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To cite this article: Steven M. Schnell (2013) Deliberate identities: becoming local in America in a global age, Journal of Cultural Geography, 30:1, 55-89, DOI: 10.1080/08873631.2012.745984

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2012.745984

Published online: 31 Jan 2013.

Article views: 606

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Deliberate identities: becoming local in America in a global age

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As the world becomes increasingly interlinked through the processes of globalization, many have argued that geography as a basis for identity is losing its resonance. However, the potentially homogenizing effects of globalization and corporatization have, in turn, spawned a notable move in the opposite direction in the United States. James “Pete” Shortridge has referred to this move as neolocalism, the conscious attempt of individuals and groups to establish, rebuild, and cultivate local ties and identities. The word “local” has, as a result, taken on renewed vigor over the past two decades, as it is actively embraced as a counter to globalism. But what does it mean, and how is it used? Because it is consciously cultivated, this idea of identity becomes much more than a statement of “who I am”; it becomes a broader political, social, and economic undertaking. This paper examines a wide variety of manifestations of neolocal identity building such as microbreweries, local food movements, and the local living economy movement, and argues that a distinctive American geography of neolocalism exists.

Keywords: local; local economies; neolocalism; local food; James “Pete” Shortridge

The resurgence of place

Globalization has, without a doubt, changed our relationship to place. As the speed of communication, travel, and movement of goods increases, the power of space and place to bind our actions is loosened (Harvey 1989). Technology seemingly creates the space for placeless communities, formed more by common interests, bonds, and demographics than by place. Aided and abetted by globalization (or at least the more homogenizing impacts of the form of globalization dominated by large corporations), such changes have led many to argue that geography as a basis for identity has lost its importance. Although space may have been obliterated (at least for those of us in the wealthy, privileged and wired neighborhoods of the global village (DeBlij 2009)), the particularities of place have not been so

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easily relegated to the dustbin. These potentially homogenizing effects of globalization, corporatization, and connectivity have, in fact, spawned a notable move in the opposite direction over the past twenty-five years. Many people have actively sought a new sense of place, a new attachment to where they are.

James “Pete” Shortridge has referred to this move as neolocalism, the conscious attempt of individuals and groups to establish, rebuild, and cultivate local ties, local identities, and increasingly, local economies. As Shortridge has argued, people seek out “regional lore and local attachment” in reaction to the destruction of more traditional bonds to community because, as he put it, “we are feeling a need to forge better geographical identities” (1996, p. 10). In the years since Shortridge first made this observation, such attempts to re-root have gone far beyond a vague sense of regional attachment, and evolved into an interlinked series of movements to create more local economies and local identities, movements that are beginning to combine their efforts across the country in mutual support of place.

This article is an exploration of some of the ways that people have been attempting to recapture, or to create, “localness” as a way of life. It is not an in-depth analysis of any one item; I have explored a number of the individual phenomena discussed here elsewhere in more depth. Instead, it is an effort to examine the commonalities in motivations as well as the nature of the simultaneous rapid expansion in entities as diverse as microbreweries, watershed organizations, local living economies movements, community supported agriculture, and numerous other manifestations of the self-conscious return to localness. I analyze some of the diverse cultural meanings encoded in the word “local” as used by such movements by examining promotional materials used by the many different enterprises covered in the article. I then conclude with an analysis of the geography of neolocalism, as well as an evaluation of the potential of the movement to transform economic and social relations, and to reshape place identity in a globalizing age.

Manifestations of neolocalism

What exactly is “new” about neolocalism? For most of human history, people lived local lives by default—eating foods produced near them, following local cultural traditions, and using local building patterns. But with the onset of modernity, the rise of industrialism, and the advent of ever-improving communications and travel technology, such place-based ties were no longer a given. People had options—economic, cultural, and social—that no longer required local ties.

What makes neolocalism different from local ties in the past is its self-conscious aspect. It is the result of people cultivating local ties by choice, not by necessity (Zelinsky 2011). Although we can dissolve the bonds of
place, it is increasingly clear that people do not necessarily want to. Place remains a vital part of people’s identity, and when they become detached from place, many feel that something is missing: a sense of the local, a sense of belonging to a place, and a sense of that place as distinct from other places. Increasingly, they react by actively cultivating these ties—whether through the growth of the local foods movement, the flourishing of self-consciously local enterprises such as microbreweries, or the rise of the local living economies movement.3

An early harbinger of neolocalism was the explosion of microbreweries in the country in the 1980s and 1990s. The number of breweries has expanded dramatically over the past twenty-five years, from 82 breweries in the early 1980s to almost 1,600 today, during a time frame when per capita alcohol consumption has generally declined (Flack 1997; NIAAA 2010; Real Beer, Inc. 2012). A major attraction of microbreweries is the exclusive nature of their product—local beers that are not found elsewhere, products that are tied to a unique place. Such breweries are often proudly and self-consciously local, and actively promote their brew through the use of idiosyncratically local beer names and imagery. In fact, microbreweries are marketing “place” as much as they are marketing beer, and they actively seek out distinctly local imagery, local landscapes, and local stories to position themselves as intrinsically rooted in place.

Microbreweries are evidence that growing numbers of Americans feel a lack of local connections in their daily lives, and will embrace enterprises that promise reconnection with local economies, landscapes, history, and culture. The images used by brewers vary as widely as the places they inhabit. Local landscapes and wildlife are featured prominently in these promotions. So too do other aspects of a place’s personality, such as Bethlehem, Pennsylvania’s vanished steel-making past and its origin as a Moravian religious settlement (indicated by the star of Bethlehem); Moab, Utah’s status as national center of mountain biking and a gateway city to Arches National Park; and lobster, the signature food of Maine (Lewis 1989). The logo from New Glarus Brewing in Wisconsin, with its fingerprint-patterned map and exhortation to “Drink Indigenous,” makes the yearning for a connection between identity and unique places explicit (Figure 1).4

Brewers often go to great lengths to create a distinctly local theme, and the images that adorn their beer labels often get every bit as much attention as the names themselves. For example, in this image from the Free State Brewery, in Lawrence, Kansas, we see an image promoting the brewery’s John Brown Ale (Figure 2). John Brown, of course, was the famous/notorious anti-slavery crusader whose violent exploits, in Kansas and elsewhere, helped to spark the Civil War. Indeed, the name of the brewery itself derives from Lawrence’s status as a bastion of free-state anti-slavery advocates in the decades prior to the
Civil War. The image itself is modeled on John Steuart Curry’s painting “Tragic Prelude,” which adorns the Kansas statehouse in Topeka. The forceful, and slightly crazed, appearance of Brown is presided over by a looming tornado, a reference to Kansas’ presence in Tornado Alley. Both images in turn take issue with the outsider’s common perception of Kansas as a mild place where not much happens. The resulting image is thus a multilayered distillation of Kansas uniqueness. Imagery need not be a point of pride even—only of distinctiveness—as can be seen in the Wasatch Ogden, Utah’s “Polygamy Porter” (Wasatch Brewery), or Cleveland’s “Burning River Pale Ale” (Great Lakes Brewing Company), a reference to the infamous 1969 Cuyahoga River fire (Figure 3).

Figure 1. Distinctiveness of place, reflected in beer label imagery, from New Glarus, WI, Bethlehem, PA, and Portland, ME.
Local wineries too have expanded dramatically during this time period (Trubek 2008). Indeed, wine is even more explicitly based in place, through the idea of terroir, the integral connection between a place’s climate, soils, and the character of the grapes produced in those soils, a concept that has in recent years been applied to many other areas of food production as well (Trubek 2008). Winery tours are a de rigueur part of tourist advertising for most regions of the country, and are touted as a means of experiencing the “authentic” nature of a place (Schnell 2011). Breweries and wineries construct localness in different fashion, however. While wineries generally ascribe their rootedness to the very soil and climate their grapes are produced in (though some import grapes from elsewhere to carry out their craft), brewers usually draw their raw

Figure 2. T-shirt image promoting John Brown Ale (Free State Brewery, Lawrence, KS), drenched in Kansas symbolism, drawing on John Steuart Curry’s famous mural, “Tragic Prelude,” which adorns the Kansas statehouse in Topeka. For an image of Curry’s original painting, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:John_Brown_Painting.JPG [accessed 10 September 2012]. Courtesy of Free State Brewing Company.

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ingredients from elsewhere; barley and especially hops, are grown in geographically concentrated areas, and hops are said to similarly gain a large part of their character from their terroir. Beer brewers thus rely on different means to evoke localness: the art of brewing itself, and the narratives of place they employ in their marketing.

Microbreweries and wineries are far from the only arena where ferment of neolocalism has arisen. The local food movement has exploded in popularity and prominence over the past decade as local food customs, local food producers, and local cuisines are all increasingly emphasized as integral to the experience of place (Trubek 2008). The motives behind the local eating movement are diverse—eating local is said to reduce fossil fuel inputs into the food system, increase the diversity of food available (through heirlooms and other, not-easily-transported varieties), keep dollars spent on food local, and enhance the sense of community centered on food. Equally important are the explicit ties to place that local eating provides.

The local-eating movement has many facets. One has been the growth of Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA, a setup where people buy a share in a farm for an entire growing season, and often...
participate directly in the life of the farm—through volunteer days, potlucks, and seasonal festivals. Participants in CSA often state that they join specifically to become more directly connected with the farmers and the land that produce their food (Schnell 2007). In fact, the Japanese word for CSA, teikei, is often colloquially translated as “food with the farmer’s face on it” (Imhoff 1996, p. 430; Henderson and Van En 1999, p. xvi). The numbers of CSAs (which began in the United States in the mid-1980s) are expanding every year, and today there are at least 4,000 of them nationwide (RVE 2010; Local Harvest 2012). Many CSAs have lengthy waiting lists, also indicative of the growing demand.

In my interviews with farmers and members of CSAs, one of the common reasons that both mention for participating is the desire to create more direct connections between customers and growers. CSAs attempt to achieve this through a variety of means: face-to-face interaction between farmers and members, farm visits, social events such as potlucks and harvest festivals, and even opportunities for members to take part in the harvest (and the weeding). There is an oft-cited figure (that, if anything, likely understates reality) that the average item of food travels 1,500 miles before it reaches your plate; CSA attempts to bring food closer to home. It also, in many cases, goes beyond that, as one farmer that I interviewed observed: “The growing popularity of CSAs, I think, shows a need in people’s minds for more connections with their food supply, with small family farms. And I think a certain amount of that is idealized . . . . But I think there’s also value in things beyond the food, and when a farm can offer that, can offer the sense of community, the events that bring people together, that’s valuable. Because I do feel that community is neglected, and people are searching for opportunities.”

Farmers’ markets are another arena that has experienced a similar level of explosive growth (Brown 2001). They, like CSAs, promote direct connections between farmers and customers, and make the acquisition of food both more personal, and more distinctly place-rooted. Many towns have initiated farm markets as a part of revitalizing downtown areas, and downtown merchants often sponsor markets in their midst—after all, the farmers’ market shopper is also one who is likely to be inclined to shop locally in other places as well.

Throughout the United States, eating locally has gained in prominence, and “Eat Local” campaigns are now widespread. Whether sponsored by local Chambers of Commerce, sustainable agriculture groups, state Departments of Agriculture, or other organizations all actively promote the idea of eating locally (Figure 4). An increasing number of restaurants also promote their local connections, as diners look for yet another means of filling their stomach in a place-based fashion. Such establishments promise not only a good meal, but one with a story
Indeed, the local food movement is the most prominent and rapidly growing aspect of neolocalism. Numerous best-sellers, such as Michael Pollan’s *The omnivore’s dilemma* (2006) and Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal, vegetable, miracle* (2007), have fuelled awareness of the broader implications of our industrial food system. The idea of eating everything produced within a 100-mile radius has turned into a bit of a game as well, with “Eat Local Challenges” sprouting up to urge people to localize their food consumption for a period of time. Oxford American Dictionary even named “locavore,” a newly coined term for a person who consciously eats as much as possible from local farmers and food producers, its word of the year in 2007. This idea has become so

Figure 4. Eat local campaigns are increasingly common. Here, Ithaca’s logo posts local eating as a revolutionary act, one with political overtones. Courtesy of www.eatingithaca.com, Edible Austin (copyright 2011; designed by Jenna Noel).
widespread that it has already engendered the inevitable backlash (see, e.g., Stein 2008) and was the subject of some good-natured ribbing in the first episode of Portlandia, a show set in that most hyper-neolocal of cities (Portlandia 2011).

This surge to local eating is driven by a desire for local connections, but it has also been accelerated by an increased knowledge of, and concern for, the path that industrial agribusiness has blazed. With alarming regularity, headlines provide us with a new food scare—salmonella-laced peanut butter, melamine-poisoned milk and infant formula, mad cow disease, infected jalapenos, and pesticide-laced drinking water. The distant machinations of the food-industrial complex are increasingly portrayed as producing products that are not only inferior in taste, quality, and variety, but that may even kill you.

Local food, on the other hand, is positioned as a counter to the impersonal industrial food economy, a means of sustenance that is place-based and personal, with a conscious link to community. It is also a means for people to feel more connected with the sources of their food, to personalize the increasingly impersonal networks of capital that provide

Figure 5. This restaurant, in Lawrence, Kansas, puts localness at the core of its identity. Courtesy of Local Burger.
our sustenance, and to connect cities—both economically and psychologically—with their countryside, a connection that the latter half of the twentieth century largely severed.

This sense of opposition to the homogenization and loss of quality caused by industrial agriculture has fuelled an expansion in the application of the European concept of terroir beyond the realm of wine to a broader range of culinary activities, and applies it in a broader sense to all foods that are intimately connected with place, whether traditional or recent creations (Petrini 2003; Trubek 2008). This has seen its greatest flourishing in the Slow Food movement, an international movement born in Italy that takes a global view of the local, arguing that we can and should act to preserve all food traditions that are local—that is to say, rooted in place and tradition. These can range from individual ingredients such as shagbark hickory nuts in Wisconsin or maple syrup in Vermont to distinctive recipes and artisanal production techniques (Petrini 2003; Trubek 2008).

European countries, most notably Italy and France, have long accepted that there is an integral tie between food and place, and have developed a legal codification of regional apppellations, reserving for particular producers using particular techniques in particular regions the right to apply a particular label such as Champagne or Asiago. The United States, on the other hand, does not have the same depth of strong regional food traditions, and chefs have only recently begun to deliberately attempt to establish distinctive local and regional cuisine (Trubek 2008). Localness in this context has become a valued descriptor, and the act of building up the idea of the connections between taste and place, and celebrating and encouraging them, has been a notable act of narrative and creation, in a country that has traditionally been concerned more with progress, efficiency, convenience, and cheapness.

So where is “local”? What is “local”?

We are, in part, defined (and define ourselves) by what we eat, what we wear, and where we shop. The microbrewed beer, the locally grown tomato, and the small local bookshop have become the equivalent of the flag or the national anthem of this new localism, symbols of this new local identity. Like all such symbols, they are vague, and they contain a wealth of ideals, contradictions, and contestations (Costa and Besio 2011). The “local” has become, in the famous phrase of Benedict Anderson, an “imagined community,” a socially constructed identity (Anderson 2006). So what is this idealized nation over which the rutabaga flag flies? What does it represent in the eyes of its inhabitants?

The term “local” is vague, to say the least. Is something five miles away “local”? How about fifteen? Fifty? What exactly is a “locally”
produced product? Is it local only if all the ingredients are produced locally? Only if all the labor that produced it is local? Or if the ownership of the company that produced it is local? Such questions have no intrinsically correct answer; instead, they must be negotiated each time the word “local” is employed, each time somebody deems “localness” as something worth having.

To make the question more complicated, the meaning of “local,” particularly as it relates to local food, will necessarily be different in different places, and to different individuals and institutions within a given place, and even in different contexts to the same individual. Sometimes this is done out of necessity—for New York City to have “local produce” for example, requires a much larger foodshed than a small town. In other cases, the “local” of eat-local campaigns coincides, somewhat illogically, with political boundaries, as with state agriculture department campaigns like Pennsylvania’s “PA Preferred.”

Such contradictory and overlapping usages of the term should come as no surprise. As J.K. Gibson-Graham has pointed out (2002), even scholars (who are fond of rigorous definitions of terminology) cannot agree on what “local” means, or how it relates to the “global.” This stems from the fact that, in the parlance of social scientists, scales are social/cultural constructions and have no intrinsic meaning (see, e.g., Gibson-Graham 2002; Brown and Purcell 2005; Born and Purcell 2006; Miyares 2008; Herod 2009). Is “the local” an interpretive frame through which we analyze a situation? Is it the yin to globalism’s yang, each deriving meaning from the other? Is globalization nothing more than a collection of local places, or does globalization sit astride the world and become the sole shaper of what we think of as local places? Or is the idea of localism a shape-shifting entity that, in tandem with the also-nebulous idea of globalism, is continually remaking our lived reality (Gibson-Graham 2002)?

What I am concerned with here are the different ways that “local” is conceived of by participants in neolocal movements, and the implications that this has on the identities that they derive from it. “Local” is always shifting its meanings, both in time and in context. “Local” is continually redefined, extolled and imbued with various virtues based on the current political, cultural, and economic situation. Donald Meinig said that “any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads” (Meinig 1979, p. 34); such a statement could just as easily be made about the terminology we use to discuss the world. The cultural meaning of “local” extends well beyond the dictionary definition of the term. Below are several of the most dominant themes I have found in the current rhetoric employed by neolocal advocates, themes that, by extension, indicate the idealized sorts of places that people are increasingly identifying with.
Eight views of the local

The “local” as non-global: The rise in neolocalism has occurred alongside growing public awareness of “globalization.” (Figure 6). As news coverage of globalization has increased, public perception of the globalized nature of the world economy has also likely shifted. Increasingly, many are not comfortable with what they see. “Local” then, conceptually becomes the opposite of everything that the “global” is seen to be: personal instead of faceless, fair instead of exploitive, democratic instead of plutocratic, unique instead of homogenous. Indeed, the list is virtually endless; whatever globalization is, we locals are not. Of course, reality is considerably messier than such conceptions. Without this perception among a sizeable segment of the public that globalization is a distinctly negative phenomenon, the “local” would likely lose some of its draw; it takes on meaning precisely because of what it is perceived not to be.

The “local” as transparent: Another recurring theme is the idea of transparency in economic interactions. Global supply chains have stretched so far, and become so convoluted, that it can be almost impossible to determine where the things you buy were produced, and under what conditions. In the wake of such disconnection, all matter of ills can creep in—exploitation of workers, inhumane treatment of animals, environmental degradation, and so forth. The rhetorical promise of localism is that transparency can be restored to the system. If you know

Figure 6. The rise in neolocalism, measured here by usage of the term “local food” in articles in the New York Times, follows shortly after the large upsurge in usage of “globalization” in the late 1990s. Both terms experienced a huge upswing as the term was becoming more commonly a subject of discussion, and then a subsequent decline in usage.
the producers of your goods and your food, so the argument goes, then abuses of labor, of the environment, and of places, are less likely to occur. What is created through the local discourse is a narrative—a story that directly connects the consumer with the place and people that produced the products they consume, a narrative in which nothing is hidden or unknown.

The “local” as non-corporate: What is notable is that pro-local activists are not necessarily anti-globalization. What they are often against is the form of globalization that has often traveled under the name “neoliberalism”—the move to a market system devoid of government interventions driven by the developed world, a system that often is seen to favor large corporations at the expense of individuals, communities, and countries. More than being “anti-global,” the neolocal movement is anti-corporate. Indeed, this is one of the most common and powerful appeals made by advocates of neolocalism. Whether in terms of alternative agriculture, breweries, or local living economies movements, the corporation is often singled out as one of the biggest culprits in the un-making of place. One of the biggest attractions of “local” enterprises for many is the fact that they are not owned by faceless corporations (who have become the objects of much suspicion and mistrust among the local movement). In part, this is due to the legal structure of publicly held corporations, whose legal standing requires them to put the profit of their shareholders above all other concerns, including the defense of places’ uniqueness, character, environment, economic health, and well-being (Bakan 2004).

The “local” as unique: A side effect of large-scale corporate globalization has been the homogenization of the landscape—from the building styles to the stores you shop in. This is, of course, not news to geographers and other observers of the landscape, who, for a third of a century have discussed and debated the “Geography of Nowhere” (see notably Relph 1976, Kunstler 1993). Promoters of neolocal enterprises argue that we need to make (or re-make) distinctive. The twentieth-century mantra of convenience and standardization is outdated, they argue, and it has led to homogenous landscapes that are impossible to identify meaningfully with. As a result, when businesses are seen as unique, when your town offers things that can’t be found in other places, such enterprises can become an intrinsic part of local identity and a point of pride for many communities (Figure 7).

The “local” as environmentally responsible: Local enterprises are often touted as being a more ecologically responsible alternative to global ones. At its simplest level, such claims relate to the amount of fossil fuel and the resultant pollution needed to get goods to market. The assumption is that locally sourced goods will require less fossil fuel to get to market.9 As a result, the idea of food miles, for example, has become an entrenched part of the concept of localization, and has gained a great deal of traction among the public. Local enterprises are also often argued to be better
environmental stewards than multinational firms. The typical argument states that, whereas a corporation with absentee owners has no stake in ensuring the long-term viability of an operation in a given place, those who are rooted in place are much more likely to take a long-term view, and to ensure that their land continues to sustain themselves and their community over the long term (Wicks 2008, Wicks n.d.). It is not hard to find counterexamples where locals have not been the best stewards of the land and water (Bhanoo 2010; Flam 2010; McGlone 2010). It is also true that local actors are not entirely independent, but are themselves enmeshed in broader systems of politics and economics. But absentee ownership, absent government regulation or serious public pressure, all but guarantees that environmental health will take a back seat to profits (Bakan 2004).

The “local” as empowered and self-sufficient: By removing control over economic destiny from distant shareholders and boardrooms and putting
it back in the community, advocates of local business networks argue, local spending keeps decision-making power in the hands of local residents, and keep money close to home (Shuman 2000). Indeed, although exact numbers vary widely, research has shown that money spent at a locally owned store is much more likely to remain in the community than money spent at a chain store (Civic Economics 2004). The density of locally owned small businesses is positively correlated with economic growth, while the density of large, non-local firms has a negative relationship (Fleming and Goetz 2011). Well beyond that, advocates say, if business owners live in the communities affected by their decisions, they are more likely to make decisions that benefit the community (Kolko and Neumark 2010). After decades of news stories highlighting factory closures, job losses, and outsourcing, it is not hard to understand the appeal of locally rooted economic endeavors. In some cases, communities have even pooled their resources to create their own community-owned and—operated stores and restaurants in places ignored or abandoned by the fickle hand of market forces (Hewitt 2010; Cortese 2011).

The “local” as community-building: Local enterprises are portrayed by neolocal advocates as fostering a sense of community. Whether through local business organizations like the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE), CSA farms, or farmers’ markets, a key part of the rhetoric promoting local enterprises is the added sense of connection you have with your neighbors with an increasing of personal-scale connections and mutual support between people, and between people and businesses. This is often stated in contrast to the commodity chains of the global economy, where people lose personal contact with the sources of the food and products they buy. Economic relationships in this conception become embedded within a broader web of human relations, rendering them more multi-dimensional. Transactions are no longer just economic exchanges, but also interactions between neighbors and friends, based on mutual respect.

Thus, as globalization accelerates this process, some people increasingly yearn to return to an idealized past, prior to the coming of corporations and outsourcing. The prototypical example of this is the early-twentieth-century American small town, where (presumably) one knew all the people you interacted with economically. It is an idealized world, to be sure (imagine, for example, being African-American in a small town in Alabama in 1930), but it speaks clearly about the sense of connectedness that neolocal advocates are craving.

The “local” as authentic: The idea that the local is more real, more authentic, and higher quality also pervades local marketing campaigns. The implication is that local products are made by “real” people whom you know, rather than simply the result of elaborate marketing ruses fostered by multinational advertising firms and their corporate clients (Figure 8). They are also seen as less likely to use harmful ingredients, and
are portrayed as intimately linked to place, history, and tradition. Products rooted in a community are valued not necessarily because of what they are, but because of what they represent—local things made by local people, in, one is led to assume, humane and fair working conditions.

The “local” as all of the above: Many of these themes are often present in the same organization or individual. Consider the words of Judy Wicks, a prominent national promoter of local economies which sum up the interlinked nature of these facets of neolocal identity:

Today most of us no longer know who grows our food, who bakes our bread, brews our beer, sews our clothes, or builds our houses. We’ve become disconnected from each other and from our places . . . Many towns and cities have lost their unique identity as streets are lined with the same chain stores found everywhere or left deserted as customers flock to big box stores, owned by distant corporations selling goods produced in faraway sweatshops and factory farms. Without direct relationships, few of us think about the consequences of our economic transactions on other people and communities, on animals and the natural environment (Wicks 2008, p. 4–5).
While it is in the nature of an academic analysis to pick apart and itemize, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that neolocalism, for many, is a multifaceted project, one that attempts to unify many of the idealizations of the local.

**Networked neolocals**

When Shortridge first identified the trend of neolocalism, he described it as a manifestation of a search for identity in place in an increasingly rootless society. However, over the past decade, it has become something much more expansive and ambitious. Increasingly, people are forming national and international networks of neolocals, mutual support organizations for their mutual interests in preserving distinctive places. Both of the examples discussed below—FoodRoutes and BALLE (The Business Alliance for Local Living Economies)—are taking an innovative approach—albeit a paradoxical one: they are trying to create a national local movement. The identities they are promoting are identities tied not only to a specific place, but also to the broader idea of localness and place distinctiveness.

One example of this is The FoodRoutes Network, which started in Pennsylvania in 2003. FoodRoutes is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide marketing, communication, and informational assistance to local groups who want to promote a culture of local eating in their own areas. In its own words, “FRN is dedicated to reintroducing Americans to their food—the seeds it grows from, the farmers who produce it, and the routes that carry it from the fields to their tables” (FoodRoutes 2012). Their most visible endeavor has been their “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” campaign, which now has state chapters and local affiliates in 24 states. Some chapters are state-based, some city-based, while others are focused on a particular physical region—the nature of what is “local” varies widely. Their promotions attempt to use the power of branding to market local foods, and to put the idea of local eating foremost in consumers’ minds. Their various logos are visually unified, yet each one changed to reflect the distinctive nature of a region’s food production (Figure 9). In essence, they are creating a national brand identity around the idea of eating locally.10

Other undertakings are even more ambitious. In 2001, Judy Wicks (a Philadelphia restaurateur) and Laury Hammel, founded BALLE. BALLE is an international network of local groups that promote networks of “local living economies,” defined as economies that adhere to a “triple bottom line” model of success: people, planet, and profit. Since its founding, it has expanded to more than seventy chapters throughout North America and the United Kingdom, each focused on creating a self-conscious network of residents and businesses. Particulars of membership are left up to individual chapters, but common elements include buying
products and supplies from businesses that share similar values, providing a living wage (sufficient to live in a particular locale) and safe working conditions, engaging in fair trade, cooperating with other businesses, and protecting the environment. The ultimate goal is to create local economies that buy when possible from other local sources, and when that is not possible, to patronize entrepreneurs and economies that follow these principles in other locations (BALLE 2012).

Such networks are distinctly local, but they are not isolated; they are, in BALLE’s words “bottom-up, networked change” (BALLE 2012). They are, in fact, using the tools of globalization, such as the internet, to achieve the goal of establishing greater local autonomy and a culture of the local on a national level. As the Small Business Network of Portland puts it, “We encourage you to get involved with us as we celebrate and create our unique community” (SBNP 2010). Both parts of that are key—this is seen not only as an economic undertaking, but also as a promotion of place, community, and identity.

The first step in BALLE’s approach, like FoodRoutes, is the buy-local campaign (BALLE 2012). Buy-local movements are nothing new in American history (Allen and Hinrichs 2007). But the tone and tenor of the
BALLE movement is different. Rather than a simple defense of one’s own place, BALLE involves businesses in actively partnering not only with others in their locality and their ostensible competitors, but also with businesses across the country who share similar values. Currently, more than 22,000 entrepreneurs are members of their local BALLE network (BALLE 2012). As chapters develop, they move into more the complicated matter of creating the “building blocks” of the local economy that do not exist, by fostering entrepreneurship in these areas.

Co-opting the local?

How mainstream has the be-local, buy-local movement become? Consider for a moment this quotation:

[W]e offer fresh produce that’s grown nearby by local farmers that love their work and love their land. There are so many local farms that supply a wide variety of produce to our stores. These farms form the backbone of our local economies. And these farmers are people that live in our local communities.

The name of the earthy-crunchy local co-op that uses these words on their website? Wal-Mart, the poster child for destruction of local economies, which has recently, and somewhat perversely, hopped on the buy-local bandwagon (Wal-Mart 2010). And indeed, Wal-Mart has moved towards more local sourcing of produce for its stores (Bustillo and Kesmodel 2011), though they have been critiqued for their methods in doing so (Mitchell 2011). The fact that Wal-Mart’s motives are purely commercial shows that the lure of the local has increasingly important financial implications. In its turn to “local” imagery, Wal-Mart is far from alone (Figure 10a–b). Safeway and Albertsons, for example, recently received criticism for creating faux-farmers markets in front of some of their stores (Wingfield and Worthen 2010).

One of the newest, most thorough, and most ironic corporate makeovers occurred in spring and summer 2009 in Seattle, where Starbucks rolled out two remodeled stores with a new concept, the “street level coffee experience.” The new stores have furnishings re-purposed from other local buildings, such as seats used from a defunct local theater, along with LEED-certified design features, as well as wine and beer. They also showcase local craftsmanship in construction, and attempt to create interiors that reflect their neighborhood. But the most notable shift has been in what you don’t see—the name Starbucks. The company opted to remove its name entirely from the stores, and to re-brand the bags of coffee and other products sold there with the name of the local neighborhood. 15th Avenue Coffee and Tea was one of first of these stores (15th Avenue Coffee and Tea 2010; Seattle Times 2009), along with Roy Street Coffee & Tea. The company had planned to extend this
concept to the rest of the country (and world) if this initial foray into local branding were successful. Ironically, the place where this rebranding was piloted is in the one city where Starbucks has a legitimate claim to being local—its home city of Seattle (Figure 11a–b).

Such a shift explicitly recognizes the changing public mood towards local enterprises. According to Arthur Rubinfeld, President of Starbucks Global Development, “We recognize the importance of continuously
evolving with our customers’ interests, lifestyles and values in order to stay relevant over the long term. Our new design approach will allow customers to feel truly at home when visiting their local store and give them opportunities for discovery at our other locations around the world” (Starbucks 2009). To achieve this new, local feel, Starbucks sent groups of observers to scout out other locally owned coffee shops in their hometown in order to figure out how to be a local Seattle coffee shop. Needless to say, this caused some tension, and indeed, the entire process resulted in vociferous debate on the comment boards of The Stranger, a local independent weekly newspaper (Seattle Times 2009; The Stranger 2009). Such a move shows that the anti-corporate rhetoric of the local economy movement has had an impact; the lure of a homogenous front is no longer the draw that it once was, and the locally distinctive is seen to have some potential to reverse Starbucks’ slide. Whether this and other attempts by large corporations to remake themselves in a neolocal image involve genuine change or are merely localwashing remains to be seen. The Roy Street Coffee & Tea store is still in existence, but Starbucks unceremoniously changed the 15th Street store back to a standard-issue Starbucks in early 2011, indicating that denizens of Seattle, one of the epicenters of neolocal sentiment, did not buy into the fakeout attempt.

Figure 11. (A) The former 15th Avenue Coffee and Tea in Seattle, “Inspired by Starbucks” (that is, inspired by itself). (B) Protestors criticized the new non-Starbucks as “faux-local,” while the company argues that it is merely trying to become a better fit in the neighborhoods where it locates (Courtesy of Kat Steinglass and www.thestranger.com).
The geography of neolocalism

While aspects of neolocalism can be found throughout the country, it seems to catch on earlier and stronger in some areas than in others (Figure 12a–c). There are remarkable similarities, for example, between the maps

Figure 12. Remarkable similarities between the maps of BALLE chapters, microbreweries, and community-supported agriculture farms seems to indicate a distinctive geography of neolocalism. (A) community-supported agriculture farms in 2008 (data from RVE 2010); (B) microbreweries and brewpubs 2012 (data from Real Beer, Inc. 2012); (C) BALLE networks 2012 (data from BALLE 2012).
of microbreweries, community supported agriculture farms, and the network of BALLE local business networks. Initially, all caught on most strongly in the urban and suburban northeast, the upper Midwest, western Oregon and Washington, and Northern California, as well as along the Front Range of the Rockies, and in areas around college towns. In the case of breweries and CSAs, they have now expanded to the more resistant Plains and Southeast, but are still strongest in their initial areas. BALLE, which is a younger, more ambitious concept, is still largely confined to these early-adopter areas, though it too has begun to spread in recent years.

Such areas tend to be relatively wealthier, more politically progressive, whiter (and slightly more Hispanic) urban and suburban areas (Table 1). Counties with a CSA or microbrewery also have a smaller percentage of their population born in that county than counties without such enterprises. This lends support to the argument that people are driven to neolocalism in part out of a search for rootedness, a desire no doubt felt more keenly by people who have been on the move. Both CSAs and microbreweries show similar patterns, which is not surprising given that they follow similar distributions. However, this is not the entire story, and indeed, stopping here can leave an overly stereotyped picture of neolocalism as simply the province solely of a white, privileged elite. To attempt a more detailed analysis of the type of communities more receptive to neolocal enterprises, I employed the twelve county types developed by Dante Chinni and James Gimpel as part of their Patchwork Nation project, an attempt to move beyond the simplistic red/blue state
motif that passes for political analysis (2010). Using principal components analysis on a whole host of socio/economic/political data, they devised a classification of twelve county types (Table 2). Using these twelve county types, I compared the percentage of the country’s population that lived in counties of each type, and compared it with the percentage of the CSAs and microbreweries in my data set that are found in those counties (Figure 13).

The largest overrepresentation of microbreweries and CSAs can be found in Boom Towns, areas of growing diversity, and recent arrivals. Other classes where neolocalism is overrepresented are the Monied Burbs, the Industrial Metropolis, Emptying Nests, and Campus and Careers. Those where they are heavily under-represented include Immigration Nation, Minority Central, Tractor Country, Service Worker Centers, and Military Bastions. Mormon Outposts, meanwhile, are distributed roughly equal with their population. And then we have the Evangelical Epicenters, areas that have a high adherence to evangelical Christianity and a

Table 1. Comparisons between CSA/non-CSA counties, and microbrewery/non-microbrewery counties. Figures are the mean values for the counties in each category. Gray shading indicates the larger of the two values in each comparison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average HH income in $</td>
<td>52657</td>
<td>43443</td>
<td>55299</td>
<td>43278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% white</td>
<td>95.6</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td>92.1</td>
<td>89.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% black</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Hispanic</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Native American</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Asian/Pacific</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Pop. age 20–34</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Pop. age 35–49</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Pop. age 50–64</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Pop. age 65 and up</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% w/ HH Income 0–20K</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>28.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>% w/ HH Income 20–40K</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% w/ HH Income 40–60K</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% w/ HH Income 60–75K</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% w/ HH Income 75–100K</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% w/ HH Income 100–125K</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% w/ HH Income 125–150K</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% w/ HH Income 150–200K</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% w/ Income 200K-up</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Coll. + Grad. School Enroll.</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Born In State of Residence</td>
<td>65.9</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>71.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with HS Diploma</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>83.8</td>
<td>76.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repub. Pres. Vote 2004</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>62.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dem. Pres. Vote 2004</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
decidedly conservative political profile, actually are more likely to have CSAs than their population alone would predict, though not surprisingly, they have not taken as much to microbreweries.

What these two analyses in tandem show is that we must be careful about overgeneralization. Though the Monied Burbs meet the generalizations we see in Table 1, many of the others do not—Industrial Metropolis counties, for example, are quite diverse, while Emptying Nests are considerably older on average than the nation as a whole. In addition, there is clearly a regional effect that demographics alone, and even the broader county types, cannot account for. Some parts of the country, most notably the Plains states and the Southeast, seem to be more resistant to neolocal enterprises, even when you take into account the differing demographics, whereas the early-adopter areas are considerably more open to them. To name just a few examples, although Service Worker Centers nationwide are less prone to having CSAs or microbreweries, there is a large swath of these counties in places like upstate New York that have become centers of neolocal activity. Similarly, the clustering in the upper Midwest in states like Michigan and Wisconsin cannot be simply explained with recourse to demographics or political inclinations. Careful consideration of the maps turns up many more examples. This leads me to conclude that the move to neolocalism is not readily reducible to any of these categories, although many of the socio/economic/political variables do clearly have an impact.

In part, I think that this is because there is a decided libertarian streak to many neolocal enterprises, one that cuts across and confounds traditional political categories in this country, an anti-bigness that applies
Table 2. Patchwork Nation community type definitions. Authored by Dante Chinni and Dr. James Gimpel, 2008. Copyright 2008–2011 The Jefferson Institute for the Study of World Politics, Licensed to Users under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerive 3.0 Unported License.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boom Towns</td>
<td>Fast growing communities with rapidly diversifying populations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus and Careers</td>
<td>Cities and towns with young, educated populations; more secular and Democratic than other American communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emptying Nests</td>
<td>Home to many retirees and aging baby boomer populations; less diverse than the nation at large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Epicenters</td>
<td>Communities with a high proportion of evangelical Christians, found mostly in small towns and suburbs; slightly older than the U.S. average; loyal Republican voters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration Nation</td>
<td>Communities with large Latino populations and lower-than-average incomes, typically clustered in the South and Southwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial Metropolis</td>
<td>Densely populated, highly diverse urban centers; incomes trend higher than the national average and voters lean Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Bastions</td>
<td>Areas with high employment in the military or related to the presence of the military and large veteran populations; likely Republican voters though Democratic President Obama gained ground in 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority Central</td>
<td>Home to large pockets of black residents but a below average percentage of Hispanics and Asians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monied Burbs</td>
<td>Wealthier, highly educated communities with a median household income of $15,000 above the national county average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon Outposts</td>
<td>Home to a large share of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and slightly higher median household incomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Worker Centers</td>
<td>Midsize and small towns with economies fueled by hotels, stores and restaurants and lower-than-average median household income by county</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tractor County</td>
<td>Mostly rural and remote smaller towns with older populations and large agricultural sectors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

equally to corporations and to government. There would seem to be room to greatly expand the movement’s appeal for those who see neolocalism as a broader economic, political, and social project. Perhaps the rhetoric of neolocals needs to shift in some regions to broaden their appeal, to focus less on the anti-corporate rhetoric that gains much mileage in more progressive areas, and to focus instead on themes of local distinctiveness, local autonomy, local independence, and local free enterprise—themes that are likely to be more resonant in more culturally conservative
quarters of our country. In fact, the ideas of neolocalism, of greater ties to place, are not intrinsically conservative or liberal, and it is counter-productive for movements that hope to bring about lasting change to confine their appeals to one end of the political spectrum.

**Critiques of the local**

It is easy to find examples where each of the virtues associated with the local fail to materialize in practice. Sometimes, in fact, the various goals of localism are at odds with each other. There are many Mennonite farmers in southeastern Pennsylvania who sell produce at local stands. From the standpoint of a local foods advocate, what could be more idealistic? On further examination, however, some are active users of sewage sludge on their fields, a practice that has been condemned by others as extremely unhealthy for people and the environment (USFA 2010). The goals of transparency and environmental virtue then are undermined at a distinctly local level.

Indeed, scholars have gone to increasing lengths in recent years to point out that scale has few, if any, intrinsic qualities. Just because something is “local,” despite the rhetoric of local movement promoters, it is not automatically more just, healthier, or more sustainable than national- or global-scale enterprises. Born and Purcell have termed this assumption of virtue automatically adhering to a particular scale “the local trap” (Brown and Purcell 2005; Born and Purcell 2006). Indeed, the rhetoric of many local movements does often equate localness with more desirable outcomes in many realms—sustainability, social justice, democracy, and nutrition, to name a few. Some critics go even further. Born and Purcell have argued that “local scale food systems are equally likely to be just or unjust, sustainable or unsustainable, secure or insecure” (2006, p. 195).

It has also become commonplace for scholars to critique neolocal enterprises as potential instances of “defensive localism,” a sort of local chauvinism that is seen as catering to a whole array of humanity’s baser instincts. In some of this scholarship there is an assumption that defense of place is necessarily a bad thing, that it necessarily leads to xenophobia and bigotry. They argue that, in creating the “us” of the local, local identities inevitably create a “them” that is excluded (at best) and demonized (at worst) (Hinrichs 2000, 2003; Winter 2003; DuPuis and Goodman 2005). Local elites, they argue, can be every bit as exclusionary as larger scale systems, and local old boy networks can shut non-white-males out of power, and economic influence, and “can provide the ideological foundations for reactionary politics and nativist sentiment” (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, p. 360). Critics have also argued that the local food movement is “a-political (anti-democratic, anti-reflexive)” (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, p. 360), and that it often ignores questions
of social justice (i.e., access to quality food for all). Indeed, these scholars have voiced their opposition to any movement that relies on defense of place as a goal in and of itself, dismissing all “local” movements as mere nativism (most forcefully Born and Purcell 2006).

While such critiques have some merit, I feel that, by relying on vague, “could-be, it’s possible” generalities, they greatly overstate their case, creating a skewed picture, and fundamentally misrepresent the nature of neolocal movements. And they are considerably off the mark when they argue that local movements reduce the “lens of who we care about,” (Hinrichs 2003, p. 37) or that “the local as a concept intrinsically implies the inclusion and exclusion of particular people, places, and ways of life” (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, p. 361).

Expanding the lens

Certainly as it regards the neolocal movements I have examined, such statements ring false. As Clare Hinrichs has noted, self-conscious localness does not necessarily lead down this path; it can also lead to a more open, inclusive view of the world as well, expanding and not contracting the lens of who we care about (Hinrichs 2003). Doreen Massey has made a similar point, arguing that there is nothing intrinsically exclusionary about localness. Although it can be, place need not be bound and exclusionary; it can also serve to create a sense of responsible linkages with the wider world (Massey 1999, p. 155).

I would argue that such place-rooted activism is precisely the kind of engagement that is needed to evince true, lasting social change at any level. Local places are the sites of day-to-day human action and experience. The nature of people’s connection to local places is qualitatively different than to broader, more abstract affiliations (Tuan 1975), and any social movement that ignores this is bound to fail. Because of the more personal nature of such connections, defense of place provides a powerful incentive to action. Neolocalism can also engage people in reflexive thinking about the relationships our actions have on a wider social, economic, and natural world by encouraging people to identify with and care not only about their “local,” but also about the idea of the “local” in general. In short, place is not a distraction to the goals of building a more sustainable, just, and livable world; it enables it.

What seems to be emerging, then, through the various aspects of neolocalism, is a distinct turn to “the local” as a primary form of identity, and the promotion of people thinking of themselves not only in the sense of abstract symbols, but also in terms of what they buy, what they eat, whom they interact with, and identifying not only with their own places, but with the idea of place itself. Corporations have long encouraged identifying with brand names (Klein 2000); in some ways, neolocalism is
turning such strategies on their head by encouraging identification with “the local” instead.

What makes neolocal identities potentially more powerful than they may appear on the surface is through the visible effects they have, the alternative spaces that they create. As Andrew Herod has argued, a dominant discourse concerning corporate-led globalization is TINA— “There is no alternative” (Herod 2009). But CSAs, microbreweries, citizen watershed groups, farmers’ markets, and the like are (in some cases literally) visceral proof that there are spaces for alternatives. The importance of such a realization should not be understated. Class consciousness as a form of identity has not exactly panned out as Marx had envisioned, but the drive for people to identify with local places seems to be a much stronger urge.

Neolocalism is defensive. But it is also creative and positive. Just as importantly, it indicates an unwillingness to cede the shape that one’s place takes to abstract forces beyond one’s control—adopting the idea instead that there is an alternative. This, in essence, creates a new narrative of place adopted by neolocals, one not driven by impersonal market forces but rather by individual and community empowerment. The new narrative of “the local” consists of an interwoven set of virtues and ideals that it is supposed to typify. As critics have pointed out, just being local is not a guarantee that such abuses will not continue. But because of the way that it embeds economic transactions and identity in a broader social matrix, it lays the groundwork for the creation of a world where values other than the purely economic shape our lived reality.

Neolocalism is not really the opposite of globalization. In fact, it is enabled by globalization. Without the homogenization of place over the past half century, it seems quite likely that conscious cultivation of place attachments would not be as strong as it is today. In addition, without the media networks that have created a globally interlinked world, the ideas of localism would have a much more provincial base. Instead, neolocal identities have become part of a broader political, social, and economic undertaking, one in which local knowledge, local economy, and local connections are all consciously cultivated, and one in which place connections are nurtured. At the heart of such a project is the idea of narrative and identity (Tuan 1991). From the local yarns behind the beer names at the local brew pub, to the narrative that traces the origins of your tomato to a specific plot of earth and a specific farmer, to the effort to establish and support a network of locally rooted businesses, all focus on creating a narrative of place in which the participant plays an active, personally connected role. It is an identity that becomes much more than “who I am,” but also a statement of “what I am a part of.”

Pete Shortridge has long argued forcefully for the importance of studying the subjective aspects of human experience through the complex interplay of identity, place, and narrative. As he observed in concluding
his groundbreaking study of the images of the American Midwest more than twenty years ago, “[t]here is an increased realization that the positive values that grow out of a rootedness in place are needed to give meaning to life …” (1989, p. 141). Shortridge was referring here to the Midwest’s role as a repository of idealized pastoral imagery, a place whose image allowed Americans to see themselves as directly connected with the landscape that sustains them. In the decades since Shortridge’s observation, the rapid rise in globalization has rendered the search for connection and local identity more vital than ever. Increasingly, Americans are looking for this rootedness not only in the imagery of the Midwest, but also much closer to home, and in more concrete, active, and diverse ways.

Shortridge’s fellow Kansan Wes Jackson has argued for conceiving of the Earth at a local level—not as a unified whole, but as a group of places to which people are attached (Jackson 1996). And he asks people to develop a relationship with their ecosystems, to root themselves firmly in nature and place. In countless ways, big and small, Americans are doing just that—becoming native to this place.

Notes
1. The term is now discussed in many of the standard introductory human/cultural geography textbooks (Fouberg, Murphy, and de Blij 2009; Fellman, et al. 2010; Greiner 2011; Domosh, et al. 2013). Although Shortridge first employed the term “neolocalism,” Raimondo Strassoldo (1992) used the term “new localism” in a similar fashion—referring to a deliberate response to globalization of rooting oneself in a locality—in his study of regionalism in Italy a couple of years earlier.

2. Although I focus here primarily on commercial manifestations of neolocalism, the urge for local connections encompasses many other phenomena as well. For example, the past twenty years have seen a large increase in numbers of local watershed associations. They often monitor pollution and water quality, promote understanding of plant and animal communities that depend on the watershed, and work to increase awareness of the relationships between people and the watersheds that support them, promoting a vision of place as one inextricably intertwined with the landscapes that we inhabit. The bioregionalism movement that began in the 1970s takes this concept even further, advocating a fundamental reorganization of society to create political structures and boundaries that are in line with biological regions that would be more responsive and sensitive to the geographical and biological realities of the landscapes they inhabit (Sale 1985).

3. The local living economies movement is a movement whose goals are to create viable networks of local businesses that are financially viable as well as ecologically and socially responsible.

4. An extended version of this discussion can be found in Schnell and Reese 2003. See also Flack 1997 for a discussion of the earlier development of microbreweries.

5. See Schnell 2007 for an expanded discussion of CSAs.
6. This number is actually 1) almost a complete fabrication, and 2) almost
certainly way too small, an argument that I expand on in a forthcoming article.

7. Local eating has also become a mainstream part of the tourist industry. In a
comparative study of state and provincial tourism guides, I examined changes
in promotion strategies between 1993 and 2008, and one of the most notable
shifts was to an emphasis on agritourism and local eating. Incidence of the
word “local” in tourism booklets increased tenfold. Local foods and farms are
now almost uniformly touted as a way to experience the real, authentic place, a
marketing strategy that was barely present fifteen years ago (Schnell 2011).

8. See http://www.agriculture.state.pa.us/paprefered/lib/paprefered/documents/
3-11-09_Revised_PA_PREFERRED_Agreement_Package.pdf for an example
of the ways in which “local” is codified in such programs. See also Hinrichs
2003 for a discussion of the definition of “local” in the context of a “local
Iowa dinner.

9. Some studies have disputed this claim (see Saunders, Barber, and Taylor 2006
for the most notable example), and argued that in some circumstances, long-
distance transport is actually more ecologically minded than local production.
Such arguments typically rely on cherry-picked examples to try and leave a
broader impression.

10. Some have argued that this idea is an oxymoron (Allen and Hinrichs 2007),
but I disagree. Indeed, I would argue that the creation of a broader
consciousness of localness is a vital part of creating a local food movement
that more broadly penetrates all sectors of society.

11. A third is located in Disneyland Park in Paris—also an interesting choice,
since Disney was the subject of much controversy when it first opened in Paris,
accused of cultural imperialism by French activists.

12. See also www.patchworknation.org for fuller methodological explanations
and for full-color maps detailing the distribution of these different county
types.

13. Although it is a simplification to assign each county to a single type (my own
county, Berks PA, is classed as “Monied Burbs” while being home to Reading,
which was just named the city with the highest poverty rate in America), an
analysis using each county’s score in each of the twelve categories yielded
similar results.

14. There is not space in this article to address this critique fully; I am addressing
it at much greater length in a forthcoming article.

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