our lives that we grow into knowledge that allows us to better identify and respond to our surroundings. People, as they move through time, are laying threads in multiple directions, binding up here and unraveling there. The same description applies to the knowledge that people encounter and develop: people’s knowledge becomes *meshworked* (Ingold 2011). The stories that we have shape how we conceive of new information and how we fit that information into our current understandings. He explains this process as such:

What distinguishes the [expert and the novice], however, is not a greater accumulation of mental content – as though with every increment of learning yet more representations were packed inside the head – but a greater sensitivity to cues in the environment and a greater capacity to respond to these cues with judgement and precision. The difference, if you will, is not one of how *much* you know but of how *well* you know (Ingold 2011, 161).

Information becomes knowledge, in this reading, as we acquire the context in

which to apply it. It is through processes of acquiring knowledge, and making sense of that knowledge in a storied context, that culture is shared and reproduced rather than replicated. It is precisely because knowledge has to be lived into, according to Ingold, that cultures change (Ingold 2011). This explanation returns us to our earlier analysis of the alternative food systems meshwork as a section of root systems within the larger garden, in which different species flourish synthetically or may impede each other's growth in certain directions. As explored in Chapter 2, San Cristóbal is a location that has an extended history of groups of people developing and identifying knowledge connected to sustainable food systems criteria (Ford and Nigh 2015, Astier et al. 2017, Altieri and Toledo 2011). Within this context, there is an active discourse around many of issues connected to food system sustainability, including agroecological practices, social embeddedness, relocalization and education to develop commitments to change.

People, moving about in this meshwork, are more likely to interact with these ideas given their prevalence in this place. However, this does not mean that they adopt or integrate this knowledge nor that they necessarily apply it to their lives consistently. In many ways it is this process that we see in the different levels of engagement presented by the interviewees. As people acquire more storied knowledge about alternative food systems, their ability to make connections increases: "Someone who knows well is able to *tell*. They can tell not only in the sense of being able to recount the stories of the world, but also in the sense of having a finely tuned perceptual awareness of their surroundings. Thus knowing *is* relating the world around you, and the better you know, the greater the clarity and depth of your perception" (Ingold 2011, 162). This was demonstrated in some interviews. For some people, learning about pesticides could result in multiple levels of

knowledge, connecting impacts only to their own health or moving deeper and seeing connections to environmental health. Similarly, descriptions of the “mutual benefits” manifested through purchasing from MyM members were displayed with varied levels of nuance.

However, over time, the idea is that more people encounter these ideas and begin to shift the terrain of the meshwork. A 2011 study of 250 consumers gauged knowledge and values around organic foods in San Cristóbal (Pérez et al. 2012). The researchers conducted interviews at an in-town supermarket, the main municipal market and the AgroEco Market cited in this dissertation. Across all locations, the authors found that personal health was a major concern for people, and that people connected the idea of organic food with terms like “natural” and “healthy.” However, at the AgroEco Market, many respondents also associated organic food and the products available at this market with broader social and political consequences, connecting their choice to shop there to ideas of fair trade, responsible consumption and resistance to transnational companies. These consumers constructed their shopping at the AgroEco Market as “representations based in language that is academic, normative, environmentalist, and socio-political” (Pérez et al. 2012, 121). In Guadalajara, both consumers and producers stated that their participation in alternative food initiatives involved personal and collective re-signification of their knowledge of nutrition, health and agroecology (Juárez 2010). In interviews with consumers who shopped at the alternative market in Guadalajara, consumers were primarily interested in healthy food (75%), though issues like environmental protection (27.5%) and communal economic support (13.7%) were also cited (Juárez 2010).

The description of this process is complemented by a return to the concept of engagement ladders. Knowledge of and attention to a broad cross section of these motivators, rather than one, would constitute deep engagement with values of AFS. As people engage more deeply with AFS; they increase their opportunity to see and identify the broader webs of relations in which their particular decisions are enmeshed, increasing understandings of how different processes are interconnected. This gradual awareness and adoption of more criteria may move one up the ladder. This aligns with Ingold's perception of the difference between people being novices and experts. Ingold described the ways that people can acquire more knowledge in the presence of others by discussing how people become experts: "Making their way from place to place in the company of others more knowledgeable than themselves, and hearing their stories, novices learn to connect the events and experiences of their own lives to the lives of predecessors, recursively picking up the strands of these past lives in the process of spinning out their own" (Ingold 2011, 161).

In terms of the engagement ladders used here to discuss the ways that people connect to and move through activities and behaviors related to AFS, the idea that people grow into knowledge also makes sense. Over time, the people that come to La Milpa because they want to find handmade tortillas or food that is natural and healthy also come to see that the same women work there some days but not others. They see a poster for an event that they may or may not attend. Others, who have sought out La Milpa because they heard about it in a course on sustainable development at ECOSUR may come and find that they really like foods made with herbs harvested from the cook's home gardens. In this way, they add additional dimensions and new lines to their own storied knowledge

about food and its meanings. However, movement in any one direction is neither inevitable nor linear. As Kanter and Fine (2010) discuss, people move on and off of ladders of engagement at different times and to different extents. For others, they simply continue to come to La Milpa because they enjoy the food or are seeking healthy options. As we will see, people adopt several kinds of behaviors, but may or may not connect those to sustainability criteria and may or may not continue them over time.

Applying Storied Knowledge: Behavior Change Among Participants

People's reported behaviors were not consistent over time. They also did not necessarily shift in relation to people's greater engagement with different themes within alternative food systems. In other words, the varied behaviors that people adopted, or failed to adopt, were not consistent with the amount of knowledge that they possessed. Many regular patrons of La Milpa also talked about and exhibited behaviors connected to the developing values of alternative food systems. These can be divided into four categories: 1) changes in food procurement habits; 2) participation in different kinds of communities and events; 3) education of self and others; and 4) the adoption of new food-related skills and practices. In in-depth interviews, though people cited numerous behavior changes, they often commented concretely on how their practices were shaped by their routines and access to possibilities for applying what they knew. Through these interviews, it became clear that the connection between the themes that people spoke about and self-reported changes in behavior were not tied together consistently, an observation that is supported by literature on food procurement habits (Yiridoe, Bonti-Ankomah, and Martin 2005, Vermeir and Verbeke 2006). Many broader issues and life

circumstances affected people's willingness and ability to adopt behaviors that they sometimes stated would be preferable for them.

Changes in Food Procurement and Eating Habits

Taste preference and health were primary reasons that people cited for frequenting La Milpa. These considerations were reflected in what people stated were primary behaviors that they undertook here and in other parts of their lives.

Of the people that I interviewed, 78% made an effort to eat handmade tortillas at least every two weeks, and 63% ate these tortillas every day or every other day. This is a concrete behavior that demonstrates some commitment to seeking out food that is less readily available. This frequency of consumption suggests that the patrons of La Milpa have made at least this behavioral change.

Many patrons also pointed to the exposure to different types of food as both a behavioral change and a reason for coming to La Milpa. An older man in his mid-50s who was a regular customer of La Milpa but knew nothing about the organizational work of *Mujeres y Maíz*, commented: "A healthy diet has to include vegetables, and natural foods, but people are not familiar with them. I didn't know about *nopales* [cactus], which are eaten in other parts of the country, but my brother-in-law made them for me, and when I saw them here, well, I come here for them now because they are healthy. But I would not have tried them if I wasn't familiar with them." For him, finding a newly familiar food that he considered healthy at this location allowed him to practice behaviorally a value that he had developed.

For many people, the foods available at the restaurant supported them in their attempts to eat healthily in general. The restaurant made a concerted effort to promote traditional recipes like maize-based soups and drinks, and also altered traditional recipes to make them healthier. Chayote, a squash-like vegetable, grilled and stuffed with cheese and other vegetables and covered in a bean-based sauce, was another variation on traditional recipes designed to familiarize people with different ways of consuming vegetables. For many people, access to these healthier options was a major reason for coming to the restaurant. They compared this to the tacos and pizza that were served in other places.

In an effort to further change her eating habits, one woman I interviewed had gotten rid of her refrigerator completely. She was a 32-year old French woman, working for a non-profit organization in Chiapas, and had been living in San Cristóbal for two years. A frequent shopper at the AgroEco Market, she was a member of Cacao Solidario and sometimes came to La Milpa. For her, the process of learning about different elements of food systems had led her to vastly alter her eating habits, buying small amounts of food each day that she prepared to eat. This practice allowed her to consume things that were fresh and healthy, to make thinking about food a regular part of her day and to limit her impact on the environment by using less electricity. Though an extreme example, this woman was making substantial changes in her shopping and eating habits that reflected her commitment to actualizing AFS values of eating fresh, healthy, locally produced food and caring for the environment.

The convenience of coming to La Milpa was an important factor that shaped people's ability to be regular customers, to integrate their monetary support for this

initiative into their daily lives. One regular client, who was very knowledgeable about the organization and who attended the restaurant with his family at least once a week, explained that: “About two months after they opened, we heard about it on the radio, and we wanted to check it out... We have two daughters that go to school in this part of town, but it is really far from our house. But since our daughters were in school over here, when we found out this is where it was, we started to come. And later, we switched one of our daughters to a school just a block away; now we are really frequent patrons.” For them, fitting their support for the restaurant was aided by its proximity to their other obligations. For another, the opposite was the case. A 50-year old teacher, who comes by about twice a month, said, “It’s just not on my route, I live far away. But I like the food; and when I come, I try to bring my own car and take food with me. Since I work a lot, I don’t have a lot of time to cook in the way that I like, like this. So I have gotten used to coming, eating and taking food to go.”

Cost was also a barrier for some people. A full meal, with appetizer, juice, tortillas and dessert, cost MEX\$55 pesos at La Milpa. The surrounding sit down restaurants sold their own version of this for between MEX\$40 and \$45 pesos. It was possible to buy food on the street for less within a few blocks, ranging from MEX\$15 to \$25 pesos for pizza or tacos. One young woman who brought her friend to the restaurant explained, “I like to support these projects like this, but it is hard because when you are like us, and your work is not very stable, you can’t always support the things that you would like to.” She and her friend talked extensively about the challenges of getting steady work as college educated 20-somethings. They had friends, however, who had started a business raising pigs outside of the city, and they felt that using their money to support initiatives that

reminded them of their friend was important. Supporting “projects like this” was a behavior that they adopted when they could due to its connection to other initiatives with which they were familiar.

For others, the issue of access was related to capacity. Alberto, a 31-year old student who also worked part time managing a small stationery store with his wife, said that they knew where to get some products from producers they like, principally meats, fruits and vegetables. However, he commented that: “For now, we’re still obligated to go to the supermarket, for oil and for milk. Even though I don’t want to shop there, there’s no other option. I don’t have a cow to milk or my own wheat that I grow. But all of that makes me want to have my own little piece of land where I can grow some of that.”

The idea that behavior changes are a daily practice, not something that one can do 100% of the time, was also reiterated. Ísabel, a nutritionist and strong supporter of MyM, explained how these thoughts affected her food purchases: “I aim to be conscious, and to make decisions based on that... to remember that if I buy onions at the supermarket, I’m not following my own creed. The decisions are daily, it’s not that I must always do this and never do that. It’s a daily practice.” Victoria, whose two daughters attend school down the road, described this process by saying, “We don’t make the right decision all the time. We aren’t 100% there. We all make mistakes, but at least coming here we know where the path is.”

These examples show that a desire to eat healthfully or to support this initiative still has to fit into the lives of patrons. Thus, people spoke of changes in their food procurement habits to different extents which were affected by their daily routines, their preferences and their means.

Education of Self and Others

An important behavior that many people associated with commitments to AFS was engaging in educational activities around the associated values. At the restaurant, La Milpa aims to educate patrons about its mission and the broader issues related to food sovereignty, biodiversity and economic development. Verónica, one of the MyM members who worked at least two days a week at La Milpa, explained that the transformations that they advocate do not have to be huge, but they do make a difference. She explained that La Milpa is a restaurant where “there are no soft drinks and no straws. We don’t use a lot of plastic bags and any to go containers are re-used yogurt or other food containers. We go by the motto: only a little sugar, a little salt, and a little fat to provide healthy food.” She regularly explained to customers about reusing plastic, and during the time of fieldwork there were four of five patrons that regularly brought in their own reusable plastic tubs or glass bottles to serve as takeout containers. For Lucy, this is another physical space where messages like supporting local food and not serving Coca-Cola can start to operate practically as models in the culture. She cited the importance of places where new social constructs can be tried out, remembering that at the AgroEco Market eight years earlier, “the idea of not supplying plastic bags for people to carry their purchases was seen as crazy, but now it’s normal there.” These actions, it was hoped, promoted behavior change among the patrons when they were in other places.

Some people focused on maintaining and educating others about skills as an important way to promote sustainable behaviors. Many of these behaviors related to producing one’s own goods rather than opting for faster, easier, automated options. Victoria, a middle aged mother of two, stated that, “it is important not to forget the skills

that people used to have to make things, being bread, jam.... Our grandparents lived healthier lives. They knew how to make things. Everyone made their own tortillas. But now, in this time where everything is easier, more automated, we've stopped learning those skills. It's easier to leave them." She went on to discuss some of the ways that re-learning those skills could combat overconsumption:

I think that small things like learning a skill, recycling at home, sharing experiences from one family to another; they make the chain shorter between people. You see more how that works. We are in a city where you can learn the tools to endure beyond all this consumerism. That's also why we like to come here, where they sell things that the people here make; and it supports them economically. At home, we have a garden and we try to employ people at good wages and with good skills, even though sometimes it is hard for our pockets. In that way, at least we are all pulling the same cart.

For Victoria, this sharing of experiences was an important part of promoting behavior change. She had remarked that her daughters, with whom she regularly attended La Milpa, did not generally like handmade tortillas because they felt them to be harder than industrial tortillas. However, for Victoria and her husband, bringing their daughters to the restaurant was something that they considered part of their education. Her husband also remarked that often, young people reject what their parents tell them is important when they are young, but adopt such practices later in life.

A young American woman and her Mexican husband, who had been living for seven years in Mexico and regularly purchased tortillas from Mujeres y Maíz producers at the AgroEco Market, came to La Milpa for the first time with their two-year-old son. Her observation was, "If more things like this can be made available to more people, then it becomes more accessible. And as we talk to each other more, we educate each other. And I like that. And when I saw the neighborhood where this restaurant is, in this

working class area and not on the main street downtown, I thought it was cool. That tells me that this project is for normal people, not for tourists.” For her, the location of the restaurant, as well as the types of food that they served helped reinforce that she should share information about it with her friends in order to support the initiative and increase awareness of and access to it, in this case, specifically for “normal people, not tourists.”

One woman saw additional struggles of social justice connected to her choice to both search for natural foods and to support an organization of women. At the end of an interview at La Milpa, a 32-year old woman who was a regular at the AgroEco Market connected her support of MyM to her own work “raising consciousness” as a disability advocate. She was dressed in a traditional woven shirt from the region and at the end of our conversation, she pointed to her thick glasses and explained that they alleviated a vision-related disability. She regularly experienced people looking at her and taking stock of her disability, and she found it exhausting “to change people’s consciousness” around people with disabilities. For her, this experience had made her more open to “gaining consciousness” around food after hearing media reports: “I heard on the radio about how Coca-Cola was bad for you, and then about how pesticides were being linked more and more to cancer; that made me start to look for different options. But how do you make sure that that happens for more people?” For her, the behavior change of shopping at the AgroEco Market and coming to La Milpa supported a system that would keep her healthier, a choice she made after gaining new knowledge. However, the question of how to enroll people in making behavior changes based on raised consciousness, as she put it, was still an active question for her.

For Alberto, a 31-year old student with a wife and five-year old son, the task of

“raising consciousness” among other people was complex. For him, it was most important to start with the people closest to oneself, and spread awareness in that way:

I think that awareness is what’s lacking, educating people to act in these ways. But I don’t think educating is the right word. It’s more like sensitizing, making aware. If I go to some community and say “let’s stop supporting transnational companies” or “don’t eat GMOs,” I mean, how am I going to say that, to say “eat healthy” if people don’t know what that means? ... It’s really hard to change the world, so it’s not going to be just me that can do all the work. So I start with talking to my family, my community. Once we learn about and share all these concerns, the same people spread that awareness to others in the same community. It gets reproduced, like a chain.

In these ways, participants in alternative food system initiatives reinforce a social context in which their actions are meaningful, and they work to expand the numbers of people making similar choices. Educating others about how to eat more healthfully and with less negative environmental impact was an important behavior that many supporters of MyM adopted, whether directly related to the organization or not. This action is an amplifying force, through which people act as advocates or engagers on the ladder of engagement.

Participation in Different Communities and Events

In the Spring of 2014, at a meeting of *Jovel Kun Kun*, the San Cristóbal group of the international organization Slow Food, of which MyM members form a part, a conversation arose about *pozol*, a drink made from fermented maize and traditionally drunk by peasants while working in the field. Pozol can be drunk plain, with salt and chili, or sweetened with sugar or chocolate. Its popularity has vastly decreased with the expanded distribution of soft drinks around the state. Margarita, one of the farmers of MyM, had observed that children no longer want pozol to be the beverage that they take

to school. They prefer milk or soft drinks. A woman working on a school gardens projects remembered finding a young boy outside of school dumping the pozol his mother had sent with him out of his thermos before walking into the building. He had explained to her that his classmates made fun of him for this peasant drink. At the meeting, which had been advertised at La Milpa, a university student named Barbara commented that in light of the popularity and advertising of drinks like Coca-Cola, it was necessary to “make pozol cool.” This quickly emerged into a conversation about what event could accomplish this, and people settled on a “flash mob” event along the pedestrian walkways in downtown San Cristóbal.

The event, “I love pozol,” emerged and was undertaken by numerous of the scholarship recipients who regularly came to La Milpa. The pozol was made by Gabriela and her family, who worked at the restaurant. Approximately 20 people got together and made cardboard t-shirts that said “I love pozol” in Spanish, English and the indigenous languages Tzotzil and Tzeltal. The group then proceeded to walk down the pedestrian street, distributing tastes of pozol along with a small printout of information about the drink’s history.



Figure 6.5 Lulu, daughter of Gabriela of MyM, models for the "I Love Pozol" event.

Events like the “I Love Pozol” flash mob can serve as educational catalysts for people that encounter them, and they also provide participants with avenues to expand and create the alternative food systems that they come to learn more about. As such, these

events may draw upon spaces like La Milpa and the people that are already involved there, but they also present opportunities to enroll new people, either through word of mouth or street contact. Videos from these events were shared online, through social media, and by putting up photos and images at La Milpa. Through these avenues, the participation for a minority of consumers in events like these is reinforced in AFS spaces and demonstrates more possibilities for people who may not come to the restaurant with either that knowledge or intention. These reveal very different levels of engagement with behavioral changes.

While participation in many of these events seems limited to people who are already heavily involved, others participate in events on a one off basis that may prompt them to return and learn more. Every few months, a group of activists and nutritionists, including Lucy, the MyM coordinator, travel to the meeting of the RedPar, the National Network of Rural Promoters and Advisors for southern Mexico. To raise funds, they have used the kitchen at La Milpa to make *pozole*, a hominy soup with chicken or pork and cabbage and other vegetables. This event is widely publicized. One woman that I interviewed at La Milpa the week following this event had come for the first time to have the pozol after receiving an email. She had loved learning about Mujeres y Maíz at that event, and she decided to come back shortly thereafter. In both of these examples, people decide to attend or participate in events that they may not otherwise have. Whether or not their participation in these events continues, these events provide a touchpoint within meshwork for a wide array of participants.

Adoption of New Food-Related Skills and Practices

In addition to changing shopping habits, working to educate others, and participating in events related to alternative food systems; some people in interviews talked about adopting new food-related practices and how this affected their viewpoints. Activities included increasing preparation of food at home, growing their own food and composting as behavioral changes that shaped how people felt connected to values and behaviors consistent with AFS.

Imelda, the voucher recipient from earlier, applied what she learned about food not only to her own cooking, but looked for ways to use this knowledge in her own indigenous community, a few hours from San Cristóbal. For the service project that she needed to complete in college, she elected to start a vegetable plot with her parents. Though her father grew milpa, she wanted to plant other vegetables like zucchini and carrots. However, she explained, “it ended up that our crops didn’t come out like we wanted or expected. We thought they would be like in the market, really big. But [I realized] those are grown with chemicals. And that led me to work on how we could strengthen our crops. So in school, I started to investigate what sort of organic fertilizers we could use” to better the production. Now, though her service project is finished, she continues to work on these farms whenever she visits her family and is still working on improving their production of compost and organic fertilizer at home.

One person extended and connected the values expressed here to land conservation as another sustainability-related behavior. Noel is an elderly man who many years ago purchased 140 hectares outside of the city. While he does not relate his work on its conservation to food production specifically, he did tell me that it offers:

[A] space so that people can come... it lets us be part of an association of private state reserves, naturalists and conservationists. We don't focus so much on food, but there is a familiarity with the idea of promoting natural, artisanal food. Many of the spaces are productive, and we try to produce more naturally.

Luís, a student of sustainable development who works with Mujeres y Maíz, had found a comparable shift in his thinking when he started to compost, an action that he put forth as being among the most revolutionary act that one could undertake:

I think that for me... [an] easy and accessible [thing to do] is compost. Composting is the start of a process that can lead you to planting. It's earth. So many people say that they don't have land. But I believe that it is a chain. The moment that you can see that your waste or your trash become earth, it starts to build a certain level of consciousness. That can lead you to other levels, things grow out of your own compost. Little plants. So for me, the most revolutionary act is to plant food, even more than going out into the street to protest and get beaten up by the police. I think that planting food, having a garden at home, for me that is a really courageous act.

Various consumers found an increased sense of connection and revaluation based on micro-scale production that experiences with alternative food networks had promoted for them. Ísabel, the nutritionist mentioned earlier who also works with the Healthy Eating Workshops, is in her late 30s, and over the past four years she has built a small house in stages on the outskirts of town. Outside, in her garden, she has a few food plants. She discussed the impact that planting a few maize plants in pots in her yard had on her:

... as consumers, we all have the ability to be producers. At a really minimal level if you want, but the more the better. Because now, since I started growing, and I just have a tiny number of plants at my house... As simple as that, when you plant seeds, it immediately creates many connections to many aspects of life. Far beyond "I ate" and "it tastes good" and "How good that we have food to eat." Often we do give thanks around the table. But for me personally, I didn't even know what I was giving thanks for until I started to plant. Now, I thank the product,

the time of the person that grew it, everything that was invested to create clean food. And suddenly, it seems like a miracle. Yes, to pay attention to the natural cycles. It had been 15 days until today that I had been waiting for it to rain. I had watered my plants with the hose, but imagine if I didn't have access to that water. Today, as it rained, I was amazed to watch it rain. It was as if it was the first time that it rained, to see the water soaking my corn plants. I'd been waiting for it for two weeks, something that if I didn't have plants, if I were just being a consumer, I wouldn't have noticed. I would not have connected that water with being alive, nor with my food. So I wish that we all had the opportunity to grow food, to make those connections. To understand and appreciate the people that are growing food. And in that way, we remove the cost of things and more to the value of things, of food. And as such, the food system wouldn't have so much to do with business, but it would be a part of people's daily life.

These changes help to make the storied knowledge that these people have deeper through active engagement with food production, composting, or conservation. Each observed a new awareness and way of knowing about food. Both Luís and Ísabel suggest that for them, and in their view, for others. Even a minimal engagement with growing food has a broader impact on consciousness, increasing commitment and appreciation for food production, producers and the natural world that supports these processes.

Multiple Ladders of Engagement: Knowledge and Behavior Change

Through the interviews conducted for this dissertation, it became clear that for many patrons, acquiring knowledge of and connecting to values like those promoted within AFS initiatives was a different process from altering behaviors. For this reason, it is useful to return to both the ideas of meshwork and the concept of engagement ladders. As we see here, a ladder of knowledge about AFS issues and values is not the same as an engagement ladder for behaviors.

The relationship between knowledge and behavior change is neither direct nor

unidirectional. People with a lot of knowledge about alternative food systems may not change their behaviors to a large extent or for certain period of time. Other people, who have little knowledge of the larger aspirations of a group like MyM, may be loyal customers in search of organic or healthy foods with little desire to engage with the broader work of the collective that provides that food.

Engagement with ideas does not equate to engagement with behaviors. That is why it is important to have multiple ladders. People can engage one while life keeps them from engaging another, as several interviewees suggested. Challenges related to access, availability (or lack thereof) of specific foods, lack of access to a kitchen or skills on how to prepare food, all shaped people's ability to put into practice bits of knowledge that they acquired. However, having a more varied, complex story means that the ideas of that story are more present for a person in different arenas and areas, increasing the likelihood that they apply these ideas behaviorally at one time or another.

There are many challenges that affect people's abilities to adopt these practices in consistent ways, including lack of money, routine, lack of knowledge, time and will. However, as seen here, through participation in trainings and formal activities, as well as in conversations that occur around those events; people's knowledge and opportunity to make different decisions is expanded. Through the networks that they build and come into contact with through these interactions, those changes become embedded in a wider social context that reinforces their meaning.

Putting Behavior Change in Context

The majority of the behaviors cited here tend to focus on individual, household or

community level engagement. In many ways, the focus at this level seems sensible as people invoke their desire to impact the world around them through their choices. More rarely in interviews with consumers, people signaled to larger social contexts that inhibited their ability to make behavioral changes that they would prefer. These emerged primarily in relation to two dimensions, one was additional pressures for people to work outside of the home and a general sense that life was speeding up, and the second was a distrust of initiatives as they operated at larger geographical or business scales.

Several people spoke to me about economic pressures that require one to work longer hours or leave one's hometown or family, and that this impacts their ability to implement healthier or more conscientious eating practices. One woman in her mid-40s, who was coming to visit her husband who had to work four days a week in San Cristóbal while she kept their house and worked in Comitán, a couple of hours away, mused on the following, "Women today, we don't know how to do this. We won't know how to cook with vegetables, with what is made here... It is so hard because of the pace of life now, even women have to work, they arrive home tired and there isn't time to prepare anything.... But it seems like some women could do this for work, and if there were more places like it, people would eat less pizza and hamburgers."

Another man, similar to several others, reflected that life used to be slower and things easier: "Before, people had a lot of kids, but everything wasn't such a struggle. I had eight siblings, but there was enough food and money was worth more.... And people did not get sick as much; they died old. Now people are dying of diseases really young, even children. I think it is because of food and stress." Though this particular diatribe sounds nostalgic, there is truth to the fact that labor patterns have shifted such that more

people work outside the home, and the economic pressure to eat out is very high. The nature of food consumed has changed, encouraging dietary shifts that contribute to chronic disease trends that are visible around the world (Popkin 2001, Pilcher 2006, Dewey 1989).

Others decried the increasing commoditization of even things that were supposedly alternative. Mayra, 32-years old, grew up on her parent's coffee and mango plantation in southern Chiapas. Her father, owning a large farm, had worked to get various certifications but faced difficulty meeting export requirements. She stated that:

I really dislike certifications. In my experience, they are really complicated, particularly for producers.... Everything becomes a business, and certifiers abuse their authority, making it impossible for producers. If people were more honest, we wouldn't need them, but there needs to be a balance.... I'm just not convinced by the stamps or stickers at the supermarket.... It all becomes just a big business.

Mayra did not feel like she could trust that these certifications operate in her own interest, or that of producers. Big business in her experience is suspect, and she does not feel convinced that certifications work for producers or are trustworthy. Her strategy for combatting this concern was to avoid certifications and supermarkets and to focus on purchasing foods from people that she could speak to. She relied most heavily on personal, socially embedded relationships to assure her that her consumer decisions supported particular practices that she wanted to support.

In these ways, the proverbial and actual paths along which people can walk in Chiapas, have shifted in structure and direction. While organizations like MyM work to combat trends that threaten or limit production systems like those explored in this dissertation and seek to provide additional options to consumers and producers, they are not exempt from these broader structural pressures. International trade laws like NAFTA

and the commodification and globalization of food systems put pressure on people that structurally limit the choices available and contribute to the focus on consumer behavior as a primary driver of social change as opposed to more structural challenges and changes (Guthman 2008b).

In the face of this, many people seem to re-orient their activities to smaller social scales, in line with ideas of relocalization and social embeddedness explored here. It is possible that the reorientation of social change movements to a lower scale, often invoked among informants as the “community” level, is a means of people making sense of their own power in the face of broader structural forces that they feel are harder to shift. At a meeting of alternative food system advocates, this idea was brought up. In conversation, a young woman spoke of her feeling that the government in Mexico could not be trusted to act in the interests of people, even when people came out to protest. It was thus, she felt, her job to work on building solutions at her level of influence. Such approaches are consistent with many social movements over time (Lyon and Moberg 2010, Schumacher 1975). In this sense, people involved in alternative food systems focused on individual decision-making as a primary tool, are also applying their own storied knowledge shaped by discourses that privilege the role of individuals and consumer behavior as the engine of social change.

Such initiatives however, do not have to be inherently limited. In a study of three alternative food system initiatives, Baker (2013) uses the idea of *biocultural agrifood relations* to examine how regional marketing proposals for maize in Mexico challenge globalizing political projects like NAFTA by linking ecology and culture “in the everyday practice of farming, cooking and eating” (69). The three initiatives include a

tortilla store that supports producers by sourcing maize grown in the surrounding region, a restaurant that works to build consumer consciousness by serving products that protect maize biodiversity and the development of a regional labelling scheme that strives to differentiate products based on provenance and quality. The movements, though set up to operate at different scales, one is city-focused and the other more regional, connect their mission and work collaboratively with social movements that aim to challenge neoliberal policies at local, state, national and international levels. She frames these movements as place-based, but not place-bound. Through biocultural agrifood relations, she contends, such initiatives connect people, plants and policies to particular ecological and cultural contexts and demonstrate how politics at a local level can challenge and delegitimize corporate policies that undermine the diversity and vitality of maize cultures in Mexico. Such consciousness is clearly present among some interviewees at La Milpa Restaurant.

Conclusion

Depending on their paths of growth and the webs of relations in which they are enmeshed, the patrons of La Milpa possess a wide array of stories and contexts through which they understand the role of food in their lives. For many, experiences both at La Milpa and beyond provided and/or reinforced activities that promote increased engagement. The idea of engagement ladders is useful for understanding these processes. By providing a space where people with many levels of knowledge and behavior interact, La Milpa is able to promote increased engagement with AFS across a broad range of stakeholders who possess a broad array of knowledge bases. Storied knowledge creates a

unique assortment for each person to be able to choose from different motivators to support AFS initiatives.

The storied world “is a world of movement and becoming, in which any thing – caught at a particular place and moment – enfolds within its constitution the history of relations that have brought it there. In such a world, we can understand the nature of things only by attending to their relations, or in other words, by telling their stories” (Ingold 2011, 160). The stories that patrons of La Milpa tell vary enormously. Some people simply happened upon the restaurant, may have enjoyed the food, and continued on their way. Others have sought it out expressly to consume foods that they deem healthy or vegetarian. For others, the web of relations in which La Milpa is enmeshed is part of a much bigger story, one that includes global corporate food companies or family histories of tortilla making and agrarian livelihoods.

Ingold puts forth that in our lives, “stories do not, as a rule, come with their meanings already attached, nor do they mean the same for different people. What they mean is rather something that listeners have to discover for themselves, by placing them in the context of their own life histories” (Ingold 2011, 162). The experiences shared by patrons of La Milpa in these interviews support this idea, and that of many AFS scholars and practitioners: that expanding the knowledge bases of participants does have the potential to result in transformative practices. However, these practices, as yet, are fairly limited in scope and scale. The interviews examined in this chapter do not show a certain outcome on the potential of spaces like La Milpa to connect the diverse storied knowledge of consumers to larger-scale understandings in ways that result necessarily in long-term commitments to behavior change. People’s ability to do so remains challenged

by broader structures. Still, through spaces like La Milpa, alternative food systems initiatives attempt both to provide access to the knowledge that some of their proponents believe will make for more sustainable food systems and to provide people with the opportunity to exercise that knowledge in practice. In this way, Mujeres y Maíz works to expand the meshwork by becoming part of and expanding the stories that consumers use to make sense of food systems and their roles within them. These understandings are influenced by the broader processes that limit them.

Chapter 7 Conclusion: The Ever-Evolving Weave of Food Systems

This dissertation has explored the numerous means through which people adopt particular practices and values related to alternative food systems (AFS) in and around San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, through in-depth examination of the work of the Collective Mujeres y Maíz (MyM). Drawing on the idea of meshwork, I have shown that the pulses, expansion, contraction, overlapping and shifting of both the people and organizations in particular places and over time are part of the development of dynamic alternative food systems. The existence of tension, and of movement, are in fact integral to the weaving and “re-weaving” (Grasseni 2013) of practices that support AFS. In this conclusion, I briefly review the arguments of the dissertation, update the current work of MyM and survey how the processes examined connect to the sustainability criteria addressed in the introduction. I finish with a brief analysis of how meshwork and engagement ladders are useful concepts for answering iterations of our introductory questions: How did the collective that Fátima is a part of come to be, and what impacts might this collective have? Also, what can the work of this collective tell us about food systems and social change?

The Ever-Evolving Weave: A Recap

Throughout this dissertation, I have used the idea of meshwork as a way to understand the processes and practices that are developed through alternative food system initiatives. This study has shown that people, in their food provisioning, are engaged in webs of relations that differentially promote and support values and behavior. By

examining a variety of AFS initiatives in San Cristóbal, and how they have developed, connected and disconnected over time, I demonstrated how different approaches promoted by alternative food systems can be used to experiment with and actualize similar values. These varied experiments allow a wide array of actors to plug in and bring their own creativity and vision to the construction of alternative food systems, thereby promoting diversity of approaches, intensity and levels of engagement within and between initiatives. The relationship between these different approaches, and the people that advocate them, can be visualized as a meshwork, a realm of entanglement in which many lines of growth connect, disperse and create knots of ideas and relationships.

The second half of the dissertation focused on increasing understandings of how the specific work of MyM encourages skill development that allows individuals to move within the meshwork with greater agency, to shape and move about the web of meshwork. Utilizing the idea of engagement ladders, specific programs and projects were shown to increase or decrease the capacity of people to act intentionally both individually and collectively. By surveying both the benefits of participation in the collective and the tensions generated by working together at different levels of intensity, I argued that maintaining diverse forms of engagement was both challenging and necessary to meet the needs of members. In the last chapter, I argued for the idea of *storied* knowledge as a way to see how people come to, make sense of, and engage (or fail to engage) with the values and activities promoted by alternative food system initiatives. Cultivating recognition of the many avenues through which issues in food systems come to the fore for people, particularly consumers, and the barriers that they face in cultivating those values, helps us

see the diverse ways that people engage with alternative food systems as part of “growing into knowledge” (Ingold 2011) that shapes how cultures are reproduced and evolve.

Evolutions of Mujeres y Maíz

In July 2015, I signed in to Facebook and read a notice on La Milpa’s page: the restaurant, for the foreseeable future, would be closed while the collective reassessed its work.

I was saddened, but not shocked. In February 2015, after a particularly challenging period at La Milpa, Lucy and I discussed how and whether initiatives of this type endure. She was very concerned about the interpersonal challenges between the women working at La Milpa. After disagreements between a couple of the women and illness for others had depleted the number of collective members that wanted a daily shift, four women had decided to continue to staff the store and three were still committed to dropping off tortillas. Attendance at the restaurant was down, and it seemed that there were not enough people to maintain the level of service necessary to continue the restaurant. Following a large catering event, tensions between members reached a boiling point, resulting in a re-assessment of the restaurant’s viability. It did not re-open.

In many ways, several of the challenges examined in Chapter 5 came to a head through these events: difficulties in communication, insufficient wages, and disagreements over how the collectively-run restaurant should continue. Within the current economic climate, the benefits of working in these cross-kin-based units ceased to be feasible for several members.

In our February conversation, Lucy had posed several questions about the

emotional and personal nature of building a collective and working intimately with other people. She wondered what level of interpersonal conflict was appropriate and what could be avoided. She reflected also on the transitive nature of particular stages of the collective and the connection of this evolution to personal development: “We work with our emotions, they are the first thing that affects us, and they are coming and going. But perhaps the things are not as bad as I have thought.... Is it bad that things are moving around? There isn’t only one way to do this work, and nothing is permanent.”

Though La Milpa Restaurant no longer exists, the Collective Mujeres y Maíz and its work continue. The organizational infrastructure that was developed to help support La Milpa has continued and now supports a variety of other programs and projects. The closing of La Milpa



Figure 7.1. Informational Flyer about MyM Collective Member Family, 2016.

Comedor Comunitario resulted in one family unit leaving the Collective to work on their own.

Since 2015, the work of Mujeres y Maíz has been restructured to re-focus on support for family-based economic units. The work of individual units is advertised now, including what each group offers. One of the families has opened a small restaurant out of their house, an endeavor that they would not have undertaken previously.

In this way, the groups are actually building on visions that some of them shared

with me during interviews. Verónica had reflected, after her mother, Mari Carmen, spoke of her dream of having a locale with her three daughters:

We have discussed the idea of having various “La Milpas;” for example, Doña Fátima opened the one at her house in Teopisca. We have talked about organizing by family. Here we have seen what it’s like to work with various families. Sometimes people say that working with one’s family is harder, but it would be a good experience too. But working with family or not, we all have to take responsibility for our work.... It is hard, but we all have to learn to excel.

In important ways, this vision and the collective’s current re-focus on family-based economic units appears to be more in line with the desire and capacity of many collective members. This form of organization supports women within the structures that they currently utilize. It does not require as much additional coordination and new forms of emotional labor as building the collectively-run La Milpa necessitated.

The closing of La Milpa reveals that the current climate can make these initiatives very precarious. The realities of working today are that many MyM members work in a more atomized food system in which many members contend with severe economic pressures and necessities. These realities make certain forms of collaboration difficult, in ways ranging from the very logistical to the psycho-emotional. Both not having cell phone credit to make phone calls and having a lack of desire or energy to coordinate one’s work with a broader group increase the difficulty of maintaining larger collective strategies. Though the dissolution of the restaurant is understandable given several of the currents examined in this dissertation, its closing raises questions about the ability of initiative like MyM to overcome barriers to higher scales of labor organization versus increasing the atomization that flexible, neoliberal labor structures promote. These challenges beg the question: how can the meshwork of alternative food systems carve out

a more hospitable environment in which collaboration of this type may flourish?

Though this dissertation has not answered this question, I have examined processes that appear to contribute to the expansion of some practices related to alternative food systems. Though the particular iteration of MyM that was La Milpa ceased, the women gained skills, knowledge and connections that grew both their abilities and aspirations. Following the restaurant's closing, it has been time for new experiments. In addition to support for the family-based economic units, other events and activities have continued. When staff from MyM attend trainings in Amatenango, they take orders for agroecologically produced maize and bring it back to San Cristóbal to sell to the tortilla makers there, particularly those that continue to be part of both *Mujeres y Maíz* and the AgroEco Market. In Amatenango, members of the group worked in summer 2016 on the construction of a group meeting house using all natural materials. The resulting structure will serve as a collective meeting space for many initiatives and has provided many of the women members of MyM with valuable construction experiences. Events such as the "National Day of Maize" have continued, with members of MyM preparing food for sale and hosting educational events. At the 2016 "Festival of Maize and Tortilla," members of MyM in Amatenango created a table adorned with all of the different varieties of maize that they grow and some from other parts of Chiapas.

Despite the restaurant closing and one of the families leaving the collective, the overall work of the organization's three pillars continues. MyM members remain committed to strengthening the livelihoods of women who work with criollo maize varieties, as farmers and as tortilla makers. It continues to build alliances between rural and urban communities in order to cultivate "the culture of corn" that revalues the

production and consumption of criollo maize. Members work to build new market opportunities that connect producers and consumers. In this way, the organization supports economic development for women food producers, promotes the re-valuation of sustainable production methods for maize and enlivens food economy and culinary traditions in Chiapas. The Mujeres y Maíz Collective, in its evolution, continues constructing alternative food systems. The direction of its evolution continues to form and inform the “ever-evolving weave” (Ingold 2011, 120) of the food systems meshwork even as this is constrained by larger forces.

A Return to Sustainability Criteria

As explored at the start of this dissertation, a single definition of sustainability in food systems does not exist. The generally accepted definition, “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,” (Brundtland 1987) is challenging to operationalize.

The introduction, given the lack of a map providing definitions of sustainability, examined several criteria that are common to many alternative food systems experiments. Now it is possible to re-examine these criteria in an effort to determine how these considerations are understood, negotiated and operationalized in the particular time, location and webs of relations created through and around Mujeres y Maíz. The criteria examined have been agroecological production methods, the nature of social embeddedness, relocalization, and education as a means of building commitment to change.

The first criterion, **agroecological production methods**, related to the extent to which the agricultural systems underlying a particular food system promote ecologically and environmentally beneficial processes tied to food production. Within this study, several projects have been initiated in service of this idea. Women tortilla makers have been supplied with wood-saving stoves, and maize producers are being encouraged to use biofertilizers and homemade compost as opposed to purchased agrochemical fertilizers and pesticides. In Amatenango del Valle, women members of MyM are working with their husbands to apply these techniques, leading to small-scale innovations that may or may not catch on widely. MyM also connects to other projects that help to expand these practices, like the La Casa del Pan farm or by connecting to other producers at the AgroEco Market. These innovations are neither perfectly adopted, nor do they present perfect solutions, but they form tracks within the meshwork through which these actors work to promote some environmentally beneficial and agroecological production techniques.

The second criterion focused on **social embeddedness**, and interrogating the nature of relations fostered by certain initiatives. This idea calls into question how different webs of relations fostered by particular initiatives can encourage participants to act on a wide variety of considerations and thereby create more just, transparent and humane connections within food systems. Such considerations may encourage participants to move beyond narrow definitions of economic logic and a search for the lowest prices to more multi-faceted considerations of their activities and effects on the world. In Chapter 3, we saw how AFS initiatives such as La Milpa and the AgroEco Market aim to generate these considerations. The initiatives succeed in some ways and

fall short in others, reinforcing certain power dynamics and contending with broader economic and political structures that constrain their possibilities. However, these initiatives do generate places in which patrons express a broader range of ideas about what they value than they do in other locations (Gutiérrez-Pérez, Morales, and Limón-Aguirre 2013). In Chapter 6, we similarly observed that for many of the patrons of these initiatives, such considerations do inform their decision-making; suggesting that these efforts support new webs of relations, new knots in the meshwork, through which people both acquire knowledge and generate a social context in which actions based on that knowledge are valued. Within this study, many people voiced a desire to move away from what they perceived to be economically, socially and environmentally harmful industrialized food systems. This belief was voiced by people from the founders of the Organic Basket, to Micaela of the Voucher Program and workshops, to the women members of MyM themselves. Similarly, consumer patrons at La Milpa argued for economic solidarity and the maintenance of cultural traditions that seemed to be at risk without efforts like that of MyM.

As we saw, both the visions and results of this embedding are contested. For some, a move towards having an AgroEco Market is simply reinforcing class dynamics, for others, it is an important way to build alternative market niches. Within MyM, different ideas of solidarity grounded in class position concretely impact how the organization works and what kinds of relations and forms of organization are desirable. Aspects outside of direct connection between people greatly impact the extent to which that bridging can overcome or mitigate exploitative relations. Closer does not necessarily mean more just. Depending on the locations where women in MyM sell tortillas, they are

treated very differently, regardless of the fact that the products that they offer are the same. This suggests, as many studies have shown, that simply creating opportunities for direct connections is not enough. The nature of the relations created there must also be evaluated and addressed. In addition, we saw that the presence of consumers and producers in the same place is not sufficient for increasing consumer awareness. As explored in Chapter 6, half of the people that came to La Milpa were unaware of its organizational structure or commitments. Others, in contrast, found eating at La Milpa to be an important strategy for enacting their commitments to healthy eating, support or solidarity. These differences suggest that social embeddedness in service of particular goals requires much more than the possibility of personal relationships between producers and consumers and suggests that continued work is necessary to understand the transformative potential of this approach.

The third criterion that we explored is **relocalization**, the reconfiguration of food systems away from a primary focus on global trade toward a measure of regional or localized production systems. Many AFS initiatives look to scales of trade and movement as markers of how sustainable a particular initiative might be. However, as we have seen here, the idea of a “local” food project, or even that of *Comida Sana y Cercana* (Healthy, Local Food), which is the full name of the AgroEco Market, is a challenging concept to measure. Many of these initiatives are not “local” in the sense of being confined to a particular geographic area. We saw in the evolution of *Mujeres y Maíz* that it grew out of work done by women from many parts of Mexico to create an organic basket. As the organization of *Mujeres y Maíz* grew, it was supported financially by expatriates who raised money from friends in Colorado and by philanthropic foundations in Switzerland

and the United States. The framing of food sovereignty, adopted by MyM, has been created by an international coalition of peasant organizations (Desmarais 2006). Indeed, people like myself find this group on the internet and travel great distances to learn about how they do what they do. Organizationally, and as individual people, these initiatives are informed by global discourses, funded by people in disparate places; and they are connecting people from outside of Chiapas. In this way, the commitment to a bounded geographic locale may not be the most descriptive or generative criterion upon which to construct alternative food systems.

Baker contributes a more nuanced definition indicating that they may be place-based but not place-bound:

Place-based, these initiatives are grounded in particular ecologies, cultures and economies. And yet the projects are not place-bound. They are networked locally, regionally, translocally and transnationally though the neoliberal policy context, the circulation of maize and corn via agriculture and food commerce, and social movements. (Baker 2013, 5)

These initiatives work to create organizations and structures in specific locations. However, many of these initiatives like MyM are connected far beyond the physical locations where maize is grown or served to customers at La Milpa. Rather, through relationships to markets, personal connections and social movements, these initiatives span geographic distance in ways that increase and impact their development. By drawing on imagery in which the idea of movement through the world and through time is central, it is possible to imagine more clearly how people bind up and separate as they work on the issues of building strong regional links in and around Chiapas, but do so drawing on relationships and logics that circulate much more broadly. These relations connect meshworks of alternative food systems in disparate locations, showing that there

are many areas of the proverbial food system meshwork garden where relationships like those explored in this dissertation are developing. Such observations both support and complicate how relocalization occurs and what its effects are in building sustainable food systems.

The fourth criterion drawn on as an approach applied across many alternative food system initiatives is **education as a means of building commitments to change**. This study has shown that many people focus on awareness-building and education as an organizing principle for initiatives. This supports the theory that in order to create more sustainable societies, people must engage in processes of re-making themselves. As people adopt and re-orient their views and priorities through re-thinking the economy, some scholars and practitioners contend that they become different, act differently and create “other worlds” and new possibilities (Gibson-Graham 2006). As shown in this dissertation, actors within AFS in San Cristóbal undertake these efforts to varied extents and for different periods of time, depending on their life circumstances, and do not do so based only on the levels of knowledge that they possess. Thus, the role of education and awareness-raising continues to require examination and expansion in specific times and places. In addition, their ability to act on knowledge that they gain or injustices that people witness, are constrained by the larger environments in which they operate. It is thus clear that generating commitments to change must be accompanied with expanded opportunities to carry out those commitments in order to advance these criteria.

The experiments examined in this dissertation have not provided a perfect vision of a sustainable food system. Indeed, have they not even fallen neatly onto one side or the other of the criteria examined regarding what such a system would look like. Rather,

through examining these initiatives, it has been possible to see how definitions of sustainability are being actively negotiated as people work through relational processes to create new webs of possibility. Still, the manner in which these processes are negotiated and contested is far more complex than simply moving in a predictable direction towards a singular notion of sustainability. As shown throughout this dissertation, the potential of alternative food systems is constrained by current political and economic climates even as proponents work to change those climates.

Indeed, a large part of what has been shown is that the concept of what sustainability is and what it means is contingent, contextual and in process. For some people, these initiatives form possible sets of relationships that lead to different ways of interacting with each other and with the world around them. Contested notions of sustainability promote people re-thinking their relationship with the natural world. Within these initiatives, sustainability criteria are actively negotiated in diverse, context-specific and geographically specific, in ways that move beyond a monolithic “alternative” to an imagined single, overarching, capitalist, or neoliberal mainstream. Within this context, the process of defining what sustainability means is a product of the relationships developed and negotiated, of the “community of practice” that emerges (Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012).

A Meshwork of Diverse Food Systems

The above analysis investigates some of the ways that the initiatives examined in this dissertation promote certain ways of being, and ways of becoming, that align with criteria of sustainable food systems. In this dissertation, I have applied the concept of

meshwork as a descriptor for seeing how movements based on those criteria occur and what varieties of relations develop as a result of those movements.

Meshwork, as a concept, has been useful for describing and interrogating not only what alternative food systems are, but what they have been and might be. Meshwork beautifully illustrates the conceptualization of “food politics [that move] toward an understanding of the world *as relational and process-based rather than perfectionist*. This relations worldview admits that its vision is never perfect but always can be improved by working in relationship with others, especially when informed by an open, reflexive, and contested view of ‘improvement’ as an idea and a process” (Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012, 6).

This reorientation advances discussions that have arisen about what alternative food systems are and how they should be understood (Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012, Fuller, Jonas, and Lee 2010). By providing us with a means of visualizing a longitudinal analysis of both people and organizations, the application of this theory to alternative food systems is better able to describe the multiple levels of engagement that people and organizations have with each other. This idea is also helpful in allowing both scholars and practitioners to move beyond the idea of alternative food systems as if they are solid, delineable “things,” separate from the world around them. Ingold, as we have seen, refers to the process of separation. Rather than thinking of beings as nodes within a network, connected by a line signifying their relation, “[o]rganisms and persons, then, [are not] so much nodes in a network [but] knots in a tissue of knots, whose constituent strands, as they become tied up with other strands, in other knots, comprise the meshwork” (Ingold 2011, 70).

Additionally, other elements of meshwork have been useful for understanding the work of AFS initiatives. Major components of Ingold's idea of meshwork are that actors have different abilities to affect and shape the meshwork, and that these differential abilities are based on the application of skills developed over time as a result of movement, growth and experiences. Through these processes, people hone their ability to connect perception and action to achieve particular results: "a skilled practitioner is one who can continually attune his or her movements to perturbation in the perceived environment without ever interrupting the flow of action" (Ingold 2011, 94). This idea of skill development becomes even more useful when coupled with the conceptualization of knowledge as *storied*, also developed over time and shaping one's ability to perceive connections and act on them in a particular realm of engagement. Both of these elements of the theory of meshwork are usefully applied to theoretical questions within alternative food systems about how changes occur and how people come to decide to act in certain ways.

The concept of meshwork increases one's ability to understand the interplay between existing relations in food systems, the emergence and development of new initiatives over time and the varied ways that people connect to and continue to shape those initiatives. Ingold's theory of meshwork simplifies the visualization of complex, contested and emerging ideas of improvement. By reconfiguring our notion of an entity not as a single, bounded dot, but as a collection of lines, spreading in different directions and developed over time, Ingold provides a framework that accounts for the processual and contingent nature of AFS development. It becomes more possible to capture the "texture of the life world" in which each line of movement of a person or an organization

is “but one strand in a tissue of trails” (Ingold 2011, 69-70). This descriptive tool is useful for demonstrating the ways that varied actors and processes come together and separate over time. It is however, limited, both in scope and potential. However, the focus on how organisms move through an environment utilized here is very individual; within the framework it is harder to explain how the larger ecological context determines or impedes the directionality of some actors. To address this, the idea of meshwork needs to be fleshed out more fully within a larger ecological framework that reveals more about what factors and variables contribute to environments that promote or inhibit these innovations.

The Potential of Engagement Ladders

Throughout this dissertation, I have worked with the concept of engagement ladders as a means of solidifying and understanding the varied ways that people engage with AFS differently. In this analysis, I have utilized the idea of engagement ladders in the plural, rather than a single ladder. This is because every organization, business, project and workshop has its own engagement ladder or ladders based on the activities undertaken by that organization. There may be ladders for mapping out participation in the broader meshwork of AFS in a particular location. In this dissertation we concretely laid out some of the varied examples of engagement ladders as they operate between different organizations in Chapter 4, and as they shape the experience of MyM members in Chapter 5. As seen in Chapter 6, these ladders can also be used to think about engagement with ideas separately from engagement with behaviors, particularly because there does not seem to be a unidirectional progression between the two.

An important element of this concept of engagement ladders is that it makes it possible to lay out and practically visualize different ways that people engage. This tool is a useful complement to the framing of meshwork because it makes concrete the manners in which the “lines and threads” of meshwork are actually constructed. Rather than abstractly talk about how the threads of meshwork interweave or knot up, working out engagement ladders makes it possible to identify that events weave people together in some ways. The AgroEco Market does so in other ways, and workshops on biofertilizer in Amatenango create different sorts of bundles of lines. In addition, the idea of a ladder of engagement can help to lay out how dense particular knots within the meshwork may be. As explored in Chapter 5, daily work at La Milpa created a much denser knot for the women involved than attendance at workshops every once in a while. In the context of La Milpa, this resulted in different challenges than arose with engagement by members at another level of intensity.

Most critically, this case study bears out Kanter and Fine’s observations that no ladder is a “linear progression from one step on the ladder to another. People can start anywhere and work their way up or down. They can take one step at a time or hopscotch their way around the ladder. Again, organizations cannot control what people do; they can only provide ample opportunities for people to enjoy where they are on the ladder and become more engaged if they so choose” (Kanter and Fine 2010, 70). This analysis helps re-orient studies of alternative food systems away from an imagined single flow of participants in one direction, to a more realistic portrayal of the ways that people’s level of engagement with a particular organization, cause or behavior may shift over time relative to one’s life circumstance, preference or other variables.

This idea of engagement ladders is useful both for scholars examining the initiatives of alternative food systems and for practitioners working to build them. For scholars, engagement ladders can be useful descriptive tools for understanding the varied roles that people may take up within alternative food system. For practitioners, this concept can be strategically helpful for orienting procedures and practice and for understanding how participants may flow in terms of activity or association to a particular group or organization.

An Ethnography of Everyday Social Change

At the beginning of this dissertation, I entertained the idea of a split between streams of thought about the nature and extent of changes required to increase the sustainability of food systems. On one side, some scholars and practitioners are most focused on processual, relationship-based approaches to cultivating people that want to engage with sustainable behaviors. On the other side are those that see a greater need for systemic shifts that determine directions of change at higher policy levels to avoid repeating pitfalls and tragedies of existing industrial systems (Guthman 2004). The preceding chapters show how adopting processual, relationship-based analyses of alternative food systems is necessary to understand how AFS initiatives expand awareness of and support for larger-scale policy changes. As argued continuously, solutions to current crises in food systems can only be developed within specific contexts (Gibson-Graham 2006) and must escalate from those contexts (Friedmann 2007).

In some situations however, there is agreement about actions that must be taken for human beings to interact more sustainably with the natural world. A potential vision

that one could advocate based on the ideas of some proponents of AFS interviewed for this study might be the following: Farmers in Amatenango could cultivate only non-GMO maize that preserves biodiversity, cultivating those seeds on land that they live on and care for, avoiding the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides that lead to other negative ecological externalities. To produce more food, these farmers could take advantage of natural systems that support varied crop production on their diversified farms. Consumers could be willing to both pay for and make an effort to find these products, thereby supporting higher wages for farmers and the maintenance of biodiversity through agricultural practices that make the most efficient use of renewable ecological systems. Consumers could get these products nearby, limiting their carbon input. They could eat seasonally and learn to appreciate the joys of that practice, as well as increase familiarity and appreciation of the foods that would be reflected by those changes. They could adopt these practices regardless of cost, or they could defray such costs through their own production as part of this broader food community.

Such a possibility is within the vision of several of the organizations examined. However, as yet, it is only the *possibility* of realizing this vision that exists. Though inroads are being made in this general direction, the possibility of creating and expanding circles like this imagined one are not yet realized. Efforts to actualize such relations in reality remain messy, convoluted and complex. Some of the farmers in Amatenango are utilizing saved seeds, homemade fertilizers and machetes to clear weeds rather than pesticides. Their friends in the neighboring *ejido* plots may not be. One farmer may still need to earn enough money to send his children to school, preferably one or two of them to university. The women who would buy the excess maize to make tortillas may lack a

way to get the maize or the credit on their cell phone to send the farmer a message. Similarly, though it is growing, the customer base that is sensitized to many food system issues is in the process of developing. Such consumers, in the meantime, must have patience with systems in the process of becoming. This patience requires acknowledging that sometimes the crops one expected are not available and learning to value chains and lifeways that lead to what is on one's plate. Consumers must undergo processes of learning what foods are seasonally available in their location in order to adjust their expectations accordingly. This dissertation describes both producers and consumers adopting these ideas and practices, from meal voucher recipients who diminish their intake of Coca-Cola to restaurant patrons that begin to pay attention to the rain when they plant only one or two maize plants.

It is through these processes, adopted daily, and enacted within one's social world that the people who consider the criteria of sustainability mentioned above are created and create themselves. These processes are the subject of this dissertation. Cataloguing and labeling these processes is the product of ethnographic engagement and description that requires mapping the realms of engagement available to people and discovering the varied pathways and knots that people make, bind with and disconnect from within the spheres they occupy.

Ingold insists that, "the way of life is a path to be followed, along which one can keep on going rather than reaching a dead end or getting caught in a loop of ever-repeating cycles. Indeed, keeping going may involve a good measure of creative improvisation. It is in following this path – *in their movement along a way of life* – that people grow into knowledge" (Ingold 2011, 162). It is along paths of movement that we

find the participants of alternative food systems considered in this dissertation. Along the path, San Cristóbal's alternative food system inhabitants encounter people interested in walking beside them or leading them in a new direction. Some of those people may forge new paths, as seen in the meshwork of alternative food systems in San Cristóbal.

It is through this movement, through these varied interactions, that many pathways toward sustainable food systems are being developed. These pathways are taken on a daily basis, and staying on and moving off of them is a result of both small and large decisions that people make. In keeping with this observation and description of alternative food systems as a meshwork, this dissertation makes the case for cultivating diverse entry points and means of engagement with alternative food systems. Since neither the end point nor a singular path toward more sustainable food systems has been determined, cultivating this diversity, and an appreciation of it, is essential for generating the possible economic forms that will underlie more sustainable relationships.

Cultivating this diversity, however, cannot neglect the ways that the meshwork is shaped by broader forces. The decisions people make and the paths that they walk are not forged in a vacuum. To return to the analogy of the AFS meshwork as the section of a garden. People's ability to forge paths through the meshwork, as well as the meshwork itself to flourish, are constrained and constricted by broader forces. In this case, policies promoting free trade and the continued expansion of tortillería franchises versus state-support for criollo maize production would have vastly different effects on the ability of certain initiatives to succeed. Understanding the factors that impede or support initiatives like MyM in a broader context is thus an integral part of explaining how a meshwork of alternative food systems is part of and shapes much larger meshworks.

For Ingold, wayfaring is the process by which inhabitants of the world move through their surroundings. The wayfarer moves through a world “woven from the lines and growth of movement of inhabitants... [forming] a tangled mesh of interwoven and complexly knotted strands” (Ingold 2011, 151). It is through the process of moving, binding up within those strands, that the wayfarer continues a journey that is through space and also through time. When she arrives at a place, physical or metaphorical, she is not quite who she was when she set out; and her knowledge of the journey that got her to where she is will in turn condition the way she perceives her new location (Ingold 2011). I argue, in the end, that it is this process in which Mexican MyM and AFS advocates are involved. Informed by notions or criteria of sustainability, they move as wayfarers, creating pathways that influence the nature of the mesh and its future development. Since definitions of sustainability and what it means in particular places and for particular people are contested and always becoming, the experiments undertaken now must be understood as integral processes of movement and growth.

A germinal characteristic of meshwork is “the recognition that the lines of meshwork are not connectors. They are the paths *along* which life is lived. And it is in the binding together of lines, not in the connecting of points, that the mesh is constituted” (Ingold 2011, 152). Making sense of alternative food systems through meshwork and engagement ladders enables us to value these initiatives as organic, continually morphing and in process. Like the interconnected root systems in the garden to which Ingold refers, these initiatives and the people in them both exist in and create environments that support webs of relations based on principles and standards that are, and will continue to be, actively explored and created. As people manifest this duality of being and forming, they

generate unique local expressions of systems that are not separate from each other, but rather enmesh with others in a process of creating alternative food systems. These actions create the matrix through which the goals of alternative food systems, as laid out by Ísabel, a 37-year old nutritionist, may be operationalized in everyday life: “The goal would be to produce a good living for all... fundamentally, a life that would promote justice, care, respect for nature... one that helps us to protect, help, collaborate with others, and to be consistent by being conscious of what and how we eat.”

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