

Island Time: The Media Logic and Ritual of Ferry Commuting on Gabriola Island, BC

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Abstract: Drawing upon ethnographic data collected among residents of Gabriola Island, British Columbia, this article analyzes the meanings associated with the movement of the MV *Quinsam*—the primary means of transportation onto and off the island—and with the ritual of ferry commuting. By focusing on the logic of the ferry as a medium of communication and on the ritualistic aspects of commuting and by combining a symbolic interactionist perspective with the media theory of Harold Innis, the authors reflect on how the Gabriola Island ferry shapes islanders' sense of time and thus experiences of lived culture.

Résumé: En se servant de données ethnographiques récoltées auprès des résidents de l'Île de Gabriola en Colombie-Britannique, cet article analyse les significations rattachées au mouvement du MV *Quinsam* —le principal moyen de transport pour rejoindre ou quitter l'île—ainsi que celles rattachées au rituel qui consiste à faire la navette par traversier. En se concentrant sur la logique du traversier en tant que mode de communication et sur les aspects rituels associés à l'acte de faire la navette, et en combinant l'interactionnisme symbolique à la théorie médiatique de Harold Innis, les auteurs réfléchissent au rôle que joue le traversier pour les habitants de l'Île de Gabriola en ce qui a trait à leur conception du temps et à leurs expériences de la culture vécue.

The logic of communication media is exercised through the operation of their formats: “rules and procedures” that work by selecting and organizing experiences (Altheide, 1985, p. 9) and by shaping ongoing definitions of social situations. Media logic is particularly consequential in the process of constructing temporal realities (Altheide, 1985). From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, however, media do not *determine* time and its multiple experiences. Individuals and groups instead actively interact with media and time, constructing joint lines of activity and manipulating the shape of temporal structures and experiences and

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Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol 32 (2007) 261-275

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thus affirming relationships and connections—albeit in conditions not always of their own exclusive choosing (Couch, 1984; Flaherty 1999; Mead, 1932).

Despite their attention to the negotiation of time in face-to-face communication (e.g., Daly, 2002; Scarce, 2002) and in the mass mediated situation (Altheide, 1985; Altheide & Snow, 1976; Kotarba, 2002), interactionists have neglected to examine the use of transportation media in relation to the social construction of time. Our object of analysis in this paper is a ferry boat—the MV *Quinsam*—that connects (and separates) the small island community of Gabriola Island in British Columbia's Strait of Georgia with its terra firma counterpart: the city of Nanaimo on central Vancouver Island. Drawing upon reflexive, narrative ethnographic data, we aim to contribute to the symbolic interactionist perspective by empirically identifying the role that a medium of communication and daily rituals (Carey, 1989) plays in a greater cultural temporal ecology.

Ferries regulate movement through their primary format of daily and weekly schedules. The logic of ferry commuting, with its constant shuttling across time and space, allows for the role of the ferry in the process of mediating time to be “known, recognizable, and shared” (Altheide, 1985, p. 14). The scheduled format of ferry commuting gives “the look of familiarity and/or relevance” (Altheide, 1985, pp. 15-16) to individuals' interaction with it, and thus to its collective meanings. The result is a unique ecological configuration of time, which Gabriolans refer to as “island time.” Island time means a later time than what the universal clock says, it means being as late as the ferry is, and it means moving as slowly as the ferry does. The uniqueness of “island time” resides in the fact that its slow pace denotes a countercultural (or least somewhat exceptional) current in a society governed more and more by the logic of speed (Virilio, 1977). As a medium of communication, the Gabriola ferry influences the rhythm of island life. It runs on a regular schedule and is incorporated into each commuter's life at a habitual level. As such, ferry travel becomes a daily or weekly ritual for most islanders, who experience their culture in relation to the ferry commute. The rituals and rhythms of the island, and the islanders' engagement with them, demonstrate how social definitions of time are shaped by media of communication. Island time is a shared definition of time that unites the community of Gabriola.

We begin our examination of island time by providing some background information on Gabriola Island and then introduce our analytical frame and research strategy. This section is written in a traditional academic writing style, in order that we may clearly provide a theoretical framework for our analysis. Subsequently, we report on our empirical investigation by utilizing the representational techniques of embodied (Monaghan, 2006) and sensuous ethnography (Stoller, 1989, 1997). In order to fully understand island time, one must experience it. In this section, we invite the reader to visit Gabriola Island. We use a more creative writing style in order that we may share the island experience. At the end of this section, we revisit a more traditional writing style so that we may effectively analyze our ethnographic and qualitative research.

Gabriola Island and commuting rituals

Gabriola Island is home to approximately 4,500 residents, the largest majority of

whom are of European and of middle-class economic background. Served by BC Ferries, Gabe (as it is affectionately known by the locals) lies a mere 20-minute ferry ride from Nanaimo, British Columbia (pop. 77,000)—the second-largest urban centre on Vancouver Island. Gabriola Island is relatively small in size (14 kilometres long and approximately 4.2 kilometres wide) and very similar in its environmental and climatological features to many other gulf islands of the Strait of Georgia—the largest of which is Salt Spring Island. Just like other islands in the area, Gabriola is home to many artisans, painters, musicians, and craftspeople who reside there year-round, as well as a handful of seasonal vacationers (perceived for the most part as outsiders) who periodically return to their cabins.

Businesses and public offices are scarce on Gabriola. There are no high schools, hospitals, or airports, so commuting—for shopping, working, schooling, and accessing most public services—is a necessity for all residents. To meet this demand, BC Ferries operates one ferry boat between Nanaimo and Gabriola. The MV *Quinsam* shuttles daily back and forth approximately every hour or so from 6:15 a.m. to 10:55 p.m., covering the 3.7 nautical miles in (ideally) 20 minutes for the cost of \$6.30 return per adult or \$15.95 return per automobile. The MV *Quinsam* is no flagship. Built in 1982, this 86.85-metre Spartan ship can accommodate at capacity 70 cars and 407 passengers and crew. Comparatively slow (12 knots per hour), punctually late, and periodically running on decimated power due to its aging engines, the *Quinsam* boasts no “amenities” in passenger lounges adorned only by 1970s-style faux leather chairs, two vending machines, and a host of bulletin boards.

From an interactionist perspective, a medium of communication “does not consist of an object or thing that exists independently of the people who select, define, interpret, and in short construct it” (Altheide, 1985, p. 38). Following the early lead of the Chicago School, interactionist studies of media and culture reject all forms of determinism. Rather than isolating media, culture, or other social institutions as indicators of dependent or independent variables, symbolic interactionists attempt to understand mediated communication processes within complex and multifaceted, situated joint acts. This ecological approach highlights the interactional dynamics of processes of cultural reproduction and the social determination of media and technology (Altheide, 1995).

Studying how the ferry acquires its emergent meanings in the process of interaction with its users requires focusing on the phenomenology of everyday ferry commuting. Only a handful of studies within the social sciences have looked at the practice of commuting and the experiences of movement by way of transportation, albeit with very diverse? research foci and objectives (e.g., De Boer, 1986; Edensor, 2003; Letherby & Reynolds, 2003; Merriman, 2004; Nash, 1975; Scanlan, 2004). These studies show that commuting is far from being a mindless, robotic-like activity. Edensor (2003), for example, shows that car commuting is punctuated by an active exploration of space, a process through which the body—via the constitution of habit—constantly regenerates the meanings of place in novel and creative ways. Nash’s (1975) ethnographic study of urban bus commuters also points to the constitution of habit and ritual. Much as Letherby & Reynolds (2003) discovered later among train commuters in the

U.K., Nash's work rejected the idea of transportation as the mere transfer of bodies and material from point A to point B. Both buses and commuter trains work as unique social spaces made socially and individually significant by particular orientations and purposes and by communities of commuters with their idiosyncratic practices and conventions.

Commuting may very well be the epitome of ritual. From the interactionist perspective, ritual is the very basis of communication; as such it "is the basis of human fellowship; it produces the social bonds, bogus or not, that tie men [sic] together and make associated life possible" (Carey, 1989, p. 22). Communication rituals work by constituting emergent social orders and by embodying culture in people's habits and social institutions (Carey, 1989). Viewing ferry commuting on to and from Gabriola Island as ritual allows us to focus on the constitution of a unique temporal culture by zeroing in on the recurrent rhythmic patterns of this protracted interaction.

As Dewey (1934) explained, rhythm is an important component of the somatic perception of reality. Studying the immediate sensorial quality of rhythm allows us to understand the self's and the body's experience of culture at the level of habit, ritual, and identity. Studying how local media—with their rhythms—inform situated social definitions of time enables us to appreciate cultural rhythms informed more by idiosyncratic temporal patterns than by homogenizing forces that push for global uniformity in the definition of time (e.g., Harvey, 1989) and place (e.g., Augé, 1995). In contrast to the "non-places" identified by nothing but speed (see Virilio, 1977)—like international airports, interstate highways, or bullet trains—what we have on local ferries and commuter trains (Letherby & Reynolds, 2003) is a situated bodily rhythm, a recurrent tempo that regulates mood and somatic sensation in a particular manner, leading communities of commuters to experience time in unique ways.

Researching the ritual of commuting

Data for this study are primarily drawn from the first author's systematic participant observation, conducted over a period of five months in 2006, as well as from a lifetime of unsystematic observation and natural participation in daily routines as a resident of Gabriola Island. Systematic full member participant observation (Adler & Adler, 1987) entailed field note-taking, conversational "field" interviews with locals, as well as group and individual interviews with a total of 18 informants of diverse ages and genders. Both group and individual interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol (Lincoln & Guba, 1989) that included questions concerning commuting habits, general disposition toward the ferry, life on the island, views of life on the mainland and on Vancouver Island, and heuristic interpretations of the significance of the ferry for island society. Observation entailed participating in typical ferry-related routines, ranging from waiting at the dock to mingling with others on the vessel to embarking and disembarking.

Participant observation and natural full member participation conducted over a lifetime of residence on Gabriola Island is of course much more difficult to outline. It refers to mundane experiences with the subject matter and with being a socialized member of the very culture one is attempting to analyze. Direct

involvement with the subject matter is not incapacitating; rather, it constitutes the very essence of a reflexive and embodied ethnographic approach (Monaghan, 2006). Complementing the first author's involvement with the local culture is the second author's knowledge of the role played by marine transportation and technology in local regional culture. The differing perspectives of the first and second author originated led to an invaluable dialogue throughout the data analysis process, a process that entailed inductive open and focused coding and analysis of the data in light of the categories emergent from the data themselves, which were constantly compared to categories existing in the literature.

In what follows we report "written up" excerpts from field notes together with embodied reflections—written in the singular first person, denoting the voice of the first author—and our subsequent interpretation, written in the plural "we." Following the research strategy of embodied (Monaghan, 2006) and sensuous ethnography (Stoller, 1989, 1997), we aim to represent ethnographic data through narratives that attempt to capture somatic experience of time and space and the bodily presence of people in dialogue. We clearly separate narrative from analytical considerations in order to preserve the dramaturgical value of the narratives and preserve the embodied, constructionist, and performative character of storytelling. The following narratives are admittedly non-exhaustive and partial (an inevitable outcome of limiting ethnographies to journal-article length) and therefore intended as sketches and partial glances driven by the communicative goal of reflexively constructing culture, rather than that of realistically reporting ethnographic "truth."

Living island time

i) February ferry to Gabriola

Friday, February 18, 2006, 4:39 p.m.: The weather is milder than usual in Nanaimo today: the early afternoon sun is warming up the West Coast winter air, and it looks as if it won't rain for the rest of the day. I arrive at the Nanaimo harbour side of the Gabriola ferry terminal just in time to see the ferry pull away from the dock. Normally I'd be upset with myself for missing the boat by such a narrow margin. But they changed the schedule recently, so it's not my fault. When I used to take the ferry in high school and early college, the ferry left Nanaimo every hour on the half-hour. Not this one, anymore. Oh well, I have some shopping I should do anyway. "I could just walk across the street to the mall to get groceries," I think to myself, "I have fifty minutes to kill."

The Nanaimo harbour ferry terminal is like a poor neighbourhood with a great view. It looks square and flat, almost drowned by the large metal cranes adjacent to it. The lot leads to a small waiting room at the far end near the ferry dock. The harbour hasn't changed for at least 10 years, except for the usual uneventful safety upgrades to the dock itself and the odd paint job when the lane lines fade from the pavement. If it weren't for the large road sign reminding motorists that indeed it is a ferry terminal, you'd think this was a cheap parking lot where car stereos disappear as frequently as cash changes hands. The view makes it all worth it though: Gabriola Island's coniferous trees look almost as if they were hugging the coastline all the way to Cedar, on the right, whereas on the

left Protection Island and its small lighthouse pose as a perfect foreground for the Coast Mountains on the distant mainland.

Groceries in hand, I make my way back, weaving through the tail end of the car line-up at the ferry terminal. I halt at the ticket booth to pay my fare. I look up at the familiar cashier sitting in the booth and smile to greet him. "We haven't seen you in a while," he comments. I don't know his name, but I remember him from countless commutes as a teenager going to secondary school every day. Though he has never lived on the island, he has worked for BC Ferries for over 15 years and knows all the islanders well. It's as if he were an islander himself, or at least a close neighbour.

I slouch on a hard wooden bench in the waiting area for a good 30 minutes, gazing out the window toward the harbour. From the terminal many islanders watch the ferry as it makes most of its trip across, as a way of keeping time. As the ferry berths I reflect on the way it seems to grow larger as it moves closer. It can't be easy to dock that old cumbersome boat at the Nanaimo harbour. The shape of the harbour prevents the *Quinsam* from coasting straight in to dock, slowing as she goes. The dock is close to a 90-degree angle to her path so that she has to turn, then dock. Because of this, she always pulls awkwardly into the dock. And when new people are learning to captain the boat, she usually berths either too quickly or too slowly. Too quickly and she'll hit the floats near the dock with a loud bang. This causes no safety worries but sure must embarrass the poor new captain. Too slow into dock, and passengers start to get antsy. Either way, it's a good show, even if you've seen it countless times before.

When the MV *Quinsam* finally makes it into Nanaimo harbour she first unloads the walk-on passengers and bicycles, then the cars. After all the cars have disembarked, the foot passengers waiting to scramble on board can start their mellow-paced yet driven foot race. I head toward the far lounge on the left-hand side. In fact, I always choose this lounge, and I am not alone in my seating habits. Most islanders choose, if not a lounge, then a preferred side to sit when they walk on the ferry. Some even have a preferred seat. It is one of the unspoken social rules on the ferry. You can meet someone you know while waiting for the boat, engage in conversation, start to board together, but once you get down the ramp, if you usually sit in two different lounges, your conversation will end as you board the ferry and walk your way.

I sprawl my stuff and my tired body on an uncomfortable chair and wake up my laptop to write some notes. Life's been busy in Victoria; it feels like there's never enough time to do everything, so it feels good to bury my nose in the screen and let the white noise of the ferry engine drown out people's voices. People's voices, indeed. Nobody else seems to be having a mute conversation with a laptop. It's as if everybody's chatting with friends. If this were Victoria, everybody would be glued to either their laptop, their cellphone, or both at the same time.

After the 20-minute crossing, the *Quinsam* docks at Descanso Bay on Gabriola Island. We disembark in much the same way we boarded the ferry: first foot passengers, then cars. Once off the ferry, I am standing in the ferry parking lot at the bottom of a large hill. Cars waiting to board the ferry form a long line up the hill and around a corner. I start my trek up the hill, burdened by luggage

and grocery bags. The house where people are gathering for the group interview I scheduled is about a 20-minute walk, first up the hill, then down a dirt road. As I hike up the hill attempting to keep safe to the roadside, ferry traffic zips by. Almost everyone on the island has to go at least part of the way up the big hill on their way home. There are only three main roads on the island, and they all connect to the ferry hill, the only place where you could rush through without looking out of place. After about five minutes, the ferry traffic has died down and I can walk the rest of the way in a silence that is interrupted only by seagulls and my rhythmic panting. Everything is quieter and slower than the place I just came from. There are no street lights or traffic lights. I have a few steps to go, but it feels as if I have long arrived.

ii) On island time

I should be upset to be arriving at the group interview later than I had hoped, but for some reason I am not. After a while waiting for people to arrive, I realize why I wasn't upset to be late. Everyone else is late, at least 45 minutes. And nobody minds; we are on island time.

Every islander has at least one good story about island time. Russ* reminds me of an island favourite: a while ago a couple of small-town crooks tried to steal a cash machine late at night. Unable to steal a speedboat for their getaway, with wine in and wits out they headed for the terminal and waited for the morning ferry. And waited. And waited. Until the police showed up. They just weren't used to island time.

Every islander also seems to have a Rusty McGurr story. "We all have a Rusty story," Mike exclaims. "Yep," Jim adds. "We waited, we waited three months for Rusty to do the drainage around the perimeter of the house. We got a big hole in the ground. We didn't know about Rusty, and everybody around here was like 'Get Rusty, get Rusty to do your thing.' So we got Rusty. Rusty came and so we got this pipe to put around, and we sat for THREE months waiting for Rusty to come back to put in the drainage pipe in around the perimeter of the house..." "A hole around our house," Selma adds. "So we say, 'Let's get it done ourselves, you know, it's been this long now,'" Jim picks up the story again, "let's go to Nanaimo to get the better plastic pipe and put that around the foundation. So we go into town and we buy \$100 worth of plastic pipe, we come back and Rusty's there waiting for us!" Uncontrolled, knowing laughter breaks out in the room. "Oh yes," Jenny remarks, "typical Rusty." "He shows up when you least expect it," Jim says. "He shows up when he shows up," concludes Tom.

The essence of island time is slowing down to appreciate the important things in life. "It may be a little closer to our aboriginal peoples' conception of time," opines Jessica, "which I've experienced particularly at work, and at first it was a shock to me, and I was somewhat, you know, outraged when they said something was gonna happen at five and it happened at eight. Then all of a sudden I realized: 'That's okay.'" Jessica worked for some time on the west coast of Vancouver Island, where, alongside some First Nations men and women, she learned to feel the pace of time in a whole different way. Now she finds that some of those feelings are common amongst Gabriolans: "When you're in a ferry line-up," she explains, "and you just miss the ferry, you know what, you get out your

car pillow, and you get out your magazines, and you sit back..." "And there's nothing you can do about it," interjects Jake, "you need to go with it." "True," Henry adds. "It took us a long time to understand time attitudes when we were in Africa. Then somebody said to us that an African sleeping under a tree is not wasting time, he's making time."

Dan has also learned to "make time." He and his wife are both in their late forties and have lived on Gabriola for the past 15 years. Dan learned to make his own bread back when there was only one small convenience store on the island. Back then bread would only be delivered to the store once a week, so by the end of the week the bread at the convenience store was mouldy and green. But to Dan, island time meant taking the time out of his daily routine to make bread.

As the conversation about island time continues, everybody seems to be particularly interested in Kate's story and perspective. Kate is a 22-year-old woman who fell on tough times a year and a half ago when she was laid off from her previous job. Employment insurance did not leave her enough money to pay the rent, so she ended up living with her mother on Gabriola. Kate only intended to stay at her mother's house for a few months, enough time to find a new job and save up money for a damage deposit on a new apartment. Instead, she ended up living in her mother's house for almost two years. "You have to be careful with island time," Kate warns, "because you can end up spending a lot of time doing nothing without even realizing." Kate was not incapable of getting a new job; she was simply on island time. She wanted a job in Nanaimo, so looking for work meant that the usual résumé preparation and pavement pounding had to be accompanied by a daily 20-minute commute on and off the island. She would start the week with the best of intentions. She would make it into Nanaimo on Monday, but the rest of the week, instead of sticking to her job search schedule she would end up staying on the island, meeting people for coffee or helping her mother in the garden. Before she knew it, her week would be over. For Kate, island time meant being open to the experiences that presented themselves along the way. It meant not being agenda bound but free to go where life led her.

iii) The rhythm of commuting

Commuting is a unique way of *making* island time. Jessica is a long-time regular ferry commuter. "I've been doing this for 23 years," she tells me. "There's, there's two very different types of commute for me. There's the car commute, and there's the walk-on commute, and they're totally different." She goes on: "The car commute starts earlier in the morning... I'm leaving the house a good 45 minutes before the ferry leaves. There's a difference from when I moved here and we left the house one or two minutes before the ferry left. So I do that, and I make sure that I have my work with me. I consider that the time during the wait in the ferry line when I'm in my vehicle is my 'me time.' Then I drive the car on the ferry, and I generally just sit and do work all the way to Nanaimo and that's the car commute. The walk-on is totally different. I'm totally prepared to visit with people. I do bring work with me, but if there's somebody sitting nearby that wants to visit, that's okay. And if nobody's around and I don't feel like doing work, I'll read the bulletin boards. I love the bulletin boards, so I do lots of business on them." "It sounds like between the bulletin boards and gabbing you don't get

much work done when you walk on," I observe. "You're right, and I'm prepared for that," she explains. "There's a bit of a protocol too. When you're sitting on the ferry, the rule is, if you've got your nose in a book, it means you don't want to talk."

"That's totally true," agrees Kate. "Tell me about your commute, Kate," I ask. "I wake up at about 7:00," she tells me. "I don't usually shower in the morning because I need my sleep, but if I do shower in the morning, then I get up at about 6:45. I start off by getting dressed, I wash my face, and put on mascara. Then I go upstairs and by that time Mum has already made tea." She continues: "I grab a cup, add some sugar and cream, and go sit on the bed. Oh, and before I grab tea, I always call my stepdad at 7:00 to ask him for a ride. Around 7:35 I have to finish up, so I go back downstairs, and I take my purse, shoes, and jacket upstairs to wait for my ride. My ride arrives around 7:42 and I leave, yelling 'BYE MUM!' and get in the car. My stepdad drives me down to the ferry, we wait till it's time for me to load, and then I say 'Thanks' and 'See ya later' and board the ferry," Kate concludes with a smile.

Both Jessica and Kate have their routine worked out to the minute, but often the *Quinsam* won't cooperate. Sometimes the ferry is late on the 8:00 a.m. run, or any other run for that matter, due to early heavy traffic, mechanical problems, bad weather, or a million other reasons, like having to rescue stranded boaters along the way. Kate and Jessica tell me they don't sweat the small stuff though. When the ferry is late, you can do more work or more catching up with family and friends. These two are true islanders. Jessica says, "This ferry is a community, a community of commuters!" "Hey, I like that," echoes Kate, "a community of commuters."

"I have a good example of the routine of commuting," Patrice says. "It always seems, inevitably, that when my father comes out here, hum, you know, he doesn't really like the commute to Gabriola, eh? He'll come at a time when there are tons of tourists or something, and we'll have to get him to line up a couple of times because he keeps missing the ferry and it just makes it worse for him, so he doesn't want to come over again, because he doesn't want to go on the ferry. And oh, it just drives him crazy, yeah, any time we're going to go take the ferry, he knows we're going to town. He wants to get there at least a half an hour ahead of time, and you know that this particular ferry isn't gonna fill up until like 10 minutes before, or five minutes before. In fact, Scott and I actually pride ourselves on being the last ones on the boat..." Laughter breaks out. "We can hear it, we can hear it when it pulls up," Scott adds. "There's nothing worse than to be the first person in the car line for the next boat," Jeannie agrees, causing even more laughter. "Or, if you get there too early, you can drive away and get a coffee," Kate remarks. "Yeah," agrees Patrice, trying to contain her laughter, "but if we miss it, we live close enough that we can go home, and have a sandwich, and miss it again, or get back in time." "Once I missed it three times doing that," Jessica exclaims. "Yeah, and it's weird," Scott follows, "it's like a weird feeling, by the third one, you don't care anymore!" Laughter breaks out.

Ferry power, or life within the floating community

The MV *Quinsam* is the only public medium of transportation linking Gabriola

Island to the rest of the world.¹ The ferry, therefore, has a unique position in the reproduction of Gabriola island culture, since it plays a monopolistic role in the regulation of the island's ethnoscaples while at the same time it has to compete with other media such as television, newspapers, or radio over the reproduction of the island's ideoscapes (cf. Appadurai, 1996). Rather than a monopoly of knowledge (Innis, 1951) writ large, the ferry exercises a narrower *ethnoscopic monopoly* over the movement of islanders. The ferry's ethnoscopic monopoly results in making the island a unique symbolic environment with idiosyncratic temporal boundaries. The *Quinsam's* ethnoscopic monopoly manifests itself through at least two types of forces, centrifugal and centripetal forces.

According to Innis (1972), centrifugal and centripetal forces emanating from communication media interact constantly in the constitution of social organization. Whereas centrifugal forces make society more integrated over a given area, centripetal forces encourage the formation of independent peripheral spaces. The MV *Quinsam* exerts both centrifugal and centripetal forces in functioning as a symbolic and material "bottleneck" that all islanders must pass through in order to get on or off the island. The main centrifugal outcome of this portal resides in the formation of shared experience: by virtue of depending on the ferry, individual commuters acquire a sense of collective identity and a common definition of time. On the other hand, the main centripetal effect of the ferry is the formation of a symbolic "gate" (to borrow from the words of one of our informants) "isolating" Gabriola from the rest of the world. From our perspective, therefore, the main logic of the ferry resides in its contribution to the process of "isolating" the island, that is, in making an island (symbolically) out of the sheer geographic insularity of its land mass.

As Altheide (1985) writes, each medium is marked by its own temporal logic. The logic of ferry commuting integrates the Gabriola community by shaping its daily rhythms, both on and off the ferry. In particular, ferry commuting exerts significant force in shaping a sense of symmetry common to islanders. Temporal symmetry, according to Zerubavel (1981, p. 65), "involves synchronizing the activities of different individuals" and thus working as a fundamental principle of social organization. The regular tempo of the ferry schedule informs the lived experience of all islanders as well as anyone else travelling to the island, occasionally or regularly. The ferry timetable, the sounds of the ferry blowing its horn, speeding, slowing, and docking inform the setting of all social experiences that take place on the ferry or on the island. For example, in the first author's particular experience of missing the ferry, the rhythm of the ferry provided her with a way of keeping time while she was waiting for the next ride. When it came time to walk aboard the ferry, then disembark, the ferry's unique pace affected her sense of rhythm for that day and weekend—and this happens to every islander, every day.

Time regulates the structure of social life (Mumford, 1963). Zerubavel (1981) refers to this phenomenon as sociotemporal order. The sociotemporal order of Gabriolans is clearly expressed by the ways people manage their time on and off the ferry. On land, sociotemporal order is most clearly expressed by the structure of feelings (Williams, 1977) we describe as island time. On the ferry,

seemingly inconsequential actions such as reading a book, talking to friends, and consulting bulletin boards reveal and have consequences for sociotemporal order. Much of contemporary urban and suburban commuting is essentially sociofugal, which means it works to discourage human contact (Zerubavel, 1981), and so are many of our media consumption activities (listening to music through headphones, watching television alone, using a laptop, etc.). Interestingly enough, however, riding the *Quinsam* is for most people sociopetal, in that it is experienced through human contact that brings people together” (Zerubavel, 1981) through activities like talk.

Island time is a combination of two phenomena: first, the perceived duration of time is experienced differently on Gabriola, and second, the agreed upon definition of objective or clock time calls for a looser understanding of the meaning of schedules on the island. Island time is a perfect example of a socially shared rhythm that unites those who live by it while separating this same group of people from those who do not. The concept of island time can only be understood as a relative term in an idealized relationship with another symbolic temporal zone. On Gabriola most often this other temporal zone is Nanaimo or perhaps Victoria (the two largest urban centres on Vancouver Island). But interestingly enough, Vancouver Islanders too might use the expression “island time” to refer to “the Big Island’s” disposition toward the pace of life, in contrast to, that in Vancouver or Toronto. The meaning of island time, in sum, is relative and defined only relationally within a semiotic system of oppositions.

Commuting by ferry modifies Gabriolans’ experiences of perceived duration of time and attitudes toward schedules by working as a *tool* for the social definition of the temporal situation. In other words, islanders more or less consciously use the ferry’s characteristics, such as its speed, its schedule, and its monopolistic control over social, territorial, and cultural production as devices to organize the temporal environment on the island. When the ferry that Jessica is trying to catch is late, or when she misses it, she takes her pillow (which is always readily available in the car) and sits back to enjoy the wait. Indeed, Jessica is “wasting” time if we understand time as a limited resource defined by the logic of the monetary economy, but she is “making” time if we define it by the prevalent aesthetic code existent on Gabriola Island. Borrowing from Flaherty (1999, 2002), we could say that Jessica and other islanders in similar situations are doing “time work”: engaging in “agentic practices designed to control or manipulate aspects of temporality” (Flaherty, 2002, p. 387).

Gabrielans’ way of doing time work undoubtedly represents a unique aesthetic disposition toward time in a larger global context shaped by a logic marked by ever-growing instances of “time-space compression” (Harvey, 1989, p. 240). The force of time-space compression is manifested in the formation and almost unquestioned adoption of temporal rules and schedules (Altheide, 1985). But despite the power of the ferry schedule in regulating Gabrielans’ daily life, minute by minute, the social order of Gabriola Island is constantly negotiated by Gabrielans themselves. This means that the ferry does not impose its definition of reality upon islanders. Rather, islanders interact with the ferry and its schedules, pace, and idiosyncratic deviations from the public norm in order to make

their own time. Therefore, missing the *Quinsam* or being on a late ferry changes Gabriola Islanders' definition of the meanings of schedules and objective clock time. In other words, if I assume that the ferry is always late, and it often is, this disposition changes the actual routines of my day and at the same time it makes me more laid back about meeting the ferry schedule and the schedules of activities surrounding it (which, on the island, are inevitably numerous, since everyone depends on it).

Islanders' disposition toward time is typical of what Flaherty (1999) calls "protracted duration," an experience marked by the perception of time as slowly moving. The outcomes of this disposition are numerous. For example, rather than interpreting perpetual tardiness as a negative thing, most islanders view being late as a logical consequence of taking the time to enjoy the important things in life. Moving slow (Honoré, 2004) vs. moving fast results in the juxtaposition of sacred and profane time (cf. Zerubavel, 1981). Island time is sacred. City time is profane, and people that are not on island time are perceived as not taking the time to enjoy the finer things in life. Island time unites islanders as a community, and authentic participation in these unique rhythms (or even just knowledge of them) marks one as a true islander. Coming to the island with the intent of imposing city time on its residents results in castigation and failure. The two characters who tried to steal the ATM obviously had little knowledge of how the island, or island time, worked. This makes these two criminals laughable and their threat to island security negligible due to the strong institutionalization of island time. Island time is never safe, however, because it is continuously and inevitably profaned by the need, at one point or another, to get off the island.

Finally, the importance of the ritual of ferry commuting can be understood by examining the role of dialogue in the constitution of culture and communication. As our narrative displays, many commuters frequently engage in dialogue with friends, family members, or acquaintances on the ferry or while waiting for the ferry. Dialogue serves to establish interpersonal bonds among islanders and functions as the basis for communion and culture. Dialogue also serves to facilitate the emergence of habit and shared value (Carey, 1989; Dewey, 1934; Innis, 2003). Dialogue is of course not only a form of information exchange but also and more importantly a type of ritual-based communication. Carey's (1989) notorious view of communication as ritual is often contrasted with the information-distribution model of communication—or, if you will, the transportation of information from point A to point B. Conceptualizing communication as ritual highlights the sacred-like qualities of the communication process, which draw "persons together in fellowship and commonality" (Carey, 1989, p. 18) and thus constitute the "ambiance of human existence" (p. 24).

Dialogue highlights well the qualities of ritual, but ferry commuting is rich with other ritualistic practices too. Commuting is about the establishment of both individual and collective routines, as Kate's and Jessica's stories reveal. Catching the ferry, and then conquering one's preferred seat on it, followed by engagement with more routine activities (seeing and talking to the same people, reading the bulletin boards, doing work, etc.), become embodied rituals as common in the daily lives of islanders as eating breakfast and showering. Following Carey's per-

spective, we can thus posit ferry commuting as a form of “projection of community ideals and their embodiment in material form” (1989, p. 19), which, much like dance, performance, news stories, speeches, architecture, “creates an artificial though nonetheless real symbolic order that operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process” (1989, p. 19).

Ferry commuting is thus easily understood as a set of common ritualistic practices. As Altheide & Snow (1976, p. 22) have remarked: “In almost every form of communication there is a set of rules (often unstated) that are used to facilitate shared meaning.” On the Gabriola ferry these include the practice of boarding and disembarking the ferry at very specific times each day or week, rules such as reading a book to not socialize, and respecting other people’s claims to preferred seats. Even more idiosyncratic rules emerge around the ritual of ferry commuting, such as showing up at the very last minute or always consuming the same food or beverage on the ferry but nowhere else.

Last boat home

As we have shown throughout this article, the logic of the *Quinsam* resides in its peculiar influence on time on the island. Its slow speed, floating community spirit, and social rhythms both carry and alter the bodies of islanders themselves by becoming part of their culture and by shaping their bodily movement across space and over time. To the residents of Gabriola Island, the *Quinsam* is a security guard, a clock, a floating community hall, and an old friend. The *Quinsam* is a symbol of island life and a part of its lived culture. Its influence can be seen in the social interactions of Gabriola Islanders, their relationship with time, the arrangement of space and development on the island, the ritual of commuting and communication, and the dialectic between islanders and non-islanders. Although the MV *Quinsam* does not directly “cause” the formation of a unique temporal community, Gabriola Island temporal culture is undoubtedly shaped by a set of shared understandings about the power of the *Quinsam* and about what it means to depend on it for bodily movement on and off the island and for the scheduling and pacing of everyday life. Even those islanders who have mixed feelings about living in a small island community—such as the first author of this paper—quickly recognize the uniqueness of the centripetal and centrifugal forces exerted by the *Quinsam*.

James Carey (1989) once wrote that there are no spaces where human influence is truly absent because space is inevitably subject to social definitions. The same could be said about time. By looking at the temporal rhythms of Gabriola Island, we can understand how social definitions of time are shaped by systems of transportation that are, in effect, media of communication. For example, first, the fact that all main roads on Gabriola lead to the ferry shows us the importance of the *Quinsam*, both symbolically and functionally, for the island community. Second, the ferry embodies the uniqueness of Gabriola and the fondness that most Gabriolans have for their place. Third, the ferry itself is a unique place, where deeply meaningful rituals continue to take place, time after time, creating tradition and collective memory. Fourth, the ferry’s pace and schedule inform the

logic of time on the island. As Canadian space and temporal rhythms continue to be colonized, we continue to witness development into previously uninhabited sites. The Gabriola Island ferry and its surrounding community offer a unique understanding of the symbolic processes of definition of time and the role transportation media play in this process.

Note

A very small number of Gabriolans own private boats, and these are generally used infrequently throughout the year and for pleasure only, rather than for commuting.

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* All names changed

