Cultivating alternatives: crafting, sharing and propagating seed-saving practice in the UK

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the faculty of Humanities.

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<td>Alternative Food Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSA</td>
<td>Community Supported Agriculture</td>
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<td>DIY</td>
<td>Do It Yourself</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>GM</td>
<td>Genetically Modified</td>
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<td>GMO</td>
<td>Genetically Modified Organism</td>
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<td>HSL</td>
<td>Heritage Seed Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<td>UPOV</td>
<td>Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants</td>
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Abstract

Cultivating alternatives: crafting, sharing and propagating seed-saving practice in the UK

Laura Pottinger

Thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the faculty of Humanities, September 2015.

Seeds form the fundamental building block for all food systems, yet have been relatively overlooked in research into ethical consumption and alternative food networks. Contemporarily, seed has emerged as a basis around which diverse economic practices might be instigated and performed by ‘seed-savers’ - gardeners who grow their own food, save the seed and exchange it with others. Practitioners claim seed-saving contributes to maintaining biodiversity, resisting corporate control, and generating resilient communities of connected growers. This thesis identifies that sharing, gifting and non-monetary exchanges are prevalent and highly significant dimensions of seed and food self-provisioning, involving complex interpersonal rewards and reciprocities. Existing theorisations of ethical and alternative food systems tend to assume ethical consumption choices are motivated by increasing consumers’ knowledge about conditions of production, and stress the need to reconnect geographically and socially separated consumers and producers. Yet to be fully interrogated are the lived everyday experiences of ‘growing your own’, and how simultaneously productive and consumptive practices of crafting, sharing and exchanging seed and food are made meaningful. Conducting fieldwork in gardens, allotments and seed swap events, this study addresses this gap by examining seed-saving and exchanging practices of growers in the UK. It utilises a practice-centred approach and draws on a mixed-method, multi-sited ethnographic strategy to explore how individuals relate to the seed and food they grow, tend and propagate. By foregrounding seed-savers’ practice, it sketches out the multi-layered, emotional, affective and embodied dimensions of diverse economic exchanges entailed in saving and swapping seed.

The diverse economies performed around seeds are exposed as heterogeneous, at times contradictory and exhibiting a ready co-existence of hand-made and mass-produced. They are thus better understood as located within ordinary practice, and continually reworked and contested through practices of alterity creation rather than existing in distinct communities, spaces or projects. The findings also question models of responsible action as motivated by rational decision making and moral persuasion. Embodied, practical acts of seed-saving allow individuals to align making, creating, growing, cultivating and sharing with environmental and social ideals. These ordinary, interpersonal and joyful aspects of practice are shown to be crucial to developing, reflecting on and performing ethical commitments and dispositions. I argue practices of caring for environments and others might be nurtured, encouraged and advanced by identifying practical, tangible opportunities for action that chime with individuals’ existing enthusiasms and sociabilities.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Laura Pottinger

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Acknowledgements

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I also want to thank all the gardeners and growers who welcomed me into their homes, let me nose around their gardens and shared their time, thoughts, ideas and seeds with me.
Chapter 1
Introduction

In the case of seedsavers and heirloom gardeners... subversion has less to do with narrative and discourse, even events, and more to do with visceral embodiment in sites of memory. These are not the ones found in rarefied memorials or museums, as sites and works of memory are normally understood, but those located in pulsating senses, germinating seeds, and thriving gardens, not to mention steaming kitchens and brimming tables. It is primarily in this warm, tantalizing sphere, rather than inscription in text, that they continue to keep creative options alive and salient. (Nazarea, 2005, p. 45, her emphasis)

Seed is a vital, if overlooked element in the broader landscape of alternative food. Contemporarily, seed has emerged as a basis around which diverse economic practices are instigated and performed by 'seed-savers' - gardeners who grow their own food, save the seed and exchange it with others. Decisions over which foods are 'good' to eat have profound implications. Celebrity chefs, academics, and food activists championing alternative food promote the idea that we can have it all: global problems can be solved through individual acts such as choosing organic salad or boycotting air-freighted asparagus in favour of local, seasonal produce. Eating well can both save the planet, and taste good too. This thesis contributes to theorising how individuals relate to the seed and food they tend, grow and propagate, and it investigates how practices of garden cultivation provide opportunities to participate in and stimulate diverse, non-monetary economies and transactions.

In recent years, numerous ethical consumption initiatives and 'alternative food networks' (AFNs) have emerged in response to an array of perceived problems around social justice, environmental degradation, and animal welfare in so called 'conventional' industrial modes of food production and distribution. AFNs claim to localise food systems, reconnect consumers with producers and redirect corporate control into the hands of local communities (Goodman et al. 2010; Harris 2009; Holloway 2008). Popular examples include fairtrade, community supported agriculture (CSA), and farmers’ markets. A desire to reconnect with cultivation is also evident in the recent resurgence of allotments and ‘growing your own’ in the UK (Platten 2013).
Theorists disagree about the radical political potential of ‘eating for change’ (Johnston and Cairns 2012). Proponents celebrate local veg boxes and fairtrade as new, democratic, and accessible ways of aligning politics with everyday life (Clarke et al. 2007a, 2007b; Micheletti and Follesdal 2007; Barnett et al. 2011), whereas critics note alternatives co-opted by big business keen to exploit new ‘green’ markets, and show AFNs can be elitist, exclusionary and ineffective at tackling social injustice (Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Slocum 2007; Luke 1997). Recent approaches drawing closer attention to consumers’ practices (Welch and Warde 2015) have helped make sense of the heterogeneous, coexisting, often contradictory rationales (McClintock 2014; Mansfield 2007b; Galt et al. 2014; Wilson 2012) that play out in mundane and everyday moments of ‘being political’ (Isin 2002) within a variety of ethical, political or anti-consumption initiatives around food. What has yet to be fully fleshed-out within this body of work, however, is an account of the lived everyday experience of ‘growing your own’ that explores how making, sharing and exchanging seed and food are made meaningful to practitioners.

Paying attention to the relatively under-represented spaces in which food is ‘self-provisioned’ (Smith and Jehlička 2013; Smith et al. 2015) requires taking seriously how individuals become embroiled in relationships of care for plants, seeds, soils, and the products of their labours. Such an orientation helps overcome the problematic production/consumption binary by refusing to treat these as discrete realms, and instead uncovering the multiple attendant practices—planting, tending, harvesting, eating, swapping and so on—which are simultaneously productive and consumptive (Goodman et al. 2010). ‘Swapping’ is a term I draw on to encompass a range of different moments of exchange. It incorporates expectations of reciprocity, and implies bartered rather than monetary transactions. Yet in implying ‘like-for-like’ exchange (Ellen and Platten 2011, p.573), ‘swapping’ is insufficient to fully convey the subtleties of intention within the different exchanges taking place between seed-savers. ‘Sharing’ (Belk 2010) was the word participants used most often to describe their distribution of produce, and as a result at times I use ‘swapping’ interchangeably with ‘sharing’.

Attending to seed-savers’ diverse swapping and sharing practices shifts attention away from atomistic, disembodied and self-interested moments of consumer ‘choice’ that have plagued studies of ethical consumption and have been roundly critiqued (Barnett et al. 2011; Malpass et al. 2007a; Maniates 2001). This research extends theorisations of the extended and shifting ‘social lives’ of commodities (Appadurai 2014; Kopytoff 2014). It
thus responds to calls to ‘identify consumptive subversions and the different meanings which different people assign to particular activities and practices’ (Jayne 2006, p.157) and to ‘follow… things in themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories’ (Appadurai 2014, p.5).

**My interest in seeds**

My interests in these issues were initiated by a long-standing fascination with food, heightened in recent years since acquiring a large, derelict allotment. In fact, I was given the deeds to the plot as a birthday present. This ‘gift’ turned out to be the beginning of a seven year battle with weeds and hard physical labour to clear decades of accumulated rubbish: sheets of broken greenhouse glass, car tyres, milk bottles, ramshackle sheds that had caved in on themselves, and tons of bricks. As the plot was cleared with the help of friends, family members and neighbouring allotment holders, the scale of the site and the responsibility of maintaining this patch of land became clearer. But it was also the start of a sustained captivation with growing. Amid the early years of hard work there were moments of discovery and wonderment – the family of kittens that appeared from the tumbledown shed; a perilous encounter with a deep, hidden well, concealed beneath a tangle of brambles; marbles and Victorian pottery that emerged from the soil like buried treasure. As my gardening skills have improved and the allotment has started to produce crops in volume, I’ve learnt about preserving, have attempted to make wine and have found many creative uses for a glut of courgettes.

Starting to cultivate the allotment was also an introduction into a generous community of gardeners. Others on the site were keen to pass on surplus seedlings and produce, as well as advice and practical help, often wanting nothing in return. This was particularly true of experienced allotment holders who encouraged us to stick with our idiosyncratic plot. Gardening has also become something shared between family and friends. When my dad comes to stay he raids my seed tin, and we talk about our shared ‘vice’ of hoarding and collecting more seeds than we’re ever likely to grow. Comparisons between my allotment and my mum’s garden cultivation, sometimes verging on the competitive, have become a mainstay of our telephone conversations, and the 200 mile journey between her home and mine is usually accompanied by pots of seedlings and cuttings we’ve swapped with one another.
The allotment has also initiated a project of learning as much as possible about the unusual plants I can cultivate in my little corner of South Manchester. I’ve accumulated gardening books, seed catalogues, online resources, and spent winter evenings voraciously consuming the information within, thinking about the weird and wonderful things I might grow in the coming summer months. It was in these searches that I learnt about ‘seed-saving’. Though I’d been given some ‘heirloom’1 climbing bean seeds from an allotment neighbour, seed-saving was something I’d never considered as a discrete set of practices before, and I was excited by the prospect of an organised seed swap and the tantalising possibilities this might offer.

The myriad seed-saving groups, personal blogs and conservation organisations I came across promoted seed-saving as not only a lost art and method by which gardeners might increase their self-sufficiency, but also as a way of maintaining biodiversity and standing up to the corporate control of seed. Particularly notable is The Real Seed Catalogue (2015), a company that sells unusual and heirloom varieties, but encourages customers to save and share their own, by sending out seed-saving instructions with every order. What interested me was that seed-saving seemed to be presented here as a radical break with consumerist practices and a way that gardeners could contribute to a range of environmental and political issues, but also something that sounded like fun. I had vague notions that what I was doing on my allotment was contributing to a ‘sustainable’ lifestyle, but questioned how far my own pleasures and self-indulgences with seeds and plants could really represent a radically different way of doing things.

In response to these questions I became interested in understanding how other gardeners made sense of their ordinary, enjoyable and at times laborious or frustrating gardening activities in relation to wider ideas about contributing something beyond the garden. By looking at the diverse practices of a heterogeneous group of gardeners, this thesis sketches out the multi-layered, emotional, affective and embodied dimensions of the diverse economic practices entailed in saving and swapping seed. This introductory chapter now reviews the treatment of seeds in the academic literature and beyond, before setting out the theoretical underpinnings and contributions of the research. This is followed by an outline of the research questions, and overview of the thesis structure.

---

1 Seeds that have been handed down over generations, often within a geographical region or area.
Seeds in the political landscape

Though seeds form a vital part of all food systems, the production and politics of seed have been overlooked in studies of AFNs and ethical consumption. Seeds are often treated as merely an input into agricultural systems, and less has been said either about seeds as a product, or growers’ understandings of the relationship between food and seed production. Whilst there have been some studies of heritage seed conservation organisations and their members, particularly in North America (e.g. Carolan 2007b; Campbell 2012; Phillips 2013) the majority of academic literature on seed-saving has addressed community seed banks and saving practices in the global South (e.g. Srinivas 2006; Nazarea 2005; Vernooy et al. 2015).

Against a backdrop of increasing corporate control of seed production, which appears to have marginalised home seed-saving in the industrialised global North (Campbell 2012), Phillips (2005) suggests the embodied processes of saving and exchanging seed constitute political acts. In accordance, Nazarea (2005, pp.67-8) describes seed-savers as ‘visionaries in the vernacular’. Unlike to be organised, integrated or politicised in a traditional sense, she argues seed-savers’ ‘ordinariness’ becomes ‘something more deep-seated and trenchant than any intellectual discourse, organized movement, or policy initiative.’ From the perspective of home gardeners and small farmers, arguments for saved seeds include that they are economical and support food security, communities and ecologies (Stickland 2008; Whealy 2011; Ray 2012). Saved seeds are said to gradually adjust to local conditions, to fare better in organic systems than those produced for industrial agriculture and to offer increased choices for growers (Phillips 2008). Significantly, it is argued seed-saving reinforces seeds as communal resources and responsibilities rather than privately owned property (Carolan 2007b; Purdue 2000). As Phillips (2008, p.16) points out, ‘[s]eeds’ abilities to reproduce, and seed-savers’ encouragement of this ability, allow escape from efforts to control and profit from seeds.’ The specific materialities, temporalities and propagative capacities of open-pollinated seeds mean they hold great potential to form the basis of diverse or alternative economies (Deibel 2013; Gibson-Graham 2006; Leyshon et al. 2003) centred on non-monetary exchanges of plant material (Ellen and Platen 2011).

---

2 Non-hybrid/F1 seeds that breed true to type, can be saved relatively easily by growers and are said to increase biodiversity.
The politicisation of seeds has been well documented around issues of biotechnology and biodiversity (Shiva 1993, 2000; Kloppenburg 2004; Kloppenburg and Burrows 1996), commodification, patenting, and plant breeders’ rights (Deibel 2013; Kloppenburg 2004; Phillips 2013) and in relation to the seed regimes of specific countries or regions (Phillips 2008, 2013; Aistara 2014; Demeulenaere 2014; Müller 2014b). Recent contributions have begun to tie individual gardening practices to these wider political issues. Phillips (2013, p.7) for example, provides an ambitious and compelling account linking the neoliberalisation of the Canadian seed industry with what she terms the ‘ethico-political engagement’ inherent within individuals’ practices with seeds. Looking at ‘actually existing tomatoes’ in Latvia, Aistara (2014) considers how cultural memory embedded within seeds comes into conflict with political designations in the EU Common Catalogue, and Demeulenaere’s (2014) account outlines a French farmers’ movement against seed regulation and industrial production. Müller (2014a, 2014b), again in the Canadian context, presents a persuasive argument for attending to ‘the sensorial and emotional connections between humans and plants’ (Müller 2014a, p.3) and to how savers ‘engage with seeds… in a “warm” relation of intimacy and care’ (Müller 2014b, p.40). However, a rich and textured picture of these ‘warm relations’ and ‘emotional connections’ has yet to be fully fleshed-out. There remains more to be said about the relationship between saving and eating, and in unravelling how seed-saving is made meaningful to practitioners by enrolling them into extended exchange relationships formed around garden produce.

In 2011, the international seed market was worth $34,495 million (US), with 75.3% of that market controlled by ten multinationals (ETC Group 2013). It is claimed that consolidation of the seed industry into the hands of a few companies has accelerated the loss of biodiversity (Stickland 2008; Katz 2006), as commercial seed production is geared towards industrial, pesticide dependent and predominantly hybrid varieties, capable of providing supermarkets with uniform vegetables that can withstand extensive transportation. As Deppe (2000, p.xv) suggests, ‘bred into the varieties are the values of their creators – that more is always better, that monocultures are best, and that pollution, biodiversity and sustainability don’t matter.’ Furthermore, the ‘EU Common Seed Catalogue’ effectively criminalises the sale of unregistered seed (Purdue 2000; Kastler 2005). Ironically, these legal restrictions arguably have stimulated the development of diverse economic practices between gardeners. The legalities dictating unregistered seed cannot be sold underpins the non-monetary exchanges taking place in...
contemporary seed swaps, since cash transacted for seeds legally must be framed as ‘donations’.

European seed legislation determines how seed and plant propagative material may be marketed, and is based on the principle of registering and certifying stable varieties exhibiting distinctness and uniformity (Winge 2015; UPOV 2015). Initially intended to protect consumers and to ensure transparency and accountability in the market (Winge 2015; Louwaars 2002), it is argued this legislation has negative consequences for crop diversity, small-scale seed producers and distributors, due to the time and cost implications of testing and registering rare varieties (Purdue 2000). For example, in 2005 it led to the French seed conservation organisation, Association Kokopelli being taken to court for transgressing this legislation and distributing 461 unregistered varieties (Winge 2015).

In 2012, changes to seed legislation were drafted by the European Commission and threatened to further restrict the activities of home savers and small-scale producers. Over the course of 2013, whilst I undertook fieldwork in growing spaces around the UK, these changes became the subject of a series of campaigns and petitions put forward by seed conservation groups, suppliers of heritage seeds and environmental organisations (e.g. Arche Noah 2015; The Real Seed Catalogue 2014; Bifurcated Carrots 2013) which some of my participants knew about or were involved in. A series of amendments were proposed, and the current status of the new legislation remains uncertain (The Real Seed Catalogue 2014). Unpicking and understanding the implications of these recent legislative proposals in Europe could be the subject of an entire research project, and I do not attempt to delve into the thorny issues shaping the wider political structuring of seed production. It is important, nonetheless, to note these discussions, contestations and appeals were taking place whilst my fieldwork was underway. They thus shaped gardeners’ notions, to varying degrees, that their practices with seeds were subversive or politically charged.

Seeds embody millennia of human endeavour and culture, ideas about place, heritage, history and future, and yet they are small, distinct, portable items that can easily be exchanged and used as conduits for human interaction (Ellen and Platten 2011; Ellen and Komáromi 2013). In this research, seeds act as an ‘ethical device’ (Clarke et al. 2008), a locus around which diverse ideas, understandings and values intersect. Saving seed is one element of a wider set of practices around ethical or alternative eating, and seed-savers
are not a homogeneous group acting on a single issue. The meanings attached to seed-savers’ cultivation and exchange practices provide an under-explored terrain within alternative food, and offer great potential to further elucidate ethical eating, diverse economies and ‘commodity activism’ (Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee 2012).

**Theoretical context**

As I have begun to outline, this thesis seeks to better understand how people relate to seed and food they have tended, grown and propagated themselves, and how garden cultivation provides opportunities to participate in and stimulate diverse, non-monetary economies and transactions. The themes of 1) cultivating alternative food; and 2) diverse economic practices inform the theoretical basis of this study. The first of these themes foregrounds the ‘visceral’ relations of growing and preparing food (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010, 2013), and extends existing understandings by bringing seed, and therefore the reproduction of food into focus. As Goodman (2015, p.2) notes, ‘when one studies food, it is impossible to separate out the notions of culture, space, economy, politics, and materiality with which it is so thoroughly imbued’. As such, this thesis contributes to theoretical debates around alternative projects and ethical consumption, but also has wider implications for understanding the multitude of relations that coalesce around practices of food provisioning. Secondly, it builds on theorisations of diverse or alternative economies (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006; Leyshon et al. 2003), the study of which has been strongly influenced by J.K. Gibson-Graham’s call to rethink the economy as a domain of difference. The reification of hegemonic neoliberal discourse in critical academic analyses is claimed to have stifled possibilities for action, and in response, Gibson-Graham’s key influence has been to initiate a project of exposing the multiplicity of already existing diverse economic spaces. By looking at the organised and everyday circulations of garden produce, this thesis extends understandings of how individuals are involved in diverse economic practices with seed and food.

Prompted by these two theoretical interests, the overarching aim of this thesis is to examine the ways in which diverse economies are lived, experienced, maintained and made meaningful by gardeners practicing seed-saving and exchange. The reason seed-savers were identified as a lens through which to explore these interests is twofold. *Doing* seed-saving embodies the repetitive, everyday gardening practices of sowing,
digging, tending and harvesting necessary to grow fruit and vegetables to eat. In this sense, researching with seed-savers provides a window onto the ordinary cultivation of garden produce, of which saving seed for the coming year’s crop is but one element. In contemporary times, however, seed-saving and swapping has been presented as something a little more radical or revolutionary, and as holding the potential to challenge corporate control and support diverse ecologies (Ray 2012; Katz 2006; McKay 2011). Seed is the fundamental building block of all food systems. Though others have looked at food production, self-provisioning and distribution in gardens and allotments (Crouch and Ward 1988; Ellen and Platten 2011; Smith and Jehlička 2013; Smith et al. 2015; Larder 2014; Cameron and Wright 2014), seed-saving offers a unique opportunity to extend existing understandings of diverse economic practices around home-grown food.

Organised seed swapping has been framed as disrupting commercialised seed procurement, widening biodiversity, and galvanising gardeners to act on wider environmental issues around GMOs, biotechnology, organic production, bee decline, food sovereignty and so on (Pautasso et al. 2013; The Real Seed Catalogue 2015). Studies of AFNs and ethical consumption have tended to focus either on self-consciously ethical consumers (Shaw 2007; Papaioikonomou et al. 2012; Szmigin et al. 2009), or more recently, have moved to considering ethical practice within ordinary and everyday consumption (Hall 2011, Adams and Raisborough 2010; Milbourne 2012). What this study does differently is to consider the nexus of everyday gardening activity and more self-conscious ethical rationalisation involved in determining what seed exchange and food provisioning should be, as ordinary exchanges are extended through organised seed swaps. This focus on seeds provides an opportunity to interrogate how the exchange of garden produce (seeds, plants, food crops) is reframed, scaled-up and promoted as a (radically) different way of doing food. It extends the remit of the research beyond everyday cultivation to include the ways seed exchange is practiced amongst large groups of individuals. This allows a simultaneous treatment of the ordinary and more self-consciously alternative encounters with food and seed, in which gardeners more clearly take a stance, attempt to raise awareness and widen the reach of their practices. This opens a space to shed light on the creation, maintenance and negotiation of diverse economies, as well as illuminating the ways ‘activist’ practices are made sense of in relation to the mundane, everyday pleasures and labours of tending a garden.

There are four theoretical strands that underpin this study into seed-saving and exchange, deliberated in further depth in Chapter 2, the ‘Literature Review’. Firstly,
attention to seed-savers’ practice is central to understanding how seed is made meaningful (Phillips 2013; Welch and Warde 2015; Hitchings 2012; Shove and Pantzar 2005). The methodological and analytical approach foregrounds the multi-layered and attendant practices of seed cultivation and exchange, uncovered by practicing seed-saving alongside participants and utilising more-than-discursive methods. I argue this focus on practice helps to draw out what might be lost in more removed, static accounts. This is particularly salient in producing explanations that are sensitive to the multi-layering of meaning, since research on the subject of ethical and alternative food has been accused of reducing consumption to atomised moments of choice in the act of purchase, and failing to recognise consumption as ‘a moment in almost every practice’ (Warde 2005, p.137). By giving consideration to embodied repetitions, sensory encounters and situated knowledges, it also troubles tendencies within some work on ethical consumption to assume ethical action must be motivated by moral persuasion and the provision of information (Barnett et al. 2011).

Secondly, there is a commitment to critically disentangling the ‘alterity’ of alternative food (Fuller et al. 2010). In reviewing the literature and discussing empirical findings, I unpack the implications of seeking out and celebrating ‘alternatives’, including the reification of a presumed mainstream, potential for co-optation and incorporation, and the performance of distinction and exclusion in gardeners’ practice of seed-saving and exchange. The discussion throughout the thesis disentangles the consequences of alterity for thinking and theorising diverse economies and in generating collective, concerted action.

Thirdly, I conceptualise seed and garden produce in terms of materiality and commodity. The centrality of practice dictates interrogation of the (sometimes living) material others that seed-savers work with in growing and tending plants, sorting seed from chaff, or packaging for distribution, for example. Contemplating these practices with materials brings attention to seeds’ ambiguous status, and moments of transgression and assertion of boundaries between seed as commodity and seed as gift. The analysis thus draws on literatures that unpack the different relations of exchange and reciprocity entailed in gifting, sharing and commodity exchange (Belk 2010; Lapavitsas 2004; Chevalier 2014), and considers how the material and temporal qualities of different types of garden produce influence their circulation (Ellen and Komáromi 2013). In particular, I bring insight from writing on craft consumption and production (Campbell 2005; Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011) into conversation with alternative food and garden studies. In
doing so, I highlight embodied and emotional attachments and encounters with materials, crafted collections, and the meaning of *making*.

Fourthly, the research seeks to uncover the emotional, embodied and affective elements of seed-savers’ practice. Considering the interplay and overlap between these dimensions is necessary to illuminate both the verbalised and less easily expressed, ‘irrational’ (Nightingale 2011) enthusiasms and motivations implicated in gardening, self-provisioning and non-monetary exchange of produce. I question how practices with seeds impact on the body, how the body ‘learns to be affected’ (Latour 2004; Hayes-Conroy 2010), and can be utilised as a tool of research (Crang 2003). This theoretical orientation towards bodies holds potential to broaden understandings of how and why certain practices ‘grab’ people (Wetherell 2012, p.2), that go beyond cognitive moral and economic rationalisation. This aspect of the thesis contributes to fleshing-out the lived experience of food production and exchange, its textures and viscosities, tangibilities and temporalities, which I argue are crucial to understanding how entanglements of the felt, the practiced and the thought are bundled together in ‘alternative’ food.

**Research questions**

Given the theoretical and contextual rationales outlined here, the research questions informing the study are as follows:

1: *What do seed-savers do?*

2: *What motivates individual gardeners to swap and save seed?*

3: *How are seeds constructed as a communal resource?*

4: *How do gardeners imagine the impacts of their practices with seeds?*

Question 1 indicates an explanation of the different practices (Warde 2005) particular to seed-saving to build a rich and detailed account of how diverse economies around seed are lived and experienced (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2008). In addressing this question, the research touches on the emotional and embodied labours and skilled repertoires (Price 2015; Hall and Jayne 2015) required in saving seed, and how saving and exchanging practices are dispersed seasonally, spatially, and within social networks. It involves describing the types of spaces (private gardens, semi-private allotments,
community gardens, swap events) where seed-saving takes place, as well as the imagined geographies and spatialities of seed-saving (Castree 2001; Barnett and Land 2007; Silk 2004). In doing so, it identifies the everyday (Hall 2011) and spectacular moments of seed-saving, and interrogates their interrelationship. Furthermore, it extends understandings of the how ideas about ‘alterity’ function in AFNs (Jonas 2010; Holloway et al. 2010), by addressing how seed-saving and swapping sit with relation to ‘mainstream’, capitalist economies. It thus prompts inquiry into the extent to which spaces of seed-saving are distinct and marginal, or overlapping and hybridised with less overtly ‘radical’ forms (Mansfield 2007a, 2007b; Ferguson 2009; Wilson 2012; McClintock 2014).

To address Question 2, the research looks at verbalised, cognitive rationales for seed-saving in relation to emotional, embodied affects. This question probes arguments put forward in favour of seed-saving, such as resisting corporate control, increasing biodiversity, preserving genetic diversity and building the skills of local gardening communities (Pautasso et al. 2013), but also interrogates the observed and experienced sensations, moods and feelings that make seed-saving and exchange practices meaningful (Longhurst et al. 2009; Hayes-Conroy 2010; Carolan 2007a, 2007b). It elaborates on these dimensions in relation to the multi-layered practices of crafting seed (Campbell 2005; Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011), and in refusing to treat production and consumption as distinct realms (Goodman et al. 2010), extends understandings of individuals’ relationships with the self-provisioned outputs of cultivation practices (Thurnell Read 2014; Smith and Jehlička 2013). It therefore considers the interplay between thought/action and practice/discourse (Wetherell 2012), and examines how articulated rationales are either reinforced or contradicted as participants carry out everyday gardening activities. It thus contributes to debates around relationships between information provision, moral action and everyday practice (Barnett et al. 2011). It also touches on the connections made by individuals between their practical encounters in known, bounded, and ‘rooted’ growing spaces, and wider environments or ideas about pressing global issues. In doing so, it expands on the affective dimensions and interrelations of individual and collective action (Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Puig de la Bellacasa 2010).

Question 3 addresses the importance seed-savers place on sharing and swapping, and how non-monetary exchanges relate to rejecting the commodification of seeds (Deibel 2013). Answering this question involves explaining and describing how seed-saving and
exchange fits with notions of diverse/alternative economies (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006, 2008; Leyshon et al. 2003), and identifying where practices with seeds sit outside of or in relation to monetary or commodity transactions (Belk 2010; Chevalier 2014; Campbell 2005; Ulver Sneistrup et al. 2011)). It engages with the ways savers view seeds as common resources and the risks associated with their sale for profit, as well as closely inspecting how reciprocity is negotiated (Belk 2010), how produce is shared, and the ordinary ethics (Hall 2011) in exchanges of plant material (Ellen and Platten 2011). It therefore contributes to existing debates around commodification and the radical potential of AFNs (Wilson 2012; McClintock 2014) by fleshing-out the complex interpersonal dimensions and mutabilities of seeds as their commodity status is negotiated by seed-savers. Building on the discussion of motivations developed in response to Question 2, it further elaborates the roles of ideas and feelings about anti-commodification in stimulating involvement in seed-saving and other forms of moral, social or environmental action.

Question 4 seeks to understand how individuals imagine the impacts of their encounters with seeds, and how such engagements provide opportunities for either enabling or constraining savers’ capacities for action (Carolan 2007a; Hayes-Conroy 2010; Hayden and Buck 2011). It therefore draws out participants’ varied definitions of what is encompassed in 'doing activism' (Bobel 2007) or 'being political' (Isin 2002), by questioning how seed-savers relate their gardening and exchanging practices to wider political, environmental and social struggles. It contributes to questioning whether ethical or political action is limited by its practice in the small, private spaces of back-gardens and allotments, or made significant as discrete practices are connected through diverse relationships of exchange (Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Barnett et al. 2011). Broadly, this question helps to elucidate and thus extends understandings of the ways in which ordinary people creatively (re)make economies and challenge dominant and destructive environmental practices. Taken together, the research questions outlined here shed light on wider concerns over whether effective, purposeful political action must be about struggle and sacrifice. Conversely, the sensorial, emotional and hedonistic aspects of growing, eating and sharing food might be mobilised towards explicitly political or activist ends (Soper 2007).
Chapter overview

The remainder of the thesis is structured into six chapters. Chapter 2, the ‘Literature review’ assesses existing literatures that inform current understandings and perspectives on alternative food and diverse economies. Building on the theoretical underpinnings presented in this introductory chapter, it is divided into three parts. Part 1, ‘Unpacking alterity’, critically disentangles the implications of theorising food and economic practices in terms of ‘alternatives’, and details the seminal contribution of J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) in rethinking the economic. Part 2, ‘Ethical eating’ reviews literature engaging with ethical food consumption, highlighting competing perspectives on the political utility of ‘eating for change’ (Johnston and Cairns 2012), and drawing out different ways of thinking about the ‘reconnection agenda’ (Morris and Kirwan 2010, p.132) prevalent in ethical food initiatives. Part 3, ‘Practices, materialities and visceralities’ outlines prominent theorisations within social and cultural geography that inform the study of everyday (Hall 2011), embodied, emotional and affective (Jayne et al. 2010) dimensions of growing and sharing seed and garden produce.

Chapter 3, the ‘Methodology’ covers the approach drawn upon in empirically researching seed-savers’ lived experiences and practices, and discusses practical and ethical challenges encountered conducting fieldwork. This chapter explains the rationale for utilising a mixed-method, multi-sited ethnographic strategy to generate rich empirical data. It outlines how the ‘field’ of seed-saving and its participants were identified and defined by ‘following’ (Cook 2004, 2006) seeds into diverse and heterogeneous gardening spaces, and unpicks the methodological considerations in conducting multi-sited research (Falzon 2009). It then discusses the theoretical underpinnings and applications of methods drawn upon, and how the collected data was analysed. It concludes by discussing ethical issues and positionality, two areas of key concern given my personal practice of seed-saving and growing, and the fact that conducting fieldwork meant spending time with participants in their everyday lives, often in the (semi) private spaces of the home, garden or allotment.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 detail the empirical findings of the research. Chapter 4, ‘Saving seeds: stories, attachments and responsibilities’ focuses on seed-savers’ ordinary practices in gardens and allotments, and aims to unravel the affective and emotional dimensions of individuals’ attachments to plant material. ‘Saving seed’ is understood as having a dual meaning. Saving refers to keeping seed back for subsequent plantings, but it
also implies a rescuing and caring relation. The chapter begins by unpicking the everyday exchanges between gardeners, and the reciprocities and generosities that ‘sharing’ practices entail. It then looks at stories told about plants, before considering the emotional and embodied labours of saving seed. Finally, it examines how ideas about ownership and emotional attachment are implicated in developing responsibilities and ethical relations of care.

Chapter 5, ‘Swapping seeds: crafting commodities and constructing boundaries’ focuses on plants in their seed form – mobile, exchangeable and arguably, therefore, more easily commodified. This chapter considers how the ‘commodity’ status of seeds is destabilised by savers, firstly in the everyday exchange of garden produce, and then in the more self-consciously ‘alternative’ space of a seed swap event. It begins by attending to discursive and material ‘boundary work’ (Johnston et al. 2011; DuPuis and Gillon 2009) performed by participants as garden produce is configured as ‘priceless’. It then discloses the more consumerist moments of saving money, sourcing, selecting and collecting seed, before outlining how seed swaps are framed and promoted by organisers and volunteers. The chapter ends with a discussion of participants’ concerns over co-optation and commercialisation as seed swaps grow in size and appeal.

Chapter 6, ‘Connecting with seeds’ addresses the wider implications of seed-savers’ relations of nurture and care, and fleshes out the embodied practices of doing seed-saving with human and non-human others. This chapter draws out the sensuous ‘doings’ (Puig de la Bellacasa 2010) that are connected by seed-savers to ideas about effectivity beyond the garden. It begins by detailing the embodied and sensory interactions with environmental others - seeds, plants, soils and so on - that are experienced and accumulated as practitioners learn to save seed. This is followed by a discussion of self-sufficiency and sociability as seed-savers practice together in collectives. This section touches on moments in which individuals assert their alterity from others, expressed in judgements about taste, aesthetics and what constitutes ‘proper’ gardening. Seed-savers’ imaginings of connectivity and the political impact of their gardening practices form the basis of the concluding section.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis, and provides a summary of the key empirical findings and wider implications in relation to the themes of 1) sharing; 2) crafting; 3) seed with feeling; and 4) boundaries and alterity. It argues that theorising the multi-dimensionality of the sharing, swapping, and gifting practices central to seed-saving is crucial to
recognising the prevalence of already existing diverse economic forms, and for identifying how 'care-ful' (Milligan and Wiles 2010, p.737) relations and responsibilities for environments might be nurtured and cultivated further.
Chapter 2

Literature review

I have so far argued that an exploration of the cultivation and exchanging practices of seed-savers holds great potential to shed light on wider questions around ‘eating for change’ (Johnston and Cairns 2012) and diverse economic practices. Before outlining the methodologies and findings of this research project into seed-savers’ self-understandings, this chapter reviews existing literatures that theorise the complex, messy, ‘both/and’ (McClintock 2014) nature of practicing seed and food in ways that ‘subvert or skirt the logics that drive the conventional agrifood system’ (Galt et al. 2014, p.134). The review is divided into three sections, each of which contributes to theorising seed-savers’ meaning-making practices. These are: 1) Unpacking alterity; 2) Ethical eating and 3) Practices, materialities and visceralities.

Often posited as more connected, socially just or ‘green’, numerous products and initiatives have been put forward in recent decades that claim to address a raft of issues relating to the production and provisioning of food. These include, for example, fairtrade (Lyon 2006; Clarke et al. 2007a; Low and Davenport 2007); organic food (Guthman 2008a; Clarke et al. 2008); and CSAs (Hayden and Buck 2012; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). As I will show, these multiple and at times contradictory approaches and initiatives are often theorised in terms of ‘ethical consumption’ (Barnett et al. 2011; Lewis and Potter 2011; Cherrier 2007; Pottinger 2013) or are incorporated under the broad banner of ‘alternative food networks’ (AFNs) (Goodman 2010; Bryant and Goodman 2004; Morris and Kirwan 2011; Harris 2009). These approaches researching food consumption have significant utility in thinking through individuals’ interactions with seeds.

Whilst ethical consumption and AFN literatures intersect, the former has developed understandings of the moral and political dimensions within the motivations and practices of so called ‘ethical consumers’, whilst the latter concentrates on food production differing from ‘conventional’ means of production and distribution. Holloway et al. (2010) note that European academics studying AFNs have tended to emphasise
sustainable rural development, how producers might overcome the harsher impacts of conventional food systems, and the marketing of niche, quality, certified foods. The North American perspective takes up a more radical and transformative political agenda, emphasising the need for more democratic food production and connection between producers and consumers. However, despite forming a vital input to food systems, seeds have been overlooked in both bodies of literature. Additionally, whilst theorists have begun to address the physical, emotional, and affective dimensions of gardening and eating, the situated, embodied practices of growing, sharing and self-provisioning (Smith and Jehlicka 2013; Smith et al. 2015) food and seed are as yet under-explored.

As outlined the introductory chapter, theoretical treatments of alternative or ethical food have been polarised, depicting AFNs as either radical or neoliberal. Furthermore, the progressive intentions in food systems variously referred to as ethical, alternative, ‘subversive and interstitial’ (Galt et al. 2014), or ‘autonomous’ (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010; Wilson 2012), have been evaluated on their relationship with market exchange (e.g. Hinrichs 2000), and the extent to which food is treated as either a commodity or a basic human right (Wilson 2012). As I have argued, the acquisition, propagation, and divestment of seed is intimately related to thoughts and feelings about food. Rather than attempting to determine seed exchange as either a radical alternative to an imagined mainstream or as co-opted by neoliberal market forces, the approach here instead follows Wilson’s (2012, p.3) suggestion ‘we should attune ourselves to the sometimes subtle degrees of emancipation and domination, to evaluate the degree to which food practices embody a transformative food politics’.

Part 1: Unpacking alterity

Gardening practices are beginning to be recognised as an ‘interface between the market and domestic and friendship sub-economies’ (Ellen and Platten 2011, p.567) and as encompassing ‘alternatives to corporate capitalism’ (p.566). This part of the literature review problematises the ‘alternative’ in AFNs, and unpacks the implications of a language and politics of alterity for progressive food practices and diverse, alternative economies developed around seed and plant material. The recognition of such ‘diverse economies’ is central to Gibson-Graham’s (1996, 2006) re-theorisation of the economy.
as a ‘domain of difference’. This work has been ‘paradigmatic’ in human geography and beyond (Kent 2007, p.278), influencing researchers to pursue an agenda outside ‘essentialist’ political economy with an emphasis on exposing previously concealed economic forms. Following a review of the arguments of Gibson-Graham, I then address literatures engaging critically with theories of neoliberalism to argue studies of neoliberal hybrids offer useful insight for the theorisation and research of seed exchange and circulation.

**Troubling ‘the alternative’**

Cameron and Wright (2014, p.4) state that ‘[t]o call a set of practices “alternative” is to presume that there is a mainstream… and to give this perceived mainstream more credence than it deserves’. Fuller et al. (2011) and others (e.g. Holloway et al. 2010) argue detailed engagement with the notion and language of alterity is necessary, since ‘how we talk about and thus know the economy ensures that some economic practices are made real and dominant while others are relegated to subordinate positions or non-existence’ (St Martin et al. 2015, p.19). Fuller et al. (2010) take up this challenge by presenting a range of studies that ‘interrogate’ the concept of alterity and its political utility, and Jonas (2010) identifies an over-reliance in alternative economies literature on dichotomies such as ‘alternative’/‘mainstream’, and ‘global’/‘local’. This is problematic for a number of reasons, including the tendency to equate various binary pairings. For example, scalar attributes are often conferred to the ‘mainstream’ through its elision with the ‘global’, and concomitantly the local is assumed uncritically to be the site of alternatives or resistance (McCarthy 2006a; Born and Purcell 2006).

Attempting to overcome these pitfalls, Jonas (2010, p.9) defines alterity as ‘a way of knowing, representing and narrating the “other” in terms that exist outside one’s own categories,’ in which alternative projects thus do not need to identify ‘capitalism’, ‘neoliberalism’ or ‘the mainstream’ as their ‘other’ in order to exist. This approach stresses a relational rather than binary understanding of alterity, aims to avoid theorising the alternative as some form of ‘other’, and instead recognise alternatives as part of the mainstream (Jonas 2010, p.11, 2013). Theorists have also attempted to further dismantle the binary of alternative/mainstream (Jonas 2010; Fuller and Jonas 2003) by delineating ‘alternative-additional’ institutions, which offer choices that
supplement existing capitalist institutions; ‘alternative-substitutional’ institutions which provide a substitute for previously existing institutions or survival strategies; and ‘alternative-oppositional’ institutions which offer a symbolic rejection of mainstream values and are ‘consciously attempting to be alternative’ (Jonas 2010, p.8).

Others have questioned whether it is possible to avoid thinking in binary terms when using the appellation ‘alternative’, suggesting the word is complicit in prefiguring imagined opposition. Holloway et al.’s (2010) study of consumer participation in AFNs demonstrates a range of different motivations for involvement, and divergence in participants’ understandings of the term ‘alternative’. Some rejected it as exclusionary and elitist, whilst others understood ‘alternative’ to be pejorative, preferring to present their consumption in AFNs as a ‘return’ to a mainstream that had been corrupted by ‘unnatural’ and processed supermarket food. For these consumers, describing their preferred food systems as ‘alternative’ maintained marginalisation, whereas claiming they were part of the mainstream normalised and articulated how food should be provisioned. The authors suggest consumers’ understandings of ‘alternative’ are unlikely to parallel academic definitions, highlighting the complexity and contestation over the term’s meaning.

DuPuis and Gillon (2009) identify a need to address processes of ‘alterity creation’ which allow ‘alternatives’ to preserve their imagined separation from the ‘mainstream’, which is useful in thinking through individuals’ differentiation of saved and commercially purchased seed. The authors discuss organic foods as ‘epistemic objects’ which are created through interactions of a variety of competing discourses and material processes, and they argue the value and legitimacy of organic food must be struggled for and constantly restated. This struggle requires both producers and consumers engage in ‘boundary work’ to draw conceptual distinctions between organic and non-organic food, and entails processes of categorisation in which individuals define identity via exclusion and opposition to others, therefore reinforcing a sense of distinction and group membership (Johnston et al. 2011, p.298). Miele’s (2008, p.135) study shows, for example, that ‘Slow Cities’ (closely linked with the Slow Food movement) work by ‘creat[ing] borders against the spread of the ‘fast life’. Critical of this tendency for AFNs to exclude both people and knowledge, Bryant et al. (2008) question whether creating intentional communities with shared goals towards sustainable consumption simultaneously creates ‘exclusionary spaces’ (Goodman and Bryant 2013).
Various attempts have been made to overcome these issues with ‘alterity’, including proposing different terminology by which to understand progressive food initiatives. Levkoe (2011), for example, focuses on how practitioners and academics might work towards a ‘transformative food politics’, and Wilson (2012) draws on Pickerill and Chatterton’s (2006) notion of ‘autonomous geographies’ in proposing ‘autonomous food spaces’. Staying closer to a conventional/alternative distinction but adding nuance to this discussion of marginality, Galt et al. (2014, p.143) suggest the notion of ‘subversive and interstitial food spaces’ (SIFS) as a way of ‘stitching together counterhegemonic ways of thinking, relating/valuing, managing landscapes, and engaging in consumption/exchange’. Further decentring ‘mainstream’ capitalist economic practices as the central reference point, others have identified and theorised communal spaces and resource management. Eizenberg (2011) considers ‘actually existing commons’ in community gardens in New York, and St. Martin (2009) ‘countermaps’ New England fisheries as part of a project of making visible diverse economic practices. Both examples contribute to showing ‘commons potential as present and capitalism as contingent, fragile, occasionally sparse, and existing within a diverse economic space’ (St. Martin 2009, p.497). Nightingale (2011, p.122) also draws on work in forestry in Nepal to argue that whilst studies of commons tend to look at rational factors relating to resource management, more attention needs to be given to the ‘alternative rationalities that underpin cooperation’, and ‘the emotional and “ir-rational” reasons people cooperate’ (p.119). These insights are significant for thinking about and bringing to light the under-acknowledged emotional, embodied and affective dimensions of seed-saving practice of interest in this study.

The alternative economic geographies literature highlights several critiques of the emphasis on alterity that are important to consider in reference to the political effectivity of alternative food activism. One criticism is that so-called ‘alternatives’ seem to have made little progress in challenging unequal power relations, particularly between the global North and South. Friedberg (2003, p.98) qualifies the optimism surrounding AFNs by suggesting researchers ‘consider how emerging networks, for all their newness, may in fact be laid down in the deep ruts worn by earlier relations of domination and extraction.’ Entrenched power relations are at risk of becoming further embedded (Allen 2010), particularly if alternative initiatives rest on uncritical equations of the ‘local’ with justice, for example. Several writers note AFNs frequently overlook inequalities of access and exclusion along the lines of race and class (Guthman 2008d;
Slocum 2007; Zukin 2008). Furthermore, the lack of longevity in many alternative projects limits their efficacy. As Crewe et al. (2003, p.101) in their discussion alternative retail spaces such as Manchester’s Affleck’s Palace note, the ‘alternative’ is ephemeral: ‘as soon as it’s definable, it’s lost.’

Furthermore, alternatives are vulnerable to co-optation. Tensions exist between activists’ aspirations to incorporate alternative initiatives into the ‘mainstream’ and thereby increase reach, with opposing desires to ‘maintain positions of ontological purity’ (McCarthy 2006a, p.809). Preserving alterity requires that the target of opposition is maintained rather than dismantled. Whilst McCarthy (2006a) suggests activists often choose to stay true to a more ‘radical’ ideological position at the expense of creating substantive change, others offer a more complex explanation. Dixon (2011, p.131), for example suggests ‘groups can simultaneously derive intrinsic rewards and have their efforts absorbed or emulated by mainstream actors, and in this way they influence the mainstream, albeit often briefly.’

A related criticism is that many self-consciously alternative projects incorporate or rely upon elements of the systems they oppose (Etzioni 1998; Dixon 2011). For example, it could be claimed that the practice of ‘gleaning’ (Edwards and Mercer 2007; Wilson 2012), a ‘radical’ alternative food movement which involves procuring waste food from supermarket bins for consumption, is parasitic on a particularly corporate neoliberal model of food distribution. This critique is also echoed in Goodman and Bryant’s (2013) notion of the ‘second hand ethics’ marketed by UK charity shops in which the sweatshop origins of some items are obscured through their resale in ‘alternative’/’ethical’ retail spaces. There is a significant body of research considering the co-optation of alternatives and the ways in which civil society has been put to work towards neoliberal goals (e.g. Bond 2005; Purcell 2009; Eaton 2008; Guthman 2008a, 2008b). Furthermore, several writers have considered the coexistence of alternative consumption practices and neoliberal rationales in alternative spaces such as ‘hired gardens’ (Naylor 2012), ‘heterotopian’ ethical neighbourhoods (Chatzidakis et al. 2012), and alternative urban food retail (Zukin 2007). Eaton’s (2008) study of alternative food in Niagara, for example, discusses how projects that began with the social justice orientation of providing food for low income groups were gradually redirected towards selling ‘quality’ local food products to tourists.
These studies indicate the complexity of describing anti-neoliberal or ‘radical’ food activism, and suggest the search for ‘pure’ alternatives is misguided. All consumption based initiatives are vulnerable to the criticism that they rely on individualised market exchanges of commodities (Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Maniates 2001). As McCarthy (2006a, p.809) states, ‘[f]ew [initiatives] are so alternative that they eschew the circulation of capital in commodity form altogether: rather, they attempt to harness intrinsic dynamics of capitalism to progressive political projects.’ What these discussions hint at, and which I discuss in further depth later in this section, is that attending more closely to the shifting and contested meanings attributed to commodities – in this case, seeds - and their circulation is necessary in order to elucidate the ‘subtle degrees of emancipation and domination’ as alternative food is performed (Wilson 2012, p.3).

Alternatives can also be seen as ‘reformist’ (Lee and Leyshon 2003, pp.196-197), acting to bolster and supplement failing systems or as ‘flanking’ mechanisms (Jessop 2002, p.452) that mollify harsh aspects of neoliberal restructuring and withdrawal of services. Additionally, due to their rejection of a ‘rigorous’ understanding of capitalism or neoliberalism as the starting point for analysis (Fickey 2011), studies into alternative economies have been dismissed as utopian and detached from ‘serious’ political concerns. A core element of Gibson-Graham’s (1996) thesis, as I go on to discuss, is to reframe research agendas away from notions of capitalism as a structure that must first be theorised, in order to allow space for alternatives to be imagined and created. However, as Fickey (2011, p.242) articulates, ‘many mainstream researchers still fail to take seriously economic research not framed within analyses of “globalization”, “neoliberalism” or “capitalism”’. As a result, attention to alternative economic spaces has come to be seen as somewhat utopian and detached from serious political concerns.

Relating to this final critical point, Fickey and Hanrahan (2014) identify a rift at the centre of this scholarship, with researchers polarised along two theoretical lines. The ‘alternative economic practices’ (Fickey and Hanrahan 2014) or ‘political economy’ (Hillebrand and Zademach 2013, p.13) perspective considers ‘alternative economic practices in relation to capitalism’ (e.g. Leyshon et al. 2003; Fuller et al. 2010). The ‘poststructuralist’ (Hillebrand and Zademach 2013) or ‘diverse economies’ (Fickey and Hanrahan 2014) perspective (e.g. St. Martin et al. 2015; Cameron and Wright 2014; St. Martin 2009), on the other hand, is ‘concerned with the recognition and enactment of diverse economies beyond capitalism’ (Hillebrand and Zademach 2013, p.13). In the
former, ‘political economy’ approach, ‘the relationship between alternatives and mainstream is at the heart’ (Hillebrand and Zademach 2013, p.13), with those from the latter ‘postructuralist’ perspective more heavily influenced by Gibson-Graham’s theorisation of the economy as ‘a domain of difference’. This fissure stems from a differing emphasis on alterity and theoretical conceptualisation of ‘economy’. As Mitchell (2008, p.1116) argues, it was only in the twentieth century that ‘the economy’ began to be ‘measured and calculated as though it were a free standing object’. The question of what is an economy thus inhabits a contested terrain (St Martin et al. 2015), and informs the following discussion of Gibson-Graham’s influential work on the subject.

**The arguments of J.K. Gibson-Graham**

J.K. Gibson-Graham is ‘a mini-collective, a decentered author, [and] a fictional subject’ (Gibson-Graham 2008b) comprising two authors, Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham in authorial collaboration. Gibson-Graham (1996) aims to theorise capitalism without assuming its dominance, and consequently to question whether alternative economic sites must always be approached as marginal or experimental. Gibson-Graham’s central contribution is that ‘thinking of capitalism as a spatial frame or a super-organic structure does not bode well for those who wish to pick it apart’ (Aitken et al. 2008, p.145). Rather, ‘the discussion and generation of knowledge about neoliberalism can stymie participants’ hopes for other world and strengthen neoliberal discourse’ (Roelvink 2010, p.111).

Gibson-Graham’s (1996) agenda has two goals. Firstly, her focus on knowledge challenges the discursive parameters constraining understandings and articulations of ‘the economy’. Secondly, she foregrounds action in the here and now. ‘Acting the economy otherwise’ is a key goal achieved both through action research and by adopting a ‘performative’ epistemology. By collapsing the distinction between thought and action (Gibson-Graham 2008a, p.614), re-theorisation of the economy simultaneously becomes a form of activism. Gibson-Graham suggests we turn capitalism on its head and present it as fragmented, partial, and as one constituent among many, and challenges researchers to make visible formerly hidden alternatives in order to develop alternative futures. Numerous scholars have engaged with this project of exposing diverse economic forms, many of which are pertinent to this study of the
intentional alternative economies developed amongst seed-savers. These include CSAs and gardens (Cameron 2015; Cameron and Wright 2014), gathering wild products (Barron 2015), time banking (Werner 2015) and local currency schemes North (2014).

Concerned with the impact of academic discourse on possibilities for action, Gibson-Graham (1996) argued that since the 1970s, social theory had been dominated by Marxist prescriptions that in order to change the world it must first be understood. The flaw in this approach was that it ‘seemed to cement an emerging world in place rather than readying it for transformation’ (Gibson-Graham 2008a, p.614). Gibson-Graham’s (1996, p.260) response was to deconstruct capitalism in order to give ‘the economy’ an ‘identity crisis’ in the same way that ‘society’ or ‘subjectivity’ had been reinvigorated by engagement with poststructuralist theory. Her argument is that a diversity of capitalist and non-capitalist activities, such as gardening ‘sub-economies’ (Ellen and Platten 2011) do exist, but dominant representations of capitalism have rendered non-capitalist alternatives invisible.

Her first task was to deconstruct familiar notions of capitalism and economic determinism, through the technique of ‘ontological reframing’. Gibson-Graham (1996, p.39) draws on overdetermination theory to critique the ‘disproportionate effectivity’ attributed to capitalism. She argues that whilst capitalism is actually one of many specific economic forms, it has become the ‘moral definition’ of the economy, ascribed with characteristics of unity, totality and singularity. This ‘capitalocentrism’ has ‘allowed capitalism to hegemonise both the economic and the social field’ (Gibson-Graham 1996, p.45). The possibility for escaping capitalism thus becomes highly unlikely and unachievable, and attempts at building alternatives appear meagre and ineffectual in comparison. Furthermore, she suggests discourses normalising the hegemony of capitalism prevent us from seeing the multiplicity of economic formations already in existence. The technique of ‘rereading for difference’ draws on queer theory to introduce diversity to the understanding of the economy, and suggests that recognising the plurality of existing economies is a first step towards enacting alternatives.

By making diverse and supposedly ‘marginal’ economic forms visible, such as the sharing, gifting and barter of seed and garden produce in this study, her argument is that ‘noncapitalist construction becomes a ‘realistic’ present activity rather than a ludicrous or utopian goal’ (Gibson-Graham 1996, p.264). Gibson-Graham therefore emphasises the need for a ‘different kind of academic subjectivity’ which recognises the
performativity of knowledge and the constitutive role of the researcher in ‘bringing new worlds into being’ (2008a, p.614). What Leyshon and Lee (2003, p.10) call ‘virtualism’ presents a similar line of thinking. This argument suggests that the image created by theorising ‘neoliberalism’ as something concrete and independently existing becomes projected into reality, and the world is organised around theories that have been made about it. Gibson-Graham (1996, p.262) does not discount the possibility of capitalist hegemony, but rather states that such a notion is only valid if it allows for ‘the full coexistence of non-capitalist economic forms’. The dominance of capitalism can therefore no longer be presumed, but must instead be theorised (p.18).

Gibson-Graham has prompted researchers to remove ‘capitalism’ or ‘neoliberalism’ as a determinant structural force within analyses, which opens possibilities for recognising the existence and potential of alternatives as an explicitly political move. However, Kent (2007, p.279) argues that Gibson-Graham provides an ‘awfully dualist argument’, which fails to ‘illuminat[e] the knife edge path between a ‘reductionist’ pessimism on the one side and an ‘anything goes’ optimism on the other’. Gibson-Graham’s ideas have been accused of being utopian, vulnerable to co-optation and of displaying naivety (Gibson-Graham 2006). Others argue the celebration of marginal economies risks romanticising the local and small scale at the expense of collective forms of action. As Guthman (2008a, p.1181) states with reference to food activism: ‘it is precisely the undue emphasis on creating minor alternative food institutions that has made agro-food politics so anemic at times’. Adding a further qualification, Jonas (2010, p.19) suggests scant attention has been paid to either the state or political space in the alternative economic spaces literature, and Allen (2010, p.305) argues that whilst alternatives ‘[create] opportunities for inclusion, innovation and participation… [a]t the same time, consumer-based local food efforts are difficult to extricate from the dominant political economy and therefore may inadvertently reproduce extant social privileges.’ Whilst Gibson-Graham’s ‘diverse economies’ research agenda is premised on a rejection of ‘capitalism’ or ‘neoliberalism’ as the starting point for research, the study of AFNs might yet benefit from some of the insight produced by theorists of neoliberalism, as I go on to discuss.
Critical neoliberalism

‘Neoliberalism’ is an academic buzzword that has been applied to a ‘bewildering’ array of causes in recent times (Brenner et al. 2010b, p.183; Castree 2006). The underlying philosophy asserts that ‘economic, political, and social relations are best organized through formally free choices of formally free and rational actors’ (Jessop 2002, p.453). Theorists distinguish the macroeconomic doctrine of ‘neoliberalism’ from ‘neoliberalisation’, a regime of practices, policies and real world phenomena related to that doctrine (Ferguson 2009). Work on the subject has drawn attention to the valorisation of ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’ in consumption centred initiatives and has pointed out instances in which AFNs align with neoliberal rationales (Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Eaton 2008; Harris 2009).

Neoliberalisation is understood as a continuously evolving and unfolding process of restructuring relationships between society, markets and the state (Peck and Tickell 2002; Springer 2010) specific to the period following the 1970s (Brenner et al. 2010a, pp.330-332). It has been argued there is no stabilised, ideal form of neoliberalisation. Hybrid by nature, it is always jointly articulated or parasitic on other (often contradictory) social formations, and is therefore always incomplete and context specific (Brenner et al. 2010a, p.331). As Peck et al. (2009, p.104) state, ‘it necessarily operates among its others, in environments of multiplex, heterogeneous, and contradictory governance.’ Peck (2004, p.399) notes that the valorisation of individual choice, notions of state retreat and of markets as natural and spontaneously occurring contribute to the ‘necessitarian, there-is-no-alternative’ nature of neoliberalism which dictate economic politics must defer to the ‘reality’ of market forces. Writers on this subject have noted processes of neoliberalisation in fact involve increased state involvement in ‘rolling back’ Keynesian social welfare institutions and ‘rolling out’ newly constructed modes of governance that extend capitalist accumulation, including privatisation, discourses of individual responsibility and flanking mechanisms (McClintock 2014; Peck and Tickell 2002).

Under what Peck and Tickell (2002) term ‘roll-out’ neoliberalisation, neoliberal policy or logic is co-articulated with social democracy or residual welfare state policy, which have been understood to represent ‘softer’ or ‘more consensual’ forms of transition (Peck 2004). A key concern in the literature has been to uncover whether these ‘hybridised’ forms of ‘roll-out’ neoliberalisation act as a Trojan horse, paving the way for
successive rounds of deeper neoliberalisation, or as a ‘flanking mechanism’ (Jessop 2002) to legitimise and naturalise the neoliberal ‘rules of the game’. In an examination of the South African ‘Basic Income Grant’, Ferguson (2009, p.183) traces the complexity and joint articulation of neoliberal and non-neoliberal discourses. One of his goals is to develop understandings of how neoliberal tactics are appropriated by projects with progressive political aims. Ferguson’s hope is that reflecting on the contradictions in processes of neoliberalisation can engender a nuanced theorisation that goes beyond simply proving that neoliberalism is ‘evil’ and must be opposed. He suggests a greater recognition of policy invention as involving ‘a kind of bricolage, a piecing together of something new out of scavenged parts originally intended for some other purpose’ might allow for the appropriation of neoliberal tactics by projects with progressive political goals.

Following a Polanyian line of inquiry Mansfield (2007b) problematises the question of state/market embeddedness in her exploration of Western Alaskan fisheries quota and demonstrates how neoliberal moves towards privatisation are jointly articulated with socially motivated redistribution. In contrast to the ‘economic essentialism’ of both classical liberalism and Marxism, Karl Polanyi argued against the existence of an autonomous economic realm, and instead elaborated the idea of the ‘always embedded economy’ (Block 2003). The central understanding of his thesis was that unfettered commodification of the self-regulating market would lead to the destruction of society, and it is a ‘natural’ reaction of society to protect itself (Burawoy 2003). Mansfield identifies that whilst the privatisation of natural resources might appear to equate to neoliberalisation, the state also plays a role in providing protection from the market and achieving socio-economic goals. Mansfield’s concludes the program under investigation has been successful in meeting both social justice goals and in increasingly privatising and commodifying resource. This study highlights the importance of moving beyond simply describing the incoherence of neoliberalism, towards analysing how contradictory rationalities can productively coincide in the case of seed-saving. Her suggestion is that the notion of property allows the coexistence of seemingly inconsistent logics, by forging the ideals of obligation and entitlement. Property, therefore, ‘manages to incorporate the idea that independent ownership is simultaneously social interdependence’ (Mansfield 2007b, p.495), a point which has significant implications for analysing seed-savers’ emotional attachments and motivations to acquire, keep and distribute seed.
The studies outlined here go beyond questions of whether so called ‘alternatives’ are either progressive or help to persuade people ‘capitalism is not ‘bad’ after all, it is worthy and capable of reform’ (Bryant et al. 2008, pp.18-19), to consider the coexistence of neoliberal and radical formations. Offering a different interpretation to those claiming neoliberalism is capable of colonising attempts at oppositional activism (e.g. Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Roff 2007), both Ferguson and Mansfield conclude these schemes are successful in meeting both social justice goals and providing marketised solutions. McClintock (2014, pp.148-149) also utilises this approach to consider urban AFNs and suggests researchers and activists must ‘come to terms with urban agriculture’s inherent contradictions’. He finds that ‘urban agriculture, in its many forms, is not radical or neoliberal, but may exemplify both a form of actually existing neoliberalism and a simultaneous radical counter-movement arising in dialectical tension.’ Kingfisher and Maskovsky (2008) also question whether alternative projects might exploit characteristic neoliberal moves, or ‘borrow from the neoliberal bag of tricks’ for their own agendas (Ferguson 2009, p.174). This ‘both’/’and’ mode of theorisation not only ‘demonstrate[s] the futility of essentializing either neoliberalism or resistance to it’ Mansfield (2007a, p.403), but suggests the importance of considering how contradictory rationalities productively coincide in the case of seed-saving and exchange.

This review of literatures engaging critically with theories of neoliberalism and neoliberalisation qualifies some of the ‘naivete’ and wishful thinking of which the ‘Diverse Economies’ scholarship has been accused (Fickey, 2011, p.243; Samers 2005). From more critical perspectives, seed-saving and exchange, like other AFNs might be understood as neoliberalised forms of activism since they are based on individualised consumption and localisation. However, the discussion of hybrids indicates a need to consider how individuals exploit, subvert, and borrow seemingly neoliberal tactics relating to the commodification of seed, for example, and use these tactics strategically in the formation and performance of diverse economies (Barnett et al. 2008; Barnett 2005; Ferguson 2009; Harris 2009). Furthermore, this attempt to unpack alterity demonstrates the fallacy of seeking pure alternative spaces in the interrogation of gardeners’ practices around seed and food self-provisioning. I argue that conceiving the alternative as something ‘other’ and exotic overlooks the coexistence of seemingly contradictory rationales. Missing from existing accounts is an examination of how alterity is understood in individuals’ ordinary conduct around seed and food, and how
such practices usefully recruit alternative and neoliberal modes of exchange. To develop this discussion, I now turn to the moral and political dimensions of eating ethically.

**Part 2: Ethical eating**

As Goodman *et al.* (2010, p.24) note, ‘we continue to hang many of our hopes for a better world on the likes of the “conscious” ethical consumer’. This belief in ‘ethical consumption’ as a force for change assumes decisions made by individuals over what to buy (or not buy) can impact a vast range of concerns including those for ecological sustainability (Eden *et al.* 2008; Seyfang 2007), social justice (Micheletti and Follesdal 2007) or support for specific causes (Hawkins 2011). Ethical consumption is often understood as entailing moralistic persuasion of consumers who are ‘challenged to change their behaviour through the exercise of responsible choice’ (Barnett *et al.* 2011, p.1). As I go on to discuss, however, current approaches in geography and related fields have moved beyond this emphasis on the individuated consumer, to account for the social and infrastructural embeddedness of consumption (Warde 2005; Chappells 2011; Clarke *et al.* 2007b; Barnett *et al.* 2011). The following section introduces conflicting viewpoints on ethical consumption, considering ‘governmentality’ and ‘political consumption’ perspectives in turn. This is followed by an interrogation of the trope of *reconnection* in ethical and alternative food. I then look at possibilities for overcoming the production/consumption binary implicit in much of the literature by drawing on theorists of commodities, gifts and craft consumption.

**The ‘consuming paradox’, governmentality and individualising responsibility**

A diverse and somewhat contradictory range of initiatives fall under the banner of ‘ethical consumption’, ranging from purportedly ‘radical’ forms of ‘anti-consumption’ to those accused of corporate ‘green-wash’ and allowing companies to make spurious claims about their ethical credentials (Littler 2009; Luke 1997). Ethical consumption exists in numerous forms, including boycotting unsustainable, polluting brands or products that cause human and animal harm; ‘buycotting’, or the positive buying of ethical products, (Hoffman and Hutter 2012); participating in alternative networks such as veg box delivery schemes (Clarke *et al.* 2008); or ‘voluntary simplicity’ approaches
(Etzioni 1998; Shaw and Newholm 2002) which aim to reduce overall levels of consumption. Attempting to parse this vast and complex body of literature, Barnett et al. (2005a) delineate the concept of ‘ethics of’ consumption from ‘ethical’ consumption: the former represents a critique of consumerist society, and is exemplified by ‘anti-consumption’ activity, voluntary simplicity and aims at limiting overall consumption; whilst the latter posits consumption as a medium for moral action (through the purchase of fairtrade or certified organic products, for example), and as a set of practices through which everyday ethical negotiations are performed (Hall 2011).

Others foreground the political potential of this second designation by recasting ‘ethical’ as ‘political consumption’ (Micheletti and Follesdal 2007; Micheletti and Stolle 2008; Clarke 2008). From a critical ‘governmentality’ perspective, however, the increasing alignment of political activism with consumption demands reliance on market mechanisms to challenge undesirable practices, and thus acts to reinforce neoliberal norms and individualise responsibility for global problems. This view argues that such initiatives are in fact depoliticising, as attention is deflected from states, corporations and other powerful actors (Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Luke 1997; Maniates 2001).

Echoing Miles’ (1998, p.1007, emphasis in original) ‘consuming paradox’, which identifies consumption as both ‘constraining and enabling’, Goodman et al. (2010b, p.1785) neatly describe this division in the literature:

> On the one hand, consumers are given responsibility in their (neoliberalised) choices as a way to shift blame and let the bad guys off the hook …while on the other, responsibilisation through ethical and politicised consumption choices gives consumers a voice complementary to the democratic process.

Theories of governmentality have been popular in approaching ethical consumption, either through explicit engagement with the perspective and writings of Foucault (Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Dowling 2010; Harris 2009; Rumpala 2011), or through implicit connection with some of its key conceptual tenets and with theories of neoliberal governance (Allen and Guthman 2006; Moraes et al. 2011; Barnett et al. 2011).

It has been argued an important aspect of neoliberal governance is the definition of subjects as self-governing ‘citizen-consumers’ (Dowling 2010). As outlined in the previous discussion of critical neoliberalism, Peck and Tickell (2002) suggest devolution
of responsibility is distinctive of ‘roll-out’ neoliberalisation, meaning consumers are increasingly called upon to effect social change through their purchasing practices. It is argued the rhetoric of individual responsibility and choice is a key technology of self-government (Rose 1999). Rose (1999, p.87) claims people have come to understand their lives ‘not in terms of fate or social status, but in terms of one’s success or failure acquiring the skills and making the choices to actualise oneself’. It is thereby possible to govern not by demanding adherence to prescribed rules in the name of the collective good, but instead through ‘the “responsibleized” and “educated” anxieties and aspirations of individuals and their families’ (Rose 1999, p.88).

Theorists have drawn on governmentality approaches to trace how neoliberal regimes demand and create new subjectivities suited to devolved forms of government within the sphere of consumption. The appeal of bridging governmentality approaches with theories of neoliberal hegemony lies in the perceived ability of the former to locate and explain the formation of abstract political ideologies at the individual or ‘micro’ level. However, some have suggested these theoretical approaches are incommensurable, and have questioned whether the supposed processes of governmentality can effectively be demonstrated (Barnett 2005; Barnett et al. 2008).

Drawing on this approach, Julie Guthman is critical of the increasing prominence of consumption as a political medium. Examining agro-food activism in California, she identifies that the neoliberal rationales of choice, localism, entrepreneurialism and self-improvement are prevalent in AFNs (Guthman 2008a). According to Guthman, the effect of this joint articulation of neoliberal and activist discourse is that seemingly radical AFNs serve as a form of governmentality, acting to valorise market logics, and encouraging people to employ market rationales in their everyday behaviour. Furthermore, the emphasis on consumption influences ‘what passes as politics’ and the types of activism people see as possible (Guthman 2008a, p.1175). Guthman suggests that by reinforcing the idea individual purchases (or decisions to buy less) are the main way to influence change, activist practices centred on consumption shift attention away from collective action that makes demands on states for legislative change.

In a similar vein, Maniates (2001, p.33) has argued attempts to effect change through people’s consumption choices are constraining, because they call for apolitical, non-confrontational and highly individualised solutions. He suggests: ‘[w]hen responsibility for environmental problems is individualized, there is little room to ponder institutions,
the nature and exercise of political power, or ways of collectively changing the
argues most consumer agitation calls for ‘non-political, non-social, noninstitutional
solutions’ and instead advocates an intensely individual, private form of action. Writing
on ‘green’ consumer guide books in the 1990s he described how these manuals ‘urged
readers to forsake a long march toward institutions in favour of a long shopping trip
through the malls to revolutionize modern society.’ Radical ecological activism is
debilitated in favour of ‘fairly tame forms of environmental reformism, or “green
consumerism”’. Luke’s contention is that the depoliticisation of environmental activism
comes from its shift in focus from production to consumption, with blame being
transferred from ‘big business’ to individual consumers. He argues that whilst campaigns
at the level of the individual rarely achieve change in society, what they do achieve is the
creation of new markets for ‘green’ products, as Maniates (2001, p.34) states: ‘“[l]iving
lightly on the plant” and “reducing your environmental impact” becomes, paradoxically,
a consumer-product growth industry’.

As I mentioned in the discussion of alternatives, there exists a tension between
retaining the integrity of ethical consumption initiatives and pursuing increased
participation through the purchase of ethical products. Critics of the corporate
mainstreaming of fairtrade, for example, have argued the sale of fairtrade products in
multinational supermarkets has diluted the network’s transformative potential, by
prioritising the individualistic aspects of consumer choice and side-lining aims at building
solidarity (Low and Davenport 2007). The mainstreaming of what began as a radical
alternative is now firmly positioned ‘in the market’ rather than ‘within and against the
market’. However, this form of ethical consumption is attractive to both consumers and
corporations, as it promotes a view that ‘the individual consumer, making decisions to
buy one product in preference to another, can painlessly and almost effortlessly create
social and political change’ (Low and Davenport 2007, p.336).

As Bondi and Laurie (2005) note, the idea of self-governance holds significant appeal,
and logically is difficult to challenge. They argue that ‘[h]owever much we might contest
the adequacy of this model of subjectivity, every contestation effectively mobilises the
contest ing subject’s claim to be able to think for her- or himself, and therefore the
salience of self-government.’ The question of agency forms the basis for much of the
critique of governmentality approaches and lies at the core of the division between
competing perspectives on the political nature of consumption. As Barnett et al. (2008)
suggest, the emphasis on governmental agency as ‘top down’ and overly strategic has limited conceptualisations of individual agency to that which is reactive or understood as resistance. Such theorisations are accused of playing into outdated discourses of consumers as ‘passive dupes’ (Slater 1997), and of denying the ways individuals create, appropriate and subvert through consumption practice (Eden et al. 2008). Another criticism of governmentality approaches to ethical consumption is that they have failed to demonstrate convincingly precisely how abstract discourses are either reproduced or created at the individual level (Barnett et al. 2008; Harris 2009).

Political consumption

In contrast to governmentality perspectives identifying consumer activism as depoliticising and decollectivising, proponents of ‘political consumption’ stress the participative and collective dimensions of consumer practice (Micheletti and Føllesdal 2007; Clarke 2008). ‘Political consumption’ is presented as ‘a form of political participation that is non-bureaucratic, low threshold, and attractive… to non-traditional groups’ (Clarke 2008, p.1876). An implication of reclassifying ethical consumption as ‘political’ is that it reframes consumption as activity that makes collective claims on states or institutions:

It recognises that political consumption works not only directly through the market but also indirectly through local, national and international regulatory bodies. It changes the question from how many ethical products must be sold before, say, development is achieved, to how many ethical products must be sold before legislators are persuaded to act in such areas as trade or labour conditions. (Clarke 2008, p.1878)

This approach comes into conflict with those writing from neo-Marxist and governmentality perspectives outlined above because it perceives the market as an arena for political representation and promotes individualised consumer action. The suggestion that much ethical consumption entails a weakened form of activism that burdens individuals (Seyfang 2005) is refuted by advocates of political consumption, who argue this type of critical analysis misses out the role of mediating and campaigning organisations that turn individual purchases into collective action, thus enabling everyday consumption to be used ‘as a surface of mobilization for wider, explicitly political aims and agendas’ (Barnett et al. 2011, p.13). As such, ethical consumption conceived in this
way ‘marks an innovation in modes of “being political”’ (Barnett et al. 2011, p.13, citing Isin 2002).

A critical question is whether this formulation of political consumption excludes voluntary simplicity and other anti-consumption activities, such as the non-monetary exchange and self-provisioning of seeds and plant material presented as alternative to ‘the market’ (Barnett et al. 2011, p.14). Voluntary simplicity approaches seek to reduce overall consumption of material goods and to provide a symbolic challenge to consumerist culture by advocating simpler ways of living. Szmigin and Carrigan (2006) distinguish between ethical consumers and voluntary simplifiers as seeking to refine and reduce consumption, respectively. However, it is important to recognise any form of voluntary simplicity ‘is working within the consumer society’ (Szmigin and Carrigan 2006, citing Etzioni 1998) and even the most purportedly radical ‘anti’-consumption or self-sufficient practices are open to accusations of valorising individual choice and responsibility (Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Adams and Hardman 2013). Theorisations seeking to clearly delineate approaches that operate either within or in opposition to markets therefore may be misplaced and oversimplistic.

Barnett et al. (2011, p.14) suggest critical academic analyses have been overly enamoured with more ascetic styles of ethical consumption which are ‘less compromised with markets and the culture of consumerism’. Critiques of market based approaches have, from their point of view, been inflected with a moralism that equates consumption with conspicuous display and excess. Instead they stress that much of consumption, far from being hedonistic is in fact ordinary and routine (Barnett et al. 2011, p.16). Whilst it is difficult to dispute that much consumption deals with the mundane, the political consumption perspective has been read by some as over celebratory (Bryant et al. 2008), in that it fails to account for the material effects of over consumption and the creation of exclusionary spaces (Zukin 2008; Guthman 2008d; Slocum 2006, 2007).

Furthermore, the notion of ‘political consumption’ indicates increasingly blurred boundaries between consumption and citizenship (Thompson 2011). Lockie (2009) argues contemporary food politics has ‘become characterized by a variety of attempts to redefine food consumption as an expression of citizenship that speaks of collective rights and responsibilities’, and Phillips (2005) suggests seed-saving might be understood as a form of ‘green citizenship’. This conflation points towards the analogy of
'consumption as voting' as a method of suturing the individualist nature of consumerism with the collective ideals of citizenship. In Shaw’s (2007, p.143) interviews with ethical consumers, for example, she found participants routinely expressed their participation in ethical consumption activity in terms of ‘voting’. Furthermore, those interviewed felt reducing their overall consumption would limit their power to effect change.

However, a criticism of ‘consumption as voting’ is it sidesteps the fact that not everyone can participate equally in a ‘market-democracy’ which privileges those with more money, resources, or human capital. As Lyon (2006, p.461) articulates: ‘[v]oting with our dollars marks not only the inequalities in the global arena but also those at home: while we all have the same number of votes, we do not all possess the same number of dollars.’ Illustrating this point, some have drawn attention to the ways ‘alternative’ foods are culturally encoded as white and middle class in studies of AFNs in the US (Slocum 2006; Guthman 2008d; Zukin 2008). From a UK perspective, Paddock (2015, p.38) draws on Bourdieu to argue processes of distinction are evident in AFNs, and suggests ‘the form that a farmers market takes might play more comfortably into the cultural repertoire of a more privileged consumer.’ Similarly, Goodman et al. (2010, p.11) note enjoyment of this type of consumption ‘is most often available for those who can afford it and/or for those who can marshal the necessary knowledges to make it meaningful or value-laden.’ A noted shortcoming of the political consumption perspective therefore is the exclusion of those less able to participate, including, for example, producers in the global South. Hughes et al. (2015), however, argue the ethical consumption literature has disproportionately focused on consumers in the global North, and seek to redress this by considering the consumption practices of middle class South Africans.

Another significant issue with the notion of consumption as voting is that it reduces consumers’ complex and ongoing negotiations to moments of individuated choice about which item to buy (Malpass 2007a). As has been noted by various writers (Miller 1998; Barnett et al. 2011) the ethics of consumption often have more to do with familial and social relationships and practices of caring for others. Concentrating on food purchasing decisions alone not only neglects these interpersonal and temporally extended dimensions of consumption, it overlooks the multiple attendant practices of food such as growing, preparing, cooking, sharing, and the ethical negotiations therein. There has been a widespread critique of formulations of ethical consumption that rest on simplistic models of consumer choice, particularly in regard to ideas that behaviour change is motivated by the provision of information (Barnett et al. 2011; Eden et al.
2008; Malpass 2007a). It is to these questions of knowledge, information and reconnection that I turn next.

Production, consumption and connected commodities

Processes of production and consumption have historically been conducted separately in academic analyses, and research has tended to privilege spaces of production over those of consumption (Goodman and DuPuis 2002). A persistent trope in approaches to ethical food is that of ‘reconnection’ (Pottinger 2013). Indeed, Forsell and Lankoski (2015) identify reduced distance between producers and consumers as a core characteristic of AFNs. This perceived need to reconnect is premised on views that socially and environmentally destructive outcomes continue due to the spatial and cognitive distance between producers and consumers (Scales 2014), as consumers are physically and emotionally removed from the impacts of their consumption practices. Both activist and academic analyses share normative assumptions that mobilising ethical consumption necessitates raising consumers’ awareness of the social and environmental issues stemming from consumption choices (Barnett and Land 2007). ‘Knowing where food comes from’ is a central theme in AFNs, whether this knowledge is acquired reading a label in the supermarket, meeting an artisanal producer at a local farmers’ market, or handling the seed that will become your own home-grown vegetables (Eden et al. 2008). Underlying this style of approach is a presumption that knowledge and information provision is key to sustainable or ethical decision making (Barnett et al. 2011), exemplified in the proliferation of food labelling and certification schemes (Scales 2014; Roff 2009). It has also been argued that initiatives postulated as more ‘alternative’ (e.g. CSAs, community gardens, vegetable box schemes) rest on similar ideas that knowledge is increased through proximity and embodied reconnection (Goodman 2010), which further underscores the validity of attending to intimate food encounters in the self-provisioning practices of gardeners and seed-savers.

Such approaches suggest the ‘rational’ choices of consumers are a powerful vehicle for linking individual self-interest with collective concerns, and that providing consumers with information will motivate ‘better’ choices. As Barnett (2010, p.1882) states ‘it is assumed that exposing to view the strictly functional interdependencies into which people are implicated will have some sort of motivating force on them to change their
conduct in suitably “responsible” ways.’ The goal of much research into ethical consumption has therefore been to understand the motivations of consumers in order to promote behaviour change (Rumpala 2011; Clarke 2008). However, Eden et al. (2008, p.1047) suggest simplistic understandings of ‘knowledge provision’ in which information flows straightforwardly from ‘those who know’ to passive recipients is flawed, since it overlooks the ways consumers resist, reinterpret and ignore attempts to influence behaviour, and rests on problematic notions of consumer sovereignty and choice.

From the ‘political consumption’ perspective, earlier critiques opposing ‘individual’ and ‘collective’ action (Luke 1997; Maniates 2001) are over-simplistic, as Cherrier (2007, p.331) stresses: ‘ethical consumption practices… represent the conditions and outcomes of interactions between individual and collective identity’ (also Papaoikonomou et al. 2012; Werkheiser and Noll 2014). Clarke et al. (2008) maintain that ethical consumption creates routes into political participation for ordinary people. In this sense, consumption is one of many activities linked together to form a broad, collective effort. Clarke et al.’s (2008) view is that organisations campaigning on ethical consumption issues should be understood as mobilising consumers, rather than simply providing better information so consumer preferences are expressed more perfectly in the market.

A common feature of AFNs such as farmers’ markets and the ‘grow your own’ movement is an aim to ‘respatialize food systems perceived to have become “placeless”’ and to ‘re-embed food systems in “local” places and communities’ (Harris 2010, pp.355-356). The localisation of food networks is a significant strategy in AFNs, important for enabling discursive opposition to dispersed, global, ‘conventional’ food production, and for providing the site at which experimental, human scale projects can be nurtured (Allen 2010). Underlying celebrations of the local are assumptions that moral action is only possible if consumers are fully aware of the impact of their actions (Harris 2010), and that increasing proximity to production makes consumers more likely to care about the environments and people that produce their food. Local food initiatives provide a geographical ‘knowledge fix’ (Eden et al. 2008), and are appealing because they give the impression that the network spanning production to consumption can be more easily known. A crucial question, however, is how consumers come to act on environmental and social concerns, since as Silk (2000, p.304) indicates:
There is a critical distinction between benevolence, caring about others, and beneficence, or caring for others. In caring about others, we experience a genuine ethical and emotional engagement, wishing to do good. In caring for others, we take the crucial step actively to do good.

Theorists writing on the ‘ethics of care’, particularly in the area of ethical consumption have questioned how caring responsibilities can extend to distant and different others and if ‘caring at a distance’ is possible (Popke 2006; McEwan and Goodman 2010; Milligan and Wiles 2010; Silk 2004, 2000).

Often exhibiting a tendency to champion the local as a site of resistance against global forces (McCarthy 2006a, 2006b), AFNs have been criticised for assuming food systems can be made more just or environmentally sustainable purely by virtue of their localness, and for reproducing over-simplistic binaries between local/global, alternative/mainstream, and good/bad food (Tregear 2011; Born and Purcell 2006), as I touched on in the previous discussion of alterity. Despite a growing body of academic critique of ‘unreflexive localism’ (Harris 2010; DuPuis and Goodman 2005), the binary thinking eliding global/local with bad/good food seems difficult to avoid. Though rationales of localisation underpin a large amount of AFN campaigning and analysis, they are problematic for several reasons. As Allen (2010, p.302) states, ‘[o]ne of the most-cited benefits of local food systems is that of supporting the local community and keeping food dollars close to home.’ However, she argues the problem with this is that ‘geography is not a defensible arbiter of the scope of caring, action or understanding. It is a type of defensive localism where actors consider themselves responsible only for those in their own localities’. Barnett et al. (2005b, p.99) suggest debates around responsible action are frequently understood in terms of an opposition between place and space, in which ‘[p]lace is understood to be the location of clear cut ethical commitments, while space serves as a shorthand for abstract, alienated relations in which distance intervenes to complicate and extend the range of moral duties.’ Space or distance is thus implicitly or explicitly depicted as a barrier to responsibility within ethical consumption narratives. Barnett and Land (2007, p.1073), however, question normative assumptions within moral geography that people are ‘too egotistical and not altruistic enough’ and thus need to be persuaded to care more. Instead they suggest that the reciprocities and generosities of everyday social practices warrant closer attention.
In order to overcome the limitations of oversimplified conceptions and celebrations of ‘the local’, several writers have recommended the AFN literature engages more closely with Massey’s (2004) theory of relational place (Harris 2010; Darling 2009; Malpass et al. 2007b). This demands recognition of the ‘relations which run “into” and “out from” place’ (Darling 2009, p.1938), and helps to explain how “‘the lived reality of our everyday lives’… is in fact pretty much dispersed in its sources and repercussions’ (Massey 2004, p.7). Malpass et al.’s (2007b) study of Bristol’s certification as a Fairtrade City, for example, demonstrates how ideas about ‘place’ can be used to bring the local and global together, as notions of fairness associated with the ‘within’ of Bristol are reframed through its connections to other places. It is suggested that recognising how the local and global are intertwined in ‘a mutually constitutive, imperfect, political process in which the local and the global make each other on an everyday basis’ (Harris 2010, p.364) might contribute to the generation of AFNs that are more sensitive to a ‘diversity receptive localism’ (Harris 2010, p.363; Hinrichs 2003).

Commodities, their social lives (Appadurai 2014), spatialities and circulation, feature strongly in work on ethical and alternative food. Commodities are defined as ‘objects produced for exchange, upon which various social meanings are bestowed’ (Bridge and Smith 2003, p.258) and ‘produced through labor for purposes of trade and profit within markets and fetishized in culture’ (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2013, p.2). They have been drawn upon to provide ‘a window through which to understand the sociocultural construction and regulation of economies’ (Bridge and Smith, 2003, p.258) and to understand ‘how the self comes to be through a continual process of reexperiencing and redescribing the fragmented narratives encoded within objects’ (Crewe 2011, p.44). Several theorists have engaged with the notion of the commodity fetish to explain how AFNs work to overcome consumers’ separation from production in increasingly complex supply chains (Morris and Kirwan 2010; Carrier 2010, Gunderson 2014; Lyon 2006). Commodity fetishism is the process described by Marx through which objects produced for exchange take on their character as commodities. It implies a ‘veil’ (Harvey 1990) is drawn between commodities and the conditions of their production, which allows enchantment to be created. Researchers of AFNs and ethical consumption have revisited the notion of commodity fetishism as pertaining to ‘the general tendency to obscure the people and processes… that are part of creating an object and of bringing it to market’ (Carrier 2010, p.674). This body of work is particularly relevant in
the study of ethical consumption, since as Buller (2010, p.1876) notes, ‘it is the very unseen nature of this modernist displacement that today engenders ethical anxieties’.

Research into the ‘reconnection agenda’ (Morris and Kirwan 2010, p.132) in alternative food has critically evaluated ‘the claim that ethical consumption is supposed to make visible the ways that things get into our lives’ (Carrier 2010, p.686). Theorists have noted attempts by AFNs to ‘thicken connections’ between spaces of consumption and production might in fact ‘entail the creation of new and rival fetishes’ (Morris and Kirwan 2010, p.131), in a process which potentially ‘strengthens the mystification of objects of consumption’ (Carrier 2010, p.686; see also Gunderson 2014). Coles and Crang’s (2011, p.92) illustrative example of the ‘double commodity fetish’, for example, considers the performance of ‘authenticity’ in farmers’ markets, achieved through physical interaction between producer and consumer and geographical knowledge about food provenance. They argue the repackaging of ethical food as ‘reconnected’ is itself a form of fetishisation that fosters certain geographic imaginations about the meaning of ‘good’ consumption, and is thus a ‘creative performance of reconnection’ rather than a simple unveiling.

Morris and Kirwan (2010, p.142) conclude ‘it is all but impossible to completely defetishise any type of commodity, which effectively includes all forms of food produced by one person for eventual consumption by another’ and argue ‘[i]t is essential therefore that we continue to work to understand the way in which fetishes are drawn and re-drawn within AFNs’ (p.143). What has not been fully encountered in the ethical consumption and AFN literature is food that is produced by the person that consumes it. Whilst researchers have begun to look at the reconnection of production and consumption in the act of self-provisioning food, in, for example, CSAs (Hayden and Buck 2012), urban agriculture (e.g. Galt 2014; Eizenberg 2012; Adams and Hardman 2013), foraging (Barron 2015; McLain et al. 2014) and backyard food production (Larder 2014; Smith and Jehlička 2013, Smith et al. 2015; Cameron and Wright 2014), the productive labour entailed in cultivating and consuming food are areas that have yet to be fully developed (Morris and Kirwan 2010). Indeed, the language and spatial imagery of alternative food networks is premised on geographically or socially disparate spaces, practices and individuals that must be reconnected. Whilst existing work on AFNs provides fertile ground for theorising the more ‘networked’ practices of exchanging seeds and connecting with other growers at seed swap events, for example, it
overlooks the situated and emplaced moments of production and consumption occurring simultaneously in the crafting and cultivation of seeds and food.

In order to better understand growers’ understandings and relationships with garden produce, a theoretical approach capable of moving beyond entrenched historical tendencies to separate production and consumption is necessary. Problematising the production/consumption dialectic, Goodman et al. (2010, p.25) suggest that ‘[i]n the ‘moments’ of both production and consumption are their so-called opposites’.

Processes of production entail the consumption of materials, energy and so on, and consumption can be understood as producing identities and politics. This argument chimes with that advanced by theorists of ‘prosumption’, which encapsulates the interrelated process of production and consumption (Comor 2010; Ritzer et al. 2012; Ritzer 2013). They argue it is a mistake to separate production and consumption, proposing instead a continuum (Ritzer 2013), and suggesting ‘the existence of largely separable producers and consumers is, at best, a historical anomaly’ (Ritzer et al. 2012, p.380). Whilst work on ‘prosumption’ offers a theoretical challenge to resist treating consumption and production as distinct spheres in the study of AFNs, the suggestion that everything is prosumption seems to limit the utility of this formulation for unpicking how seed-savers make sense of the different moments of their practice. The flattening of diverse gardening practices under the banner of ‘prosumption’ seems likely, for example, to eclipse the ways gardeners play with the identity of ‘producer’ or diametrically oppose their practices to notions of ‘passive’ consumption.

Perhaps more useful in disentangling the meaning growers attribute to their practices with seeds and home-grown food is Campbell’s (2005) notion of ‘craft consumption’, since the polyvalent notion of craft encapsulates ideas to do with creativity, mutability, embodied skill and repetition, and the interrelationship of consumption and work. Campbell defines craft consumption as practices of self-expression in which the consumer ‘brings skill, knowledge, judgement and passion’ to create something ‘made and designed by the same person’ (Campbell 2005, p.23). As Watson and Shove (2008, p.70) note, what is interesting about Campbell’s formulation is that it is ‘inextricable from mass production’ and draws attention to the ways craft consumers assemble, appropriate and reinterpret industrially produced commodities. This notion of ‘craft’, which melds ideas of the authentically handmade with the customisation and transmutation of commodities has significant purchase for thinking about how participants in this study make their own seeds. Rather than reifying the separation of
production and consumption, conceptualising seeds in terms of craft and the associated activities of tending, growing, collecting and harvesting offers an effective means to capture the variety and texture of food’s productive and consumptive attendant practices.

There has been a recent interest in geography in craft and the affective and emotional dimensions of ‘making’ (Price 2015), with researchers addressing diverse crafting practices from dressmaking (Hall and Jayne 2015) to micro-brewery (Thurnell Read 2014) and surfing (Warren and Gibson 2014). Insight from this research sheds further light on how the embodied and emotional practices of creating, cultivating and exchanging food and seed inform gardeners’ relationships with both the things they produce, and with wider environments and socialities. As Thurnell Read (2014, p.46) notes, craftwork has been positioned as ‘a possible antidote to some of the alienating features of work in modern capitalist societies’ and as ‘oppositional to the anonymity of disembodied mass-production’, and Hackney (2013, p.169) examines how crafting can be a medium for a ‘socially engaged’ and ‘quiet activism’. Ulver-Sneistrup et al. (2011, p.233) draw more directly from Campbell’s (2005) notion of ‘craft consumption’ to argue ‘consumption is work, and when done right it is work to be proud of.’ They examine how ‘everyday’ Scandinavian consumers legitimise the ‘bad’ consumption of branded, industrial products through the work of consumption, by addressing the emotional and physical labour of preparing a meal:

What matters is how much one will work with one’s consumption, and no matter how simple the work, one must love it. This work is then characterized by romantic craftsmanship myths such as ‘the true love’ invested, the handmade, the sacred of the organically emerged, the joy of the natural being, and the absence of touch by evil (industrial) hands. (Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011, p.233)

The authors also suggest the very notion of being ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ of the market is misplaced, though a tendency in many analyses of ethical consumption and AFNs, particularly those attending to ‘anti-consumption’ practices (Portwood Stacer 2012; Kozinets 2002). Ulver-Sneistrup et al. (2011, p.221) argue that although the marketplace is ‘ubiquitous’, it forms the basis for ‘localized resistance’ through processes of appropriation and reworking ‘mainstream’ commodities and consumption practices.

Rather than seeking out distinct and exotic spaces of ‘alternative economies’, what this indicates is that diverse economic practices (sharing, gifting, bartering and so on) within
the ordinary and mundane require closer inspection, alongside the processes alterity creation and distinction that are performed in relation to crafted products. As Kopytoff (2014) has noted, commodities or things acquire ‘eventful biographies’ through their exchange. Sharing is often under-acknowledged as a form of everyday non-monetary exchange, yet it is central to gardening practice, evident in the mutual support between allotment holders and diverse wildlife co-habiting growing spaces, as well as the circulation of seeds, young plants, produce, tools and labour amongst gardening friends and family (Smith and Jehlička 2013; Smith et al. 2015; Ellen and Platten 2011; Platten 2013).

Belk’s (2010) definition of sharing stresses it is a fundamental, if overlooked social behaviour which creates and strengthens bonds between people, and differs from commodity exchange and gift giving since there are no reciprocal expectations. Gregory (1982, p.12) distinguishes commodities from gifts in terms of alienability and reciprocal independence, in that whilst commodity exchange depends on ‘exchange of alienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal independence’, gifting entails ‘exchange of inalienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal dependence’. Whilst Belk (2010) attempts to disentangle the reciprocal expectations entailed within gifting, sharing, and commodity exchange, in practice there is frequently a slippage between these different forms, since the ‘characteristics of a commodity are mutable and its meanings ambivalent’ (Bridge and Smith 2003, p.261).

The diametrical opposition of gifts and commodities, often elided with market/non-market distinctions has received sustained critique (Mauss 1990; Lapavitsas 2004; Chevalier 2014). Commodities have come to represent economic rationality, self-interest and individualism, with gifts associated with generosity, morality and collective sociality. These categorisation are perhaps more permeable and dynamic than their opposition suggests, however. Chevalier (2014, p.56), for example, looks at how ‘individuals, rather than being swamped by the alienating experience of mass consumption, try to “appropriate” their domestic material environment by making it their own personal space’. She addresses the mutability between commodity and gift by considering how mass-produced items are appropriated by consumers and receivers of presents. Furthermore, Lapavitsas (2004) contends that non-market relations both arise from and are mobilised by capitalist commodities.
Bringing discussions around craft and (de)commodification into conversation with those relating to diverse economic practices and alternative food opens fruitful avenues for explaining the self-understandings of seed-savers. Furthermore, it offers a unique opportunity to explore how the ‘romantic craftsmanship myths’ Ulver-Sneistrup et al. (2011, p.233) allude to are aligned with more explicitly politicised discourses of commodification of the commons. As Deibel (2013) points out, questions of who owns seeds are contested and difficult to establish, and seeds’ propagative capacities ‘allow escape from efforts to control and profit’ (Phillips 2008, p.16). Coupled with the threats of enclosure associated with patenting plant genetic material, for example, questions of whether seeds are or are not commodities are laden with both significance and ambiguity (Bridge and Smith 2003).

This discussion has outlined critiques of approaches viewing ethical consumers as rationally and economically motivated, and acting in response to the provision of information (Barnett et al. 2011). I also exposed disagreements in the literature around the political potential of consumption activity for effecting change. Wilson (2012) suggests the radical nature of food projects be evaluated in terms of whether food is conceptualised as a commodity by practitioners. However, building on the discussions around alterity in Part 1 of this review, I brought together debates within ethical consumption and scholarship on crafted commodities to highlight the need to attend to ambiguity and hybridity in exchange relations. I argue the status of commodities is far from fixed, but is open to contestation, manipulation, and appropriation. This study develops understandings of this ambiguity by taking an approach sensitive to the subtlety and shifting meaning attached to living and non-living material things in seed and food self-provisioning practice. The following section therefore outlines literatures informing the approach taken to disentangle the emotional, affective and embodied ordinary dimensions of seed and food cultivation and exchange that go beyond rational economic choice.

Part 3: Practices, materialities, and visceralities

Having discussed ethical consumption and alternative food, what now require further investigation are existing approaches that help to theorise how individuals understand and make meaningful their gardening and crafting practices. In order to better explain
how cultivating, tending, sharing, and swapping construct and inform the ways people feel about seeds, this final section of the literature review considers perspectives on the embodied, emotional and affective elements of practice, and their roles in stimulating awareness, motivation, and political participation. This section therefore contributes to locating the entry point of investigation in this thesis. It begins by considering theorists who have looked at everyday, mundane and material practices. I then look at recent scholarship around emotional and affective geographies, highlighting influential work bracketed under the ‘non-representational’ and debates and critiques surrounding this theoretical orientation. Finally, I address embodiment, highlighting studies that have foregrounded the sensory, tactile, haptic and visceral.

**Everyday practices**

Recent approaches within geography and related fields have moved away from emphasising information provision and behaviour change towards an understanding of consumption as embedded in social relationships, with attention to practices and routines as constitutive of rather than dependent on behaviour (Warde 2005; Welch and Warde 2015; Clarke et al. 2007b; Barnett et al. 2011; Goodman 2015). Under this approach, the ‘routine, collective and conventional nature’ (Warde 2005, p.131) of consumption is amplified. Rather than viewing individual behaviour as influenced by orchestrated attempts at moulding subjectivity, or valorising rational individual ‘choice’, attention is paid to the way desires emanate from everyday practices:

The analytic focus shifts from the insatiable wants of the human animal to the instituted conventions of collective culture, from personal expression to social competence, from mildly constrained choice to disciplined participation. From this angle the concept of “the consumer”, a figure who has bewitched political and social scientists as well as economists, evaporates. Instead the key focal points become the organization of the practice and the moments of consumption enjoined. (Warde 2005, p.146)

Practices here are understood as consisting of both ‘doings and sayings’ (Warde 2005, p.134) and as ‘an organized, and recognizable, socially shared bundle of activities that involves the integration of a complex array of components: material, embodied, ideational and affective’ (Welch and Warde 2015, p.85). Attention to practice marks a departure from recognising agency in individualised purchasing choices made when
shopping, to addressing how ethical consumption is embedded and embodied in ordinary, everyday social activity.

This practice-led approach has been particularly influential in the field of sustainable consumption. Shove and Walker (2010, p.471), for example, look at the examples of showering and congestion charging in London to consider ‘how variously sustainable practices come into existence, how they disappear and how interventions of different forms may be implicated in these dynamics.’ Similarly, Sahakian and Wilhite (2014) and Chappells et al. (2014) draw on an approach grounded in everyday practices to consider how food and outdoor domestic water consumption (respectively) might be shifted towards more sustainable resource use by attending to habits, dispositions and embodied knowledges acquired over time.

A contribution of practice-centred approaches particularly pertinent to this study of seed and food provisioning is that rather than viewing ‘consumption’ as a discrete social practice it is better conceived as ‘a moment in almost every practice’ (Warde 2005, p.137; Welch and Warde 2015). Relatedly, some theorists have moved away from considering ‘spectacular’ consumption practices and have engaged instead in the ordinary, mundane and everyday moments and spaces of consumption (Hall 2011; Adams and Raisborough 2010; Binnie et al. 2007a). Adams and Raisborough (2010, p.259) note previous studies have tended to focus on ‘self-identified “ethical consumers”’ with the result that ‘“ethical consumption” risks being regarded as a given object’. Advancing the notion of the ‘ethical everyday’, Hall (2011) concurs that the ethical decisions made by individuals within mundane consumption activity have been side-lined within studies of ethical consumption, and instead she suggests ordinary consumption be recognised as ‘an ethically-embedded process’ (p.635). This implies that everyday practices can be ‘inherently ethical in nature’ and are no less noteworthy than ‘other more fetishized and fashionable consumption processes… assumed under the title of “ethical consumption”’ (p.629).

Relatively, Smith and Jehlička (2013, p.155) draw attention to what they term ‘quiet sustainability’, which encompasses diverse economic exchanges and ‘everyday practices that have low environmental impacts, but that have not been pursued for that reason’. Whilst approaches to the everyday and under-the-radar negotiations of ethics and sustainability inform this study of seed-saving and exchange, as outlined in the introductory chapter, also of interest are the ways individuals connect ordinary activity
around food to more self-consciously activist practices and ideas. Askins (2014, 2015) articulates a similar sentiment to Smith and Jehlička (2013) in her work with befriending schemes connecting local residents with refugees and asylum seekers. She proposes a ‘quiet politics’ is enacted in the interdependencies and emotionalities inherent within ‘an unassuming praxis of engaging with others, in which new social relations are built in/through everyday places, relationally connected across a range of geographies’ (Askins 2014, p.354). Here, however, she foregrounds the political dimensions of the ‘more-than implicit actions being taken’ by participants, arguing ‘[t]hese relationships are explicit, there is a political will to engagement that requires commitment’ (Askins 2015, p.476, her emphasis).

Wilbur’s (2013, p.149) study seeks to locate the transformative potential of the everyday practices of ‘back-to-the-landers’ or ‘neo-farmers’, individuals who have migrated to the countryside in pursuit of an agrarian lifestyle. He suggests radical political orientations and potentialities are not only identifiable in spectacular or formally organised modes of ‘ethical consumption’ but need to be traced within day-to-day subsistence practices. Accordingly he argues an approach sensitive to material interactions and the ‘affective qualities of everyday cultivation practices’ is necessary (p.155). Shove and Pantzar (2005, p.44) also highlight material dimensions, suggesting that ‘what is involved in consuming and using things in practice’ has been under-theorised. Watson and Shove (2008, p.70) suggest analyses have tended to focus on the acquisition of consumer goods rather than how they are used, and redress this lapse through an interrogation of DIY home improvement practices and competencies. Engaging with Campbell’s (2005) notion of ‘craft consumption’, they elucidate ‘how the hardware of material culture figures in the doings, as well as in the displays, of social life’. Shifting consumer research away from purchasing choices and towards practices thus emerges as a cogent orientation for pursuing individuals’ emotional, embodied, and affective relationships with things and the socialities they support.

### Materialities and temporalities

It has been argued that in the last decade there has been a ‘turn’ to the material in cultural geography (Kirsch 2012) as theorists of consumption in particular have brought into view the ways ‘[o]ur relations to our things are sensory, bodily, evocative, and
profound’, and furthermore, how ‘[t]hings come to matter through our interactions with them’ (Crewe 2011, p.45). The work of anthropologist Daniel Miller (1987, 1998, 2010) has been highly influential in approaching the social relations made meaningful through consumption practices and relationships with material things. Kirsch (2012, p.435) draws on Whatmore (2006) to depict materialities as ‘things, living and dead, woven in complex ways into the fabric of human and social being’, and argues their study entails an emphasis on ‘relational conceptions of nature, objects, people, and spatialities’. Though the question of ‘matter’ has been framed by some as an absence in previous work, Anderson and Tolia-Kelly (2004) suggest that rather than a new engagement between culture and matter, it is the way the two have engaged that is revised in more recent research. Whatmore (2006, p.602) similarly couches this reengagement in terms of ‘returns’ to questions of the material, and argues ‘this return to the livingness of the world shifts the register of materiality from the indifferent stuff of a world ‘out there’, articulated through notions of ‘land’, ‘nature’ or ‘environment’, to the intimate fabric of corporeality that includes and redistributes the ‘in here’ of human being’. Such approaches, which she terms ‘more-than-human’, stress the blurring of boundaries between self and other, human body and environment, and prioritise practice and affect over discourse and meaning. However, as I go on to discuss, the strict separation of affect and discourse put forward in some iterations of this work risks reifying another set of polarisations between mind and body (Wetherell 2012).

Approaches theorising the ‘more-than-human’, particularly those drawing on Actor Network Theory and which entail a more radical relational materialism have influenced the study of human-plant interactions (Head and Aitchison 2008; Hitchings 2003; Hitchings and Jones 2004), garden studies (Taylor and Lovell 2014; Head and Muir 2006; Power 2005), permaculture (Puig de la Bellacasa 2010), alternative food (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010, 2013) and waste (Law and Mol 2008). Thinking derived from this broad body of approaches has significant utility in foregrounding the agency and ‘vibrancy’ (Bennet 2010) of both living and non-living materials, and in decentring human agency (Power 2005). A central concern of my research, however, is to understand how seeds and their attendant activities of growing, saving and exchanging are made meaningful to practitioners, and to foreground individuals’ self-understandings of their practices with plants and seeds. In ‘thinking through the relation between people and things’ (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly 2004, p.671; Miller 1987), it therefore draws more heavily on theories of the ‘social lives’ of commodities (Appadurai 2014; Kopytoff 2014),
and the imperative to ‘follow the things in themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories’ (Appadurai 2014, p.5).

Numerous researchers have attempted to elucidate the ‘eventful biography’ (Kopytoff 2014, p.90) of things in the sphere of food networks and beyond. Ian Cook’s (2004, 2006) prominent study of papaya supply chains draws on methodologies premised on ‘following the thing’ in order to explicate the complex and geographically dispersed relations in the circulation of commodities (also Friedberg 2004; Pfaff 2010). However, this body of research has been criticised for prioritising corporate flows of commodities to Western consumers and for focusing predominantly on products that are ‘successfully stabilised’, thus essentialising the objects under investigation (Gregson et al 2010, p.848). There is a danger in ‘following’ commodities, therefore, in neglecting their mutability (Bridge and Smith 2003) and overlooking the ‘vast range of intermediary things that are consumed in production and circulation’ (Gregson et al 2010, p.848) including the emotional attachments and labours performed in objects’ (re)production and appropriation.

Sensitive applications of this approach include Clarke et al.’s (2008) study following an organic vegetable delivery scheme, which outlines the veg box as an ‘ethical device’ that enables consumers to engage with the ethics of organic food. The authors suggest the ‘graspable’ materiality of alternative food and its packaging is imbued with significance for consumers, and reveals more about individual motivations towards ethical consumption than grander discourses of ‘sustainability’, for example. Within a different space of consumption Gregson and Beale’s (2004, p.690) study follows the circulation of clothing between women, depicting the wardrobe ‘not just as a repository and container of meaning, but as pivotally positioned in the practices of clothing consumption’ which include ‘practices of tidying, storage, divestment and displacement’. As Anderson and Tolia-Kelly (2004, p.671) state, Gregson and Beale’s account achieves a ‘subtle description that avoids postulating dynamism as a condition of matter “in-itself”, or the actions of categorically separate meaning making humans, but rather the rhythm and routine of practical actions.’

Difficult to disentangle from the materiality of seeds, food and their circulation are questions of temporality. Much scholarship at the intersection of food, materiality, corporeality and sensoriality centres on Slow Food and the related Slow Cities (Cittaslow) agenda (Pink 2007). Premised on cultivating conscious consumption and an
appreciation of ‘slowness’ in opposition to the spread of the ‘fast life’ (Miele 2008, p.135; Mayer and Knox 2006), studies of Slow Food draw attention to the imaginations and configurations of food that purportedly operates through different temporal registers to the conventional, standardised and globalised fare epitomised in ‘fast’ convenience food. Southerton (2012, p.342) questions ‘[w]hether temporalities configure practices or practices effectively shape… temporal experiences’. Significantly, drawing on Shove et al. (2012) he suggests time and practice are experienced together, and that ‘the passing of time, tempos, repetition, recollection of past times and anticipation or imaginations of the future are mediated by the practices through which that time is experienced.’

Considering the dimension of time is significant in the study of seed and food practices, not least in terms of the temporal rhythms of seasonality (Palang et al. 2005); but also memory and futurity (Nazarea 2005). The durations of transportation and preparation of food have implications for freshness (Friedberg 2009), and self-provisioning practices often depend on having free leisure time to spend on cultivation (Potter and Westall 2013). Abrahamsson (2014, p.288) suggests:

> food has a kind of speed that is particular to its situation: food can be grown and harvested; it can be cut, canned, and frozen; it can decompose and decay; it can be wolfed down or savoured slowly; and it can be ingested, digested, and metabolized at different speeds in relation to an eating body.

Notable in work focusing on Slow Food and pertinent to seed-savers’ understandings of the seasonal, time consuming and deliberate activities entailed in saving seed, is that different temporalities have come to be associated with value judgements relating to ‘good’ or ‘bad’ consumption practices and what constitutes a sustainable lifestyle.

Originating in Italy in a symbolic rejection of ‘fast food’ culture, the Slow Food movement seeks to conserve local and traditional foods through a programme of education, taste refinement and the championing of artisanal food producers. Prioritising sensory experience, Slow Food’s main tool for increasing social awareness is ‘the enhancement of an “aesthetic disposition”’ (Sassatelli and Davolio 2010, p.222) in which the unhurried capacities of savouring, appreciating, and conscious consumption are cultivated and valorised. Acknowledging that pleasure has rarely been a tool deployed by activists on the left, Sassatelli and Davolio (2010) question the alternative politics of consumption pursued by Slow Food and the implications of basing politics on pleasure.
Although the emphasis on ‘taste’ leaves Slow Food vulnerable to critiques around self-interest and reciprocity, following Soper (2007), the authors suggest that food activism need not be characterised by ‘asceticism and renunciation’ (Sassatelli and Davolio 2010, p.203). However, whilst keen not to dismiss the role of the ‘sensory dimension’ in galvanising support, they argue Slow Food is limited by its emphasis on taste refinement and aesthetics. In accordance, Hayes-Conroy (2010, p.740) expresses similar concerns around whether Slow Food might be ‘creating scenarios in which some bodily articulations of the world are seen as “true statements” while others are seen as wrong’.

This work on Slow Food has been particularly expedient in theorising the viscerality of food consumption and appreciation (Hayes-Conroy 2010) and for foregrounding the senses in studies of how individuals both create and relate to environments (Pink 2007, 2009). Slow Food is, however, a highly organised and arguably ‘spectacular’ form of ethical consumption, somewhat distanced from everyday and ordinary ethical activities around food, a point borne out by the associations with distinction, taste refinement and class highlighted here. The insight into material, temporal and corporeal dimensions of practices derived from these studies into organised food initiatives, could, however, be brought to bear on more mundane practices of saving seed, tending plants, eating and exchanging and their emotional and ‘affective qualities’ (Wilbur 2013, p.155).

**Locating emotion and affect**

Writing on the banal and mundane, Binnie et al. (2007b, p.517) draw on non-representational theories to ‘attend to the ways in which we “get by”’. They suggest this body of literature has troubled emphases on the discursive and representational within cultural geography in recent years, and that it foregrounds ‘the sheer complexity and extraordinariness of the ordinary’, enabling recognition of the ways in which ‘the skills we employ in the everyday making of space and place are full of affective forces and improvisatory resources’. This possibility of uncovering the ‘extraordinariness of the ordinary’ is significant for researching seed-savers’ everyday gardening practices and how they are made sense of in relation to organised seed-saving collectives and more overtly politicised rationales. It is thus necessary to draw closer attention to how geographies of affect and emotion have been conceptualised; points of disagreement in
various theoretical approaches; and potentialities for operationalisation in this research.
In response to previous discussions critiquing conceptualisations of the sovereign, rational consumer, I argue it is necessary to examine seed-savers’ ‘ir-rational’ motivations (Nightingale 2011). This requires looking beyond economic and political rationales toward the role of reciprocity, empathy and affect, and the ways ‘mind and body, reason and passion, intellect and feeling are employed together’ (Singh 2013, p.2).

In Roelvink’s (2010, p.112) study of the World Social Forum she suggests that ‘[a]s a politics, affect can create feelings of possibility in the context of hegemonic ideology and hopelessness’. Drawing on Latour’s (2004) notion of ‘learning to be affected’, she examines ‘how affect might be operationalised in a politics of affirmation that aims to generate economic possibility.’ In another particularly salient case, Thompson and Coskuner-Bali’s (2007, p.294) discussion of CSAs questions how feelings of ‘enchantment’ are produced in what superficially appears an expensive and restricted mode of food consumption. They found that through physical immersion in soil, spaces of production and networks of sharing:

the banes of consumer society – inconvenience, variance in quality and constrained variety – acquire a beatific aura, symbolizing societal transformation, consumer emancipation from corporate influence, revitalizing connections with nature and opportunities for enchanting experiences of surprise and wonderment.

Attending to affect and emotion, variously understood, holds potential to develop understandings of how the (extra)ordinary practices, emotional attachments and investments in seed-saving and exchange are informed and stimulated beyond rational economic choice, as well as the methodological implications of this orientation.

Geographical work in this area has furthered understandings of ‘how embodied emotions and affect are intricately connected to specific contexts and practices’ (Jayne et al. 2010, p.540). According to Pile (2010), there exists a rift between those interested in emotional geographies and those concerned with non-representational theories of affect. Though both attend to emotion and affect, these are theorised as at times intertwined and overlapping (e.g. Wetherell 2012; Jayne et al. 2010), and elsewhere as distinct and discrete (e.g. Anderson 2006b; McCormack 2003, 2005). Whilst both emotional and affective geographies share relational ontologies, privilege intimacy and ethnographic methodology, and are interested in flows between people and things, they differ in their treatment of the relationship between affect and emotion (Pile 2010).
Emotional geographies (e.g. Bondi et al. 2005; Davidson and Milligan 2004; Jones 2005) are interested in how emotions impact ‘the way we sense the substance of our past, present and future’ (Bondi et al. 2005, p.1). They are said to ‘tak[e] seriously… people’s expressed emotional experiences, and treat their accounts as open, honest and genuine (Pile 2010, p.8)’. Emotions here are understood as ‘a form of connective tissue that links experiential geographies of the human psyche and physique with(in) broader social geographies of place’ (Davidson and Milligan 2004, p.542). Whilst these approaches have contributed to increased understandings of ‘the body [as] a site of feeling and experience’ (Pile 2010, p.11), the relational understanding of emotions in much of this work stresses they are conceived as ‘flows, fluxes or currents, in between people and places rather than ‘things’ or ‘objects’ to be studied or measured’ (Bondi et al. p.3). Yet Ahmed (2004, p.11) notes that as well as being about movement, emotions are ‘also about attachments or about what connects us to this or that’. This has particularly utility for thinking through individuals’ connections with things, such as seeds and places, and the practices through which attachments are performed. Jones (2005) for example, in an account depicting memories of a childhood landscape, depicts the spatiality of memory and its interrelationship with attachments to place, and Harris et al. (2013, p.358) consider the role of emotions in homeowners’ lawn management practices, suggesting emotion is ‘enacted and reproduced through… mowing, gardening, pruning or fertilising, and in social interactions in and around the yard’.

However, Pile (2010, p.8) also notes emotional geographies have been strongly criticised by writers from the perspective of non-representational theories of affect for ‘assuming the nature of emotions; objectifying emotions by naming them; presenting superficial accounts’ and being ‘mesmerised by expressed accounts of emotional life’. Key distinctions between these bodies of thought revolve around questions of ‘representability’ (Jayne et al. 2010). Non-representational approaches (e.g. Anderson 2006b, 2012; Lorimer 2008; McCormack 2003) have challenged geographers to ‘look beyond what people say they do, to get to grips with what they actually do’ (Burrell 2014, p.1), and stress that ‘[p]ower and the political are not only about what we say, know and represent… but also emerge from the felt, embodied, and ontological’ (Cameron 2012). With writers often drawing on the philosophical writing of Deleuze, Spinoza and Massumi (Wetherell 2012), such approaches ‘insist… on the necessity of not prioritizing representations as the primary epistemological vehicles through which knowledge is extracted from the world’ and in their treatment of affect ‘valorise…
those processes that operate before… conscious, reflective thought’ (McCormack, 2005, p.122).

Though definitions vary, those writing from the broad orientation of non-representational theory have defined affects as ‘properties, competencies, modalities, energies, attunements, arrangements and intensities of differing texture, temporality, velocity and spatiality that act on bodies, are produced through bodies and transmitted by bodies’ (Lorimer 2008). Affect has been distinguished as ‘what potentially overflows’, and as distinct from ‘what is captured (emotion)’ (Curti et al. 2011, p.592). Pile (2010) stresses the conceptual distinction between emotional geographies and non-representational theories rests on the relationship between thought and affect.

Whereas affect is understood in emotional geography as psychological in nature, ‘a thought of some kind, even if it is an unconscious one’ (p.12), from the non-representational perspective affect is ‘beyond cognition… always interpersonal… [and] moreover, inexpressible’ (p.8), and is ‘never an object of consciousness, nor is it even unconscious or an unthought thought’ (p.12). However, though non-representational theories may have prompted closer attention to both the body and the ‘the imperceptibles elided by representation’ (Hayden and Buck 2011, p.2), some have suggested the tendency to partition the representational and affective has overlooked significant contributions of feminist theorists, and thus ‘serve… to reinforce several pernicious dualisms: specifically those of body/mind and nature/culture, but also personal/political’ (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013, p.83).

In terms of operationalising non-representational theories of affect, Pile (2010, p.12) is particularly critical of what he sees as a central contradiction, arguing that despite the outward suspicion of discursive representation in this work ‘it cannot help but represent and represent affect… in language’. This has significant implications for conducting and communicating research (Laurier and Philo 2006), as Wetherell (2012, p.67) notes rather pointedly ‘fieldwork reaches an impasse when it formulates its object as unspeakable’. Whilst writers from this broad body of work have experimented with innovative methodologies and styles of relaying their findings, Burrell (2014, p.2) notes ‘the impossibility of disseminating findings from these works without again resorting to text and “representation” in the write-up’.

Wetherell’s (2012, p.4) understanding of affect as ‘embodied meaning-making’ is useful here for approaching individuals’ self-understandings of their seed-saving practice.
Rather than relegating the discursive, a more integrated conceptualisation is outlined in her notion of ‘affective-discursive loops’ (p.15) and ‘affective practices’ (p.125). According to Wetherell (2012, p.125), studies of affective practices pay close attention to ‘the individual as a very particular and specific site of transformation and pattern making’ and seek to understand ‘the personal and affective history of the individual… their repetitions and continuities, and the ways in which their present practice intertwines with their past practice.’ In response to suggestions promulgated in some veins of non-representational theory that discourse is ‘taming’ and ‘codifying’, she instead stresses the individual as a location in which ‘multiple sources of activation and information about body states, situations, past experiences, linguistic forms, flowering thoughts etc. become woven together’ (p.22). Rather than distinctly separating affect from consciousness and therefore representation, this provides a route through which to ascertain the ‘subtle, relational back-and-forth shuttling and interweaving going on at all levels of the body/brain/mind’ (p.50).

Though non-representational theorists have asserted dominant discursive methods in social science such as interviews ‘happen after the fact’ and thus ‘can only ever provide an unsatisfactorily washed out account of what previously took place’ (Hitchings 2012, p.61, citing Thrift and Dewsbury 2000), Wetherell (2012, pp.19-20) suggests such claims that rest on attempts to ‘pull apart’ discourse and affect are wrongheaded. Similarly, in Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy’s (2010, p.1280) work on the ‘visceral’ geographies of food they draw instead on Lorimer’s (2005) notion of the ‘more-than-representational’ in which ‘the discursive, meaning-making activities of daily life are not separate from sensuous, material life’. Others agree on this interrelationship, including Roelvink (2010) and Hitchings (2012, p.61, my emphasis) who contends ‘people can talk about their practices’, and Jayne et al. (2010) who uphold the utility of in-depth interviews for researching affect and emotion. Burrell (2014) states that in fact ‘people can talk very accessibly about their relationship with things’ and argues interviews remain an important method in research interested in understanding the perspective of the interviewee.

In addition to critiques around questions of representing the unrepresentable (Pile 2010; Wetherell 2012), there have also been accusations of a ‘masculinist, technocratic and distancing’ tenor in non-representational work (Thien 2005, p.452; Bondi 2005) as affect is seemingly pitted against ‘domesticated emotion’ (Wetherell 2012, p.61). Others suggest that such critiques rest on a selective caricature of the literature (Anderson and
Harrison 2006) that artificially separates and thus ‘omits work at the middle ground of conceptualising emotions, embodiment and affect’ (Jayne et al. 2010). A remaining question, significant to this study of seed-savers is raised by Popke (2008, p.84) who addresses the impact of the turn to affect and embodiment on the theorisation of ethics. He asks whether ‘the immanent ethics on offer perhaps emphasizes individual encounters and experiences at the expense of a more extensive vision of collective responsibility’. Thinking about practices, emotions and affect implies paying attention to bodies, in terms of their capacities, and the human and material others with which they come into contact. With these questions and critiques in mind, the final section of this review now turns to the matter of bodies, sensoriality and viscerality.

**Sensorial, embodied and visceral geographies**

Gardening, seed-saving, eating and growing are necessarily embodied practices. As I have argued, existing literatures have yet to fully explore the interrelationship between the feelings and embodied repetitions involved in making seeds. Work on craft contributes to understanding seed-savers’ ‘embodied meaning-making’ (Wetherell 2012, p.4) by attuning to how bodies interact with materials, tools and equipment, and the spaces in which craftwork is practiced. Price (2015, p.85) for example, outlines knitting as a skilled practice requiring rhythmic, repetitive movements conducted at a ‘leisurely and meditative… pace’ in tandem with materials, that can offer the feeling of ‘flow experience’. Hall and Jayne (2015) also note the engagements with specific materials and time consuming, repetitive movements and skills drawn upon by dressmaking practitioners. These material dimensions impact on the spaces and sociabilities through which this particular craft is performed, hinting at the relationship between materialities and emotional, interpersonal dimensions of craft practices. Thurnell Read’s (2014, p.53) research into microbreweries finds the tangible, embodied and sensory dimensions of creating craft beer are important aspects of brewer identity, performed and experienced in both working with ingredients and equipment, and in appreciation of the final product. He therefore argues: ‘any strict dichotomy between physical and mental labour misses the complexity of work which is evidently animated by the richness of a range of cognitive, embodied and sensory features’.
In a different vein, Jones' (2012) discussion of commuter cycling reflects on the crosscutting dimensions of embodiment, affect and emotion within practices challenging what he describes as a regulated ‘sensescape’. Though ostensibly a mundane, everyday activity, Jones shows how cycling provides marginal ‘spaces of sensory indiscipline’ (p.647, his emphasis) in which individuals perform minor forms of resistance to the sensory management he argues characterises contemporary Western society. This has implications for understanding the diverse and ‘alternative’ hedonic (Soper 2007) dimensions of gardening and seed-saving, such as handling plants and soil, encountering pests and manure, or eating in unsanitised spaces, for example. Turner’s (2011, p.520) study foregrounds these earthy and embodied dimensions of community gardening, finding ‘[c]onnections to broader environmental concerns relating to issues such as food miles, climate change, and water security are often informed by the intimacy of the individual’s relationship to the soil in their plot in these communal places.’ She suggests such ‘intimate’, ‘micro-level’ bodily engagements in garden places hold significant potential for long-lasting and deep commitments to sustainable environmental practices.

Tilley (2006) shows the overlapping senses of sight, smell, taste, sound and touch are fundamental to practitioners’ emotional experiences of gardening. Yet several writers suggest there has been a dominance of the visual, particularly in Western thought, and that this pertains to a particular ‘distal’ rather than ‘proximal’ way of knowing, as Paterson (2009, p.16) notes: ‘[t]he historical emphasis on sight and the optic solidifies perceptual ‘self’ / ‘other’ boundaries between ‘my’ body and others based on visual feedback and clearly identifiable visual representations’. Writing on ‘occularcentricity’ in treatments of the senses, Jones (2012) suggests it is only the visual which is capable of operating quickly enough to deal with the ever faster movement of the contemporary world, which parallels earlier discussions on the Slow Food movement around the alignment of slowness and sensory appreciation. Paterson (2009, p.14) notes the sense of touch, fundamental to the manual embodied engagement required in saving seeds, has been under-theorised in ethnographic research. He draws attention to the ‘haptic’ experiences and internal bodily sensations which become patterned and habituated into ‘sedimented bodily dispositions’. A notable exception is Hetherington’s (2003, p.1933) examination of visually impaired people’s experiences of museums, which depicts how touch constitutes place ‘at the interface between the materiality of that world and the hand’.
Also in contrast with Cartesian epistemologies privileging ‘seeing’ and in which consciousness is distinct from an external material world, Carolan (2007a, p.1264) suggests engagements in what he terms ‘tactile space’, which do not necessarily privilege the visual, blur these boundaries (also Hayden and Buck 2011). Carolan’s point is that embodied encounters in such spaces facilitate an interchange of representational and non-representational knowledges, which ‘decent[res]… the subject/objective dichotomy’. Like Turner (2011), he claims this ‘helps to instil within individuals a greater sense of the relationality with others’, the impact of which is long-lasting behavioural change and deep commitment to the environment. A caution is noted, however, by Hayden and Buck (2011, p.9) in their study of volunteering experiences in CSAs. They suggest ‘[I]mmersion in tactile space sometimes produces negative rather than positive affect, leading potentially to withdrawal from interconnected understandings and an undoing of environmental ethics in the face of hostile nature.’

Aligned with approaches considering the haptic and the tactile, the visceral food approach put forward by Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2010, 2013) draws on the work of Probyn (2000) and Longhurst et al.’s (2009, p.334) understanding of the visceral as pertaining to ‘sensations, moods and ways of being that emerge from our sensory engagement with… material and discursive environments’. As Goodman (2015, p.3) indicates, an emphasis on the visceral connotes recourse to our ‘gut’ feelings about food. This work has been formulated predominantly with reference to Slow Food, and broadly accentuates materialities, scepticism of boundaries and dualisms, and a reconception of the relationship between self and other (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013). In contrast to the stricter division between thought and affect outlined in the previous discussion of non-representational theories, Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy draw on Carolan’s (2008, p.408) argument that ‘[w]e think, and thus socially construct with our bodies’. In doing so, the authors conceptualise the ‘minded-body’ (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013, p.82) to question how ‘we can begin to recognize and utilize the body as an instrument of progressive political projects’ (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010, p.1277).

The approaches discussed here emphasise embodied learning as part of a transformative project around food and seed (also Carolan 2007a; Hayden and Buck 2011; Cameron et al. 2011). As Hayes-Conroy (2010, p.735) indicates, mobilising political potentiality requires understanding how feelings ‘activate or deactivate behaviours related to… food activism’ and how ‘cognition and taste merge ‘somewhere’ inside the body to create…
lived eco-preferences of food’ (p.739). Like Cameron et al. (2011), Hayes-Conroy (2010) draws on Latour’s (2004) notion of ‘learning to be affected’ to understand how to better motivate change, and which depicts bodies as becoming more ‘articulate’ as they sense and are affected by different things, both material and social. In contrast to strategies aimed at changing behaviours by providing information, as outlined in earlier discussions, the relational understanding of the body here ‘complicates the notion of individual choice or behaviour’ (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010, p.1278). Instead stressed are ‘embodied forms of learning where people are doing, walking, chatting, moving, tasting, sensing with each other and with nonhuman others, and potentially registering the world in more articulate and more sensitive ways’ (Cameron et al. 2011, p.505).

A further caution is sounded by Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2013, p.82), however, who note projects ‘conceived as a sort of education of the senses’, particularly those drawing on discourses of ‘naturalness’ might imply there are right and wrong ways of feeling about food, or that individuals were not using their senses ‘properly’ prior to engagement with seemingly more enlightened food educators (also Guthman 2008c; Pudup 2008). Accounts of authenticity arising in narratives about seed-saving must therefore be qualified by attention to potentially problematic associations with performances of taste and distinction (Paddock 2015; Jordan 2007). Furthermore, tensions emerge between the more radical relationality implied by research in this vein, and the focus on individual bodies, interior states and sensations. Though the project of dismantling boundaries might entail ‘[s]omething of the experience of mingling, of collapsing self and other, interiority and exteriority, making the distanced more proximate (and vice versa)’ (Paterson 2009, p.14), Goodman (2015) questions whether scrutinising the corporeal dimensions of makers of seed and eaters of food might in fact place further onus on the ‘responsibilisation’ of bodies (Colls and Evans 2008).

Chapter conclusion

This chapter examined several bodies of work theorising ethical, alternative food and diverse economies in order to identify existing debates and avenues for exploration in this research into seed-saving. In ‘Unpacking alterity’, I identified how this research contributes to Gibson-Graham’s (1996, 2006) project of bringing diverse existing
economic spaces into view. Though an interest in how ‘alternative’ and diverse economies are experienced and maintained around seed underpins my research, I argued seeking out pure alternative spaces may be misguided. To further understandings in this area it is crucial, therefore, to attend to the ambiguity and hybridity of diverse economic forms. Conceiving diverse economies as something ‘other’ and exotic overlooks the coexistence of the radical and neoliberal in the messy practices of alternative food (McClintock 2014). Missing from existing accounts is a thorough examination of how alterity is understood in individuals’ ordinary conduct around seed, plants and food and how such practices usefully recruit alternative and more neoliberal modes of exchange. I suggest tracing the elusive and at times contradictory meanings in ordinary activity is therefore necessary and requires attention to practice.

The discussion of ‘Ethical eating’ highlights a tendency to separate production and consumption prevalent in studies of food. I argue theorisations of ‘craft consumption’ (Campbell 2005) and (anti)commodification could extend understandings by explaining how individuals relate to the living and non-living others encountered in seed and food provisioning practices. Though it has been suggested explicitly (Wilson 2012) and implicitly (e.g. Guthman 2008a, 2008b) that the radical nature of food projects be evaluated in terms of the commodity status of the food on offer, I demonstrated that the status of commodities is far from fixed, but is open to contestation, manipulation, and appropriation. There is therefore a prevailing need to attend to the ambiguity and hybridity of seed exchanges and circulations.

The discussion of food’s viscerality builds on claims that ethical action is better enabled through embodied immersion in ‘tactile’ spaces with seed, plants and food, and that sensorial encounters entail dissolution of boundaries between self and other. This notion of blurred boundaries and relationality implies a radical rethinking of individualisation debates identified in some strands of the ethical consumption literature, which point to the depoliticising effect of reifying individual consumer choice (Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Maniates 2001). However, as I noted in the final discussion, practices of distinction and othering are likely to remain, evident in expressions of taste and distinction (Paddock 2015; Jordan 2007), for example. This thesis therefore disentangles practices of alterity in everyday seed and food cultivation in order to better understand the ambiguity and complexity which I suggest are important to trace.
Highlighted by the focus on practice is the need to consider the 'ir-rational' (Nightingale 2011) - emotional, embodied, affective and *more-than*-cognitive - aspects of seed-saving and how they shape and are shaped by practical activity and ideas about doing food differently. By foregrounding these dimensions, this thesis contributes to existing arguments that ethical eating and consumption is motivated less by the provision of information, and more by engaging with everyday ethical negotiations, ordinary activities and the things people are passionate about. In order to understand how meaning is constructed in relation to materialities, and how *things* acquire significance and ‘feeling’, attention must be paid to what people *do*. Drawing on debates around representation and the utility of discursive approaches in social and cultural geography, however, I argue that whilst attending to what people *do* is of key importance, what they *say* remains a significant aspect of practice. There is yet a role for discursive, interview based methodologies, as I go on to outline in the following chapter.
Chapter 3

Methodology

As I outlined in the ‘Literature review’ (Chapter 2), in order to examine how diverse economies around seed and food are lived, experienced, maintained and made meaningful by individuals, the research is informed by a methodological orientation towards practice. The meaning-making practices pursued in this study are multi-layered, complex and ambiguous and their investigation therefore necessitates a multi-sited, mixed-method approach. Rather than pursuing certainty, the methodology drawn upon recognises the situated and partial nature of any account attempting to describe this complexity (Law 2004) and that ‘the world is so textured as to exceed our capacity to understand it’ (Davies and Dwyer 2007, p.258). The approach taken follows Wetherell’s (2012) insistence that the discursive is inextricably connected with human affect and emotion. Interviews, including the more traditional semi-structured variety and those conducted whilst ‘going along’ with participants (Carpiano 2009; Kusenbach 2003; McMorran 2012) form a significant part of this ethnographic methodology, alongside participant observation and photographic methods. This chapter starts by ‘Defining the field’, and considers how fieldwork was organised and how the ‘field’ of seed-saving and research participants were identified. In the second section ‘Researching practice, practicing research’ I explain the methods used, their philosophical underpinnings and practical application. I then consider ‘Data analysis’, before addressing ‘Ethical issues’ and ‘Positionality and reflexivity’, and I conclude with a discussion of leaving the field.

Defining and tending multiple fields

Given this research is interested in how seed-saving and exchange is made meaningful within everyday gardening practices, an ethnographic methodology was determined necessary to generate the requisite deep description, and to convey something of ‘the richness and complexity of social life’ (Hine 2000, p.42) from the viewpoint of practitioners. Often closely associated with phenomenology and underpinned by concerns with ‘how meaning is constructed in the practicalities of everyday life’ (Hoggart et al. 2002, p.254), ethnographic research seeks to understand the social
worlds of research participants from their own perspectives. Ethnographic approaches are often exploratory in nature, draw on multiple methods, and:

usually involve… the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry. (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p.3)

The methodological pluralism implied by this statement requires carefully and strategically combining complementary approaches appropriate to the situation. This research therefore drew on fundamental ethnographic methods of interviewing and participant observation, and I capitalised on the strengths of these methods by combining them in the form of ‘go-alongs’ (Kusenbach 2003; Carpiano 2009) and by talking whilst working with participants engaged in seed-saving tasks (McMorran 2012).

In ethnographic research reflexivity is key, since, as Amit (2003, p.2) points out, ‘[r]elationships of intimacy and familiarity between researcher and subject are envisioned as a fundamental medium of investigation’. The intersubjective and intimate nature of research encounters means ethnographic methods are not ‘neutral and passive instruments of discovery’ (Denscombe 2010, p.86), and there have thus been calls for greater introspection, attention to researchers’ positionality, and openness in writing about these positions (Okely 1992; Rose 1997; Davies 2008). Though criticisms include suggestions of bias, reliance on ‘anecdotal’ representations, and limited replicability and generalisability (Herbert 2000), Crang and Cook (2007, p.15, my emphasis) stress the search for objective distance is misplaced in ethnographic research. They argue ‘the always already positioned and intersubjective nature of ethnography can be seen as a strength out of which more rigorous understandings can be built.’ Like Law (2004), Crang and Cook (2007) advocate presenting the messiness and partiality of research encounters over tidied, ‘hygienic’ versions of events.

Amit (2003, p.4), however, highlights a tendency in some anthropological ethnographic work to manufacture distance by ‘compartmentalizing fieldwork spatially, temporally and textually’ which manifests in choosing field sites that are far away or in ‘alien’ communities (Denscombe 2010, p.80). Pioneering anthropologists Margaret Mead and Bronislaw Malinowski influenced an understanding of ethnographic research as the study
of ‘other’ cultures, in distant, foreign places. Historically, research has also tended to study different or ‘deviant’ others when conducted within the researcher’s own society (Denscombe 2010). More recently, anthropologists and geographers have studied communities, cultures and practices closer to ‘home’ (e.g. Miller 1998), and ethnographic approaches are well placed for researching ‘up close’ and in ‘high resolution’ (Harris et al. 2013) the lived experiences of ordinary life (Emerson et al. 2011). Okely (1992), however, identifies an ‘exoticist bias’ (Amit 2003, p.5) in the persistent distinction between ‘field’ and ‘home’.

Unlike depictions of singular, bounded, distant field sites evident in some ethnographic writings, the spaces of my research were not only multiple but connected, had porous boundaries and were difficult to disentangle from my own practices and spaces of gardening and seed-saving. Alongside the ordinary maintenance of my allotment, which I attended almost daily over the summer and once or twice a week in winter, the broader ethnographic methodology entailed immersion in the practices under investigation, and therefore learning and practicing seed-saving. I volunteered as a seed guardian, cultivating an endangered variety of tomato and climbing French bean for the Heritage Seed Library (HSL), and actively swapped my own seeds at the events I attended. This meant I could use my own body and emotional responses as research tools (Crang 2003), and could attend to the sensory and emotional elements of the practices under investigation. It also meant I could practice seed-saving whilst away from participants’ growing spaces as I cultivated my own crops. Though there have been calls for researchers to situate themselves (Davies 2008; Rose 1997) and to provide autobiographical or ethnographic accounts (Okely 1992), there is a danger in further detaching and exoticising the ‘others’ studied by focusing too heavily on self-narrative and introspection (O’Reilly 2009). Rather than foregrounding interrogation of my practices, my research instead emphasises the words and meanings articulated by participants over my own experiences. These are contextualised and mediated nonetheless by my existing personal practices with plants, my embodied experiences of conducting the research and gardening alongside participants.

It would have been not only difficult but undesirable to artificially manufacture distance from a topic with which I was already familiar, but this is not unique to studies with such evident closeness between researcher and research object. In Davies’ (2008, p.3) influential writing on reflexivity she points out that ‘we cannot research something with which we have no contact, from which we are completely isolated. All researchers are
to some degree connected to, or part of, the object of their research’. Reframing the tensions between the objective/subjective dimensions of ethnographic fieldwork as a strength, Crang and Cook (2007, p.37) advocate focusing on the ‘intersubjective understandings between researcher and researched’ which demands attending to how the researcher ‘becomes immersed in the community under study’. Whilst familiarity can be beneficial, this must be tempered by close inspection of the assumptions and pre-existing opinions carried into the research. Identifying an ‘exit’ or end point of fieldwork also becomes difficult when the core practice under investigation continues beyond the research project.

Seed-savers and swappers do not form a clearly outlined, geographically situated community or social movement, but like Wilbur’s (2013, p.150) back-to-the-landers are more likely to be found ‘conduct[ing] politicised actions in a fragmented and individuated fashion’. The participants I identified saved seeds individually or sometimes in small groups, and were only partially and episodically connected by shared practices of seed-saving and exchange. Recognising the performatively nature of research, Law (2004) argues the selection of sites or cases is in itself a creative process that constructs realities. The process of defining the ‘fields’ of seed-saving therefore warrants careful examination (Crang and Cook 2007). In order to locate seed-savers, several organisations and individuals were purposively selected to sample gardeners practicing seed-saving in a variety of ways and spaces. This identified a partially connected set of individuals, located in different parts of the UK. Much of the research took place in growing spaces, including gardens (backyards, allotments, and community gardens), but it also entered into kitchens, dining rooms, town halls, market stalls, and committee meetings (Appendix 3). It is therefore worth briefly outlining several seed-saving organisations crucial to the research and identification of participants.

**Participating organisations**

Brighton’s *Seedy Sunday* is the UK’s biggest and longest running seed swap. It brings together seed companies, gardening groups, environmental activists and local food producers in a yearly, day-long event, held since 2001, and is organised and staffed by volunteers. At the event in 2013, over 3000 members of the public attended to exchange seeds, listen to talks and visit stalls (fieldnotes, 27/02/2013). Like other smaller
local seed swaps I attended, the focal point of the event is the seed swap table, where packets of seeds in paper envelopes are organised by variety into boxes for the public to browse (see Campbell 2012). One packet of seed can be exchanged for either another packet of seed or fifty pence. These included home saved seeds and commercially packaged seeds of fruits, vegetables, herbs and ornamental flowers.

The Heritage Seed Library (HSL) is run by the charity ‘Garden Organic’ (formerly the Henry Doubleday Research Association) and based in Ryton, Warwickshire. HSL conserves around 800 varieties of heirloom and heritage vegetable varieties in a purpose built facility, and is a membership organisation. At the time of the research, members payed a subscription of around £20 per year, and in return chose six packets of seeds from the HSL catalogue (fieldnotes, 26/11/2012). Some seed is grown at Ryton, but a large proportion is grown by volunteer ‘seed guardians’. Seed guardians are gardeners based around the country who volunteer to save a particular variety (or several varieties) each year. Guardians are provided with instructions regarding isolation, selection and drying of seeds, which are harvested and posted back to HSL, usually in autumn. Seeds are stored at HSL at low temperatures and humidity to maximise their viability, and are sent out to members in spring.

Figure 3.1: Seeding vegetable plants in HSL polytunnel
As part of the research, I volunteered as a seed guardian of an heirloom tomato and climbing French bean variety through a local HSL ‘hub’, organised for the first time in 2013. This hub is located in the public heritage gardens of a historic hall in Greater Manchester. In effect, it functions as a local ‘seed circle’, since the seeds grown by volunteers are returned to the hall rather than the HSL library, to be distributed amongst members of the hub. A seed circle is a group of gardeners, each of whom agree to save seed from a certain vegetable variety (The Real Seed Catalogue 2015). At the end of the year, the seed is shared between members of the circle, meaning each individual acquires a number of different seeds. I attended several meetings as the HSL seed circle was set up, and recruited four participants from this group.

The three organisations outlined here were all significant to the research; however, they do not represent ‘cases’ that I compared. Rather, they each form part of the broader ‘field’ of seed-saving into which I ventured, and arguably helped create through the process of the research (Law 2004). Alongside these key organisations I also attended smaller local swaps and circles, took part in ‘virtual’ seed swaps organised by post and online, and interviewed several key informants who were not affiliated to any of these organisations.

Followings

In order to identify participants my approach drew on Cook’s (2004, 2006) notion of ‘following’ the seeds exchanged at swap events, whilst remaining mindful of critiques outlined in Chapter 2 around essentialising commodities and neglecting attendant practices and socialities (Gregson et al. 2010). Seeds were treated as ‘ethical devices’: graspable, material objects around which practices, discourses, and ethical/political reasoning coalesce (Clarke et al. 2008). To trace their circulation and uncover their ‘eventful biograph[ies]’ (Kopytoff 2014, p.90), this was operationalised by questioning who brought seeds to swap events, and who took them away. Whilst this proved successful in identifying individuals actively involved in saving and swapping, as Cook (2006, p.657) notes about the technique of ‘following’: ‘this kind of research can involve exciting but risky ventures. And it can do your head in. So many things that aren’t supposed to go together in theory come together in practice.’ There were numerous potentially fascinating initiatives and individuals (community pubs, public gardens,
cooperative bakeries and so on) tangentially connected to Seedy Sunday and the wider ‘gardening fraternity’ (Daniel, interview, 28/01/2013) in Brighton, for example. I became acutely aware that there seemed to be ‘too many promising paths to follow’, each capable of shaping the study (Fairhead, 2011, p.144) and imposing additional demands and constraints.

Whilst these leads could have made interesting studies in their own right, the potential for distraction necessitated identifying a clear rationale for inclusion. Coleman and von Hellermann (2011, p.3) suggest the notion of following can be problematic if ‘it implies that ethnographers are simply submitting themselves to a track laid down for them rather than actively choosing and constituting their ethnographic path’. Such interpretations gloss over strategic decisions made in research planning and fieldwork: what to include, leave out, and where to give additional focus in places that might yield rich data. The siting and selection of participants involved careful negotiation and decision making in conjunction with participants, who shaped the field through their suggestions of potential contacts and the microgeographies of the spaces they selected for interviews and observations (Elwood and Martin 2000).

Though ‘multi-sited’ (Falzon 2009; Marcus 2011) approaches might be problematic from the perspective of Malinowskian anthropological traditions defining ethnography as a period of inhabitancy, they sit more easily with Geography’s tolerance of diverse qualitative practices (Crang 2005) and nuanced conceptualisations of space and place. ‘Multi-sited’ approaches move beyond viewing the ‘site’ of ethnographic research as a ‘container’ for social action and focus instead on ‘follow[ing] people, connections, associations and relationships across space’ (Falzon 2009, p.1; Cook 2004, 2006). However, as Crang (2011) notes, the language of ‘sites’ gives a static sense of a spatial field, less capable of capturing the flow and movement of practices and relations across rather than within space (Ferguson, 2011). Due to the location of identified participants and organisations, it was necessary to bring together heterogeneous and geographically dispersed individuals in the creation of a partially stable, temporarily fixed ‘field’ (Crang 2011), better understood in terms of flows, relations and places rather than sites.

It was tempting to try to simplify the research process by identifying a neatly geographically demarcated community of seed-savers. Initially I anticipated, or perhaps hoped, that Brighton’s seed-saving community could form a singular focus (research diary, 27/01/2013). Though the prominence of Seedy Sunday in Brighton resulted in
relatively large numbers of seed-savers located close to one another, it became clear that limiting my focus to Brighton and Hove would omit significant connections and actors outside this geographical location and social group, such as independent seed companies or HSL and their seed guardians. Whilst there were several enthusiastic seed-savers in Brighton, there were fewer than expected, and I did not meet any seed guardians here. Attempts to demarcate a ‘community’ of seed-savers in Brighton began to seem more artificial than drawing together diverse, dispersed groups and individuals who were clearly connected by a common practice.

Figure 3.2: Seed saving spaces: Cathy and Clive’s allotment

Since the research is interested in both saving and swapping seeds, understanding these practices and the interplay between them required a methodology sensitive to seeds in both their fixed and mobile states. There has been a recent emphasis on ‘mobilities’ in geography and beyond (Cresswell 2010; Merriman 2014; Binnie et al. 2007a). This work theorises how people and things move, stresses that all matter is in flux, and indicates the potential benefits of mobile research methods (Kusenbach 2003; Hein et al. 2008). Cresswell (2012) suggests paying attention to stillness is integral to the understanding of
motion, which has methodological implications for following seeds. Practices of saving seed entail moments in which plant material is physically emplaced and situated. Plants are literally rooted, demanding fixity in the earth to exist, and seeds are stored and kept in collections in banks, libraries, envelopes and biscuit tins. Researching this part of the practice required engagement in locally defined places, gardens and ‘fields’ in an anthropological and agricultural sense. Swapping seeds, on the other hand, dictates plant material untied from the land, as genetic material in seed form is dispersed and moves between people and places.

Figure 3.3: Seed saving spaces: Susan’s garden

To capture these still and mobile moments of seed-saving, the research had to accommodate inherently seasonal and weather dependent practices. This contributed to the decision not to undertake longer term immersion in one or two gardens, but to engage with a wide range of gardeners and to utilise interviews. Furthermore, seed-saving is not easily disentangled from other practices of gardening, food preparation, eating and sharing, and individuals rarely saved seed as an end in itself. It would have been presumptuous and over-burdening had I asked to spend a whole day with participants solely on seed related activities. In one garden visit, there might only be one or two tasks directly understood seed-saving/swapping. One such example arose when I
helped harvest kale seeds at a community garden (fieldnotes, 04/07/2013). We laid the crisp seed-heads on a sheet of tarpaulin, and the warmth and dryness of the July day meant the seeds were easily released from their pods as we trampled on them. I was only able to experience this distinct seed-saving task because the weather conditions happened to be right. It would have been near impossible to plan a discrete visit in advance to capture this specific seed-saving instance given the particular materialities, temporalities and weather dependencies of kale seeds. With some exceptions – tomatoes, for example, can happily wait to be deseeded until a convenient moment – the timings of seed-saving tasks are determined by factors beyond human control, so the research had to allow a degree of serendipitous opportunism.

I was, however, able to strategically identify opportunities to undertake more intensive participant observation, including volunteering at HSL at their gardens in Ryton. Whilst most seed-savers predominantly grow food crops to eat, HSL grows a wide range of different vegetables for the seed crop alone, which enabled me to gather rich data in what was a more ‘densely “seedy”’ experience (research diary, 28/08/2013). Volunteering here provided an understanding of seed-saving on a bigger scale with a wide variety of crops. I spoke to volunteers and staff engaged in seed-saving as part of their day-to-day work, who had a strong understanding of the technicalities of seed-saving.

The geographically dispersed nature of the research resulted in some challenges in terms of time management, cost and constant agonising over where to direct my energy (Crang and Cook 2007). There were also practical benefits to this approach. By reorienting the research away from Brighton as the sole location and seeking out seed guardians elsewhere, including closer to my home in Manchester, a significant portion of my fieldwork was more easily achievable with less expense, travelling and disruption. This meant I could take care of my allotment and grow the seeds I had amassed in the early part of the research. The recognition of my own allotment as an important part of the extended research ‘field’ complicates the problematic dualism of ‘home’ and ‘research location’ in ethnographic research (Okely 1992), and it enabled my longer term immersion in the diverse practices I was studying. The limitation of being unable to experience longer-term or residential immersion in the homes, gardens or ‘lifeworlds’ of my participants was countered to a certain extent by this element, as I continued to save seed after leaving study locations.
Identifying participants

Examining how diverse economies are lived, experienced, maintained and made meaningful within the practices of seed-savers required an ongoing program of complementary mixed methods well-placed to build on developing themes and concerns of the research (Crang and Cook 2007). Brighton’s Seedy Sunday in February was an appropriate starting point, given my own schedule and the opportunity to observe and participate in planning a swap event. Though seed-saving and growing practices are cyclical, with neither a linear start nor end point, the annual seed swap marks a symbolic start to the ‘growing season’\(^3\). The event was characterised by anticipation of spring and intensive activity around seeds, and it brought together numerous potential seed-saving participants (fieldnotes, 03/02/2013). It therefore provided an ideal opportunity to efficiently gather information and contacts, before cultivation practices settled into the slower and more regular tasks of sowing, tending and harvesting which spread across the year.

Beyond these marked moments of organised exchange where seed-savers gathered together, many seed-saving practices were conducted by individuals acting alone or perhaps alongside a friend or family member in the semi-private spaces of gardens and allotments. Individual seed-savers did not necessarily know each other personally. Swapping seeds in the post, through online forums or at annual swap events meant exchanges were often not immediately reciprocal but temporally staggered and collective forms of sharing and gifting (Belk 2010). Thinking about participant identification in terms of tracing seeds helped me to reveal relations and practices otherwise obscured from view. I identified a small number of participants using seeds saved on my allotment the previous year as part a literal, material process of ‘following’. This involved putting saved pea, bean, tomato, calendula and achocha seeds into packets with an attached flyer conveying information about the research, asking gardeners to email me if interested in involvement. I distributed these at several seed swaps (Appendix 3). Donating seeds helped develop credibility with project organisers and showed my willingness to support the event rather than act as a detached observer. Physically processing and packaging so many seeds myself also provided important insights into the affective dimensions of exchanging seed. My notes around this time

\(^3\) the part of the year when rainfall, light levels and temperature allow plants to grow.
highlight hopes and anxieties that my seeds would be selected and grown, the effort I put into making eye-catching packets and excitement in imagining ‘where might “my” seeds end up?’ (research diary, 12/02/2013). I received fifteen responses to over three hundred seed packets sent out, and though I couldn’t follow all these leads physically, this element of ‘following’ provided interesting information on the diversity of seed swap attendees, and the journeys made by seeds after a swap event. I recruited one interviewee and one core participant through this method, and had short email communications with the remaining thirteen.

Research participants were purposively selected, and the majority were identified by asking Seedy Sunday and HSL organisers to contact volunteers or members on my behalf, or to suggest potential contacts. Utilising ‘gatekeepers’ in this way is not without ethical issues, as I discuss later in this chapter. The fact that some participants knew one another raises issues around anonymity, informed consent and the risk of those in relatively important positions influencing others to take part. However, treated sensitively, this approach proved useful in securing access to the wider group of volunteers and seed guardians (O’Reilly 2009). Gatekeepers and subsequent interviewees were asked to suggest individuals or organisations involved in seed-saving, swapping, or seed activism. Individuals that fit my criteria of dedicating a proportion of their gardens to growing vegetables and regularly saving or swapping seed; or volunteering for a seed related organisation or swap were then contacted and asked if they were happy to meet and be interviewed, preferably in their growing space.

In total, forty seven individuals participated in the empirical research, including those attending or organising local seed swaps, acting as voluntary ‘seed guardians’ for HSL as well as several individuals working or campaigning on seed issues (Appendix 4). Of this group, twenty seven were female and twenty were male. The majority (thirty nine) were growing in urban/suburban locations, with eight located in rural areas. Sixteen of the participants were growing and saving seeds solely in private back-gardens, with the remainder growing in a combination of allotment, private garden and community garden. Most of the gardeners interviewed were aged 30-49 (twenty three), seventeen were aged 50-69, four were under thirty and three were seventy or older.

It was important to draw on a range of participants to uncover the diversity, texturing, and heterogeneity of seed-saving in everyday practice. Previous studies have followed formally organised seed swapping membership organisations (e.g. Phillips 2013; Carolan
but there has been relatively little attention to informal community seed swaps existing outside of (or in relation to) these formally organised groups. Using Seedy Sunday and HSL to identify participants enabled me to include fourteen individuals saving seeds within a formal arrangement with a conservation organisation (HSL), and twenty six individuals involved more informally in organising, volunteering or attending Seedy Sunday and other seed swaps. An initial round of interviews (phase 1-2; Appendix 1) were conducted before thirteen ‘key informants’ (O’Reilly 2009), which I term ‘core participants’ were identified. These were a subset of participants I visited several times to conduct ‘serial interviews’ (Crang and Cook 2007) and participant observation (phase 3-4, Appendix 1). Overall, the majority of participants were drawn from Brighton and the South East (twenty nine), ten from Manchester and the North West, six from the East and West Midlands (Derbyshire, Nottingham and Warwickshire), and one from West Wales. Core participants were more evenly geographically distributed, with six drawn from the North West, four from the South East, and three from the East Midlands.

Core participants were selected based on their level of engagement in seed-saving, emphasis on growing food crops (fruit, vegetables and herbs), willingness and ability to be involved in the study, and location. In practice, this excluded people I interviewed early on who volunteered in running swap events, but did not grow and save a significant amount of their own seed due to limited space or time; gardeners more interested in growing ornamentals (plants grown for decorative purposes); and those whose locations made them impractical to access given time and financial constraints. The group of core participants was made up of nine HSL seed guardians and four seed swap organisers/attendees. Three core participants were male, and ten were female, and the group included one couple who each saved several HSL varieties in their shared back-garden. Five core participants were aged 30-49; four were 50-69; two were under thirty and two were seventy or over (Appendix 4).

**Researching practice, practicing research**

As I have outlined here, the meaning-making practices of interest in this study are multi-layered, complex and ambiguous, and thus required a multi-pronged methodological strategy that sensitively combined complementary approaches appropriate to the given
context and situation. In order to gain a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted practices of seed-saving and exchange, this study drew on a range of overlapping methods. The research aimed to uncover the embodied, emotional and affective aspects of ‘doing’ seed-saving, and their interrelationships with seed-savers’ articulated ideas about their practice and its meaning. The methods adopted therefore combined participant observation and interviews, layered with complementary methods including photo elicitation and ‘go-alongs’ (Carpiano 2009; Kusenbach 2003). I discuss these in the following section, considering the philosophy behind each method, the rationale for its use, how it was conducted in my fieldwork, and issues I encountered.

**Participant observation**

Participant observation is understood as the core method of ethnographic research (Crang and Cook 2007). It typically involves immersion within a community, or what Wogan (2004) calls ‘deep hanging out’, and systematic recording of what is observed. It is thought to be particularly useful in uncovering people’s interactions with environments and materialities as well as their everyday behaviours, including taken for granted practices participants might find hard to articulate verbally (McNaughton Nicholls et al. 2014). Returning to Hammersley and Atkinson’s (2007, p.3) definition of ethnography, participating in people’s everyday lives and practices is central to ‘gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry’. In this study participation is understood as ‘being there’, ‘in the middle of the action’ (Denscombe 2010, p.207). Participation formed the basis on which I constructed a multi-method approach that aimed to be sensitive to the interplay between verbal, cognitive rationalisations for seed-saving, and the embodied, affective, emotional, and less easy to vocalise resonances and reasons. Interviews formed an important part of this methodology, but as I will outline, interview encounters were designed to maximise opportunities for my involvement in seed-saving practices, and for participants to engage with environmental and material prompts (Kusenbach 2003; De Leon and Cohen 2005).

Despite the central role of ‘haptic knowledges’ in participant observation, the absence of the researcher’s body in representations of geographical research has been critiqued by Crang (2003, p.499) who suggests the researching body be recognised as ‘an
instrument of research’. The centrality of sensory experience and ‘doing’ rather than talking to gardening practice has been well documented (Tilley 2006; Hitchings and Jones 2004), and Hayes-Conroy’s (2010) study provides an excellent example that foregrounds the ‘visceral’ responses of researcher and participant bodies in various encounters with Slow Food. This reinforces the importance of physically participating and gauging my own body’s responses to situations that were meaningful to participants. An awareness and preference for experiencing gardens rather than talking about them in fact came through strongly in interviews, however, and was something participants could reflect upon and discuss (Burrell 2014). This was particularly apparent in conversations around participants’ perceptions of the impacts of their gardening and seed-saving (Roy, interview, 28/02/213; Elena, interview, 27/01/2013; Louise, interview#2, 22/11/2013), often conveyed as practical ways of making a positive change in contrast to the ineffectual ‘hot air’ of political talk (Bobel 2007; Chatterton and Pickerill 2010). The approach I took, whether engaged in doing, talking or both, foregrounded participation: rather than acting as a detached observer, my role was ‘a player in the scene investigated’ (Hoggart et al. 2002, p.251). This continued as I practiced seed-saving in my own allotment, and also involved ‘going along’ (Kusenbach 2003; Carpiano 2009) with the ordinary activities of seed-savers, working with research participants in their gardens and swap events, and using these as opportunities for interviews in situ and whilst engaged in the practice under investigation.

Eating together with participants became a central part of ethnographic encounters, which often took place in kitchens or cafes with cups of tea, or gardens, where food might be cooked on an open fire (fieldnotes, 20/06/2013; Appendix 3), or proffered in muddy fingers for me to taste having been picked directly from the plant (fieldnotes, 04/07/2013). As Law (2001, p.275) points out, ‘food acquires its meaning through the place it is assembled and eaten’. Cooking, eating and sharing food thus became useful research tactics (Brady 2011; Johnston and Longhurst 2011) often triggering rich conversations about attitudes towards food and sharing, and nuanced understandings of how participants related to seeds and plants in their ‘visceral’ (Longhurst et al. 2009) food form (Head and Aitchison 2008). I quickly realised that bringing food to share helped me join in with participants’ practices and gain acceptance within the group, particularly in community gardens, where sharing food and eating together served an important social function (research diary, 02/05/2013).
While participants were generally happy for me to accompany them when gardening, it was easier to join in with ‘work’ in community gardens already attended by volunteers allocated gardening jobs. When visiting gardens at people’s homes, I sensed their uneasiness in letting a ‘guest’ undertake physically laborious tasks (research diary, 06/05/2013). My hosts slipped into an entertaining role, preferring to talk, sit and look at the garden, or walk around the space. When I did persuade people to let me work in gardens and allotments, I was often given easier, more ‘pleasant’ tasks deemed acceptable for a guest – harvesting fruit, light weeding, or tying in tomatoes. The seasonal dimension of the research also impacted on the activities I could take part in. With the exception of community gardens, participants did not seem happy to let me do physical garden work, or even spend that long outdoors during the colder months. Organising fieldwork to take place during the growing season seems sensible given weather constraints and the opportunity to engage with plants in their most productive stage of growth. Yet confining research to the summer months could only give a partial understanding of gardening and allotmenting practice, perhaps missing some of the more reflective moods, struggles with harsher weather conditions and aesthetic changes to growing spaces experienced at different points in the year.

My participation included some tasks directly related to seed-saving, such as hand-pollinating runner beans and squashes or shelling dried peas, but it also took in numerous peripheral practices, like collecting windfall apples in a communal orchard, or painting a shed with corporate volunteers in a community garden (fieldnotes, 27/06/2013). The ‘thinness’ of seed-saving activity in any one day at a garden could be seen as a practical limitation of participant observation for researching the specifics of the practice (Coleman and von Hellermann 2011). The day-to-day upkeep of an allotment or garden dictated other tasks would often take priority, and the focus would only periodically be on seeds. However, my participation in and observations of these attendant practices was important to contextualise seed-saving and exchange. I paid close attention to moments seeds entered the picture and made their presence known, which aided my understanding of how seed-saving fit into the wider context of gardening, sharing and self-provisioning.
For example, an interesting conversation arose between the shed painting volunteers and community garden organiser Louise as she explained the seeds she guarded for HSL (fieldnotes, 27/06/2013). It was clear ‘seed-saving’ was something many of these young professionals had never considered or knew existed. This instance illustrated how seed-savers related their practice to others and drew on wider gardening and sharing situations as opportunities to educate and promote seed-saving. As already mentioned, saving seeds was rarely an end in itself, and it was crucial therefore to consider how this
particular practice was integrated and interlinked with other processes, priorities and responsibilities. I was, however, cognisant to remain focused on seeds in light of a multitude of opportunities and activities competing for my attention.

Participant observation is more than simply joining in (Watson and Till 2010), and demands careful recording. I attempted to write as much detail as possible about settings, events and sequences in my fieldnotes and to record what I observed, heard, smelt, and physically felt (Emerson et al. 2011). This was supplemented with photographs taken at research locations and notes documenting my personal reflections, observations and emotional responses. Gardening formed a core part of participant observation, but I also attended seed swap planning meetings alongside committee members, accompanied seed circle gatherings and swap events, and volunteered at a seed library (Appendix 3). The emphasis on participating/observing shifted depending on the situation. Denscombe (2010) notes that successful participant observation requires ‘being able to walk a tightrope between… involvement and passion… and the cool detachment associated with research observation’. This delicate balance between participating and observing was often difficult to negotiate. The physical, manual tasks and multiple sensory stimuli experienced at any one time conflicted with the more detached embodied processes of writing and taking photos (Crang and Cook 2007).

There were several occasions where the decision to postpone note writing until the following day highlighted my limited powers of recall (Denscombe 2010). Attempting to undertake participant observation at the day-long Seedy Sunday event presented significant challenges in this respect. The responsibility of being a volunteer made it difficult to concentrate on observing and writing notes, and I felt conflicted by the multiple roles I had to perform (Crang and Cook 2007). Like many other attendees, I was overwhelmed by the event itself, which was packed with people, stalls, talks, activities, and connections I wanted to make. This assault on the senses was over-stimulating. After several hours I felt I had ‘reached saturation point’ (fieldnotes, 03/02/2013), and I was physically and mentally exhausted by the end of the day. However, as well struggling to identify the best way to maximise my depleting energies - whether to get fully involved in working, taking photos, writing notes, or talking to potential participants - this intensity of emotion, excitement and sensory onslaught was something shared by the seed-savers I spoke to. One described it as ‘like Christmas for gardeners’ (Rosemary, interview, 25/02/2013). I began to understand the significance of
this comment as the fieldwork progressed, as it stood in stark contrast to the slower, longer-term and less immediately gratifying processes of growing which played out over the rest of the year.

To a certain extent, the participant observation I undertook, particularly at swap events, could only ever be a snapshot, and was limited by the temporal and spatial dispersal of seed-saving practices. This limitation was in part addressed by growing and saving seed in my own allotment over the course of the year, and by drawing on interviews not only for efficiency (Hitchings 2012; Carpiano 2009) but as a way of combining both observation in situ and interpretations at the same time (Kusenbach 2003). I tried to treat interview encounters as ethnographic events in themselves (Pink 2009), through ‘go-alongs’ (Carpiano 2009), talking whilst working (McMorran 2012) and using material ‘prompts’ (De Leon and Cohen 2005). As I go on to discuss, interviews were a useful, more-than-discursive means of delving into the thoughts, feelings and practices of seed-savers.

**Talking, walking and picturing practices**

Though my methodological approach involved considerable participant observation, interviews, often described as ‘purposeful conversations’ (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009) generated the bulk of rich data for analysis. In conjunction with participant observation, interviews are a central method of ethnographic research since they offer a cogent vehicle through which researchers can ‘explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others and learn to see the world from perspectives other than their own’ (Rubin and Rubin 2012). The combination of participant observation and interviews allowed a degree of methodological triangulation, as participants’ accounts could be compared and contrasted with what was observed and recorded in fieldnotes, allowing inconsistencies to be identified and tidy narratives to be probed. ‘Go-along’ interviews (Kusenbach 2003; Carpiano 2009) provided opportunities for simultaneous walking, talking, observing and participating. Furthermore, by drawing on photographic methods a form of ‘access’ to participants’ growing spaces and practices was enabled in moments when I was physically unable to be there.

Whilst superficially similar, interviews differ from conversations in important ways including purpose and power dynamics, and interviews are typically led by the
researcher (Yeo et al. 2014). Open ended, semi-structured interviews are often the ‘default choice’ in qualitative geographical research (Silverman 2013). Uncritical assumptions that interviews provide access to pre-existing knowledges that can be ‘mined’ by the researcher have been identified and critiqued in more positivist applications of this method (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009; Silverman 2013). Approaches to interviewing in cultural geography have tended to view ‘data’ as jointly constructed between participant and researcher, depicting interviews as ‘interactional accomplishments rather than neutral communicative grounds’ (Gubrium and Holstein 2011, p.150). As identified in the literature review, more recently, non-representational theories have criticised interviews for their inability to ‘get at’ affect and emotion. There is, however, a compelling case for the continued use and sensitive analysis of interview data (Wetherell 2012; Burrell 2014). Hitchings (2012, p.66), for example, advocates the use of interviews alongside other methodologies since they ‘offer such an efficient means of understanding how it is to embody certain practices’.

I initially conducted interviews with the wider group of seed-savers (non-core participants, Appendix 4), often in their homes or a conveniently located café. Later interviews with core participants and other key individuals took place during participant observation visits to their growing spaces. These ranged from more traditional ‘sit-down’ interviews (Carpiano 2009, p.264), to those conducted whilst walking in gardens and allotments or undertaking seed related tasks. They usually lasted between thirty and ninety minutes, and were recorded on a Dictaphone. Initial interviews were semi-structured, and included questions about gardening, seed-saving, and food, which were modified depending on the role and organisational affiliation of the interviewee. Repeat visits with core participants involved interactions ranging between unstructured conversations conducted whilst participating/observing, to semi-structured interviews with questions individually tailored depending on our previous communication (Crang and Cook 2007).

Adopting interviews as a core method within this research requires critical reflection on the validity of participants’ expressed words, and whether to take accounts at face value. Yeo et al. (2014, p.80) note that from a strong postmodern perspective, an interview can only ever be a performance of one of an individuals’ multiple ‘selves’, rendering the data generated ‘ephemeral and merely a representation of that single interaction.’ However, whilst participants’ utterances may be performed for the researcher, they can still offer important insight into individuals’ meanings,
interpretations and therefore knowledge of the social worlds they inhabit (Miller and Glassman 2011). Furthermore, avoiding interviews altogether risks the researcher’s explanations being afforded greater emphasis that those of the individuals being investigated (Yeo et al. 2014).

Burrell (2014, p.11) also argues interviews can ‘actually offer a very interesting vehicle to consider the gap between what people say and what they do’, which suggests that the ‘emplacement mechanisms’ of interviews are of key concern. In my research, interviews provided an effective medium for exploring the perspectives of interviewees, and the interplay between articulated rationales for seed-saving and embodied practices. Rather than viewing interviewing as a standardised method to capture ‘data’, interviews were treated as multi-sensory ethnographic events (Pink 2009) by paying close attention to settings, soundscapes, where we sat, how things were said and spoken, and who else was there. Opportunities were built in for participants to introduce objects, topics of conversation and other sensory experiences by conducting ‘go-along’ interviews and carrying out more traditional seated interviews in gardens or around plants, food or seeds (Carpiano 2009).

The places interviewees chose for meetings form an important part of the data, aiding understandings of how participants construct their own identities (Sin 2003). One core participant, for example, wanted to meet at a local community garden she had helped to set up (Becky, fieldnotes, 20/06/2013). Meeting here provided an opportunity to show me the impact of her work to change what had been a carpark into a space enjoyed by local families. Elwood and Martin (2000) suggest the location of interviews can influence power, positionality and participants’ responses, and that different sites can construe researcher/participant as ‘expert’. Interviewing someone in their workplace, for example, connotes a different set of expectations, identities and responsibilities to interviewing in a family home. Whilst I tried to interview people around plants, the seasonal dimension of the work dictated the types of spaces participants preferred to meet. Early interviews in January and February were often in cafes, kitchens, with hot drinks, or occasionally in allotment sheds where gardeners gathered to shelter from the cold. The talk here centred on the prospect of spring and seeds in their packets, their physical qualities as seeds rather than plants. Outside, gardens that had been bare and brown in winter became green, lush, overgrown and untamed in summer. The way growing spaces were used was seasonally structured, as temperature, light levels, and
growing cycles determined not only the activities individuals performed, but how they carried themselves and how long they lingered.

Mobile interviews (Evans and Jones 2011; Hein et al. 2008), often in the form of garden tours emerged as extremely useful for researching relationships between people and the spaces they cultivated. This methodological strategy arose as a process of ‘going along’ with what people ordinarily did in gardens and allotments (Carpiano 2009). ‘Go-alongs’ are described by Kusenbach (2003, p.463) as ‘a more modest, but also a more systematic and outcome-oriented version of ‘hanging out’ with key informants’, and they enable a simultaneous process of participant observation and gathering participants’ reflections and interpretations. Interviewing in the context of a tour, walk or whilst engaged in a practical task holds potential to unsettle power dynamics by enabling exchanges to be led by the participant. By creating a ‘distinctive sociability’ (Hein et al. 2011; Lee and Ingold 2006) the focus is not solely on ‘talk’, meaning respondents are less inclined ‘to try and give the “right” answer’ (Evans and Jones 2011, p.849).

Figure 3.5: Walking in Jean’s community orchard
The physiological act of walking can also encourage recall, trigger thoughts, memories and ‘emotive connections’ to the wider landscape (Anderson 2004, p.258). My walks around gardens and allotments allowed a combination of both talking and doing in ‘tactile space’ (Carolan 2007b; Hayden and Buck 2012) and for appreciation of ‘the event of research – the in-the-moment sounds, smells, doings and happenings’ (Hayes-Conroy 2010, p.726). In these encounters, the interviewee had more control over how we walked and talked. They were able to introduce things in response to the environment, to stop to look at the vista, touch, smell, or point out certain plants and explain where they came from (De Leon and Cohen 2005). This method produced a different type of ‘talk’ to seated semi-structured interviews (Carpiano 2009), and provided opportunities to register and share in the sensory dimensions, feelings and annoyances - heat, rain, insects or fatigue, for example - experienced by participants in their growing spaces.

Walks took the form of ‘aimless’ ambles (what Anderson, 2004 calls ‘bimbles’) around individual allotments and gardens or circuits of whole allotment sites. They also included formally organised walking tours of the heritage gardens at the historic hall hosting a seed hub, and accompanying a seed circle meeting and its’ members walking from plot to plot. (Appendix 3).

Though to some extent walks were contrived for the research, I got the sense that walking, peering over fences and passing comment was something allotment holders enjoyed doing as part of ordinary activity, and participants seemed to welcome the excuse to ‘take a turn’ around the site at a leisurely pace (Cathy, fieldnotes, 15/07/2013). Whilst Kusenbach (2003) stresses following the ‘natural’ journeys of participants, the notion of authentically ‘natural’ settings is perhaps problematic given the presence of a researcher is always likely to impact on the space and its participants (Denscombe 2010). Walking around allotment sites gave a clearer understanding of how the individual I accompanied was connected to the space and to other plot-holders.

Walking tours identified important places within the site, such as a communal allotment belonging to the organic gardening group, or the plot where a yearly seedling swap and social gatherings took place (Barbara, fieldnotes, 20/06/2013). They highlighted how knowledge was shared within allotments, who was seen as an ‘expert’, and how differing cultural approaches were valued and demonstrated in terms of the visual appeal of gardens and their construction. Tensions between the public/private nature of allotments also became evident. Some allotments had gates and locks, whilst others were open and easy to traverse. On several occasions interviewees discussed the
conflict between safety and opportunities for communal spaces and practices (Brian, fieldnotes, 28/02/2013; Nathan, fieldnotes, 23/08/2013). Stories were recalled as we walked, as participants relayed the biographies (Kopytoff 2014) of individual allotment plots, how they had been passed from person to person, who else saved seeds, and who wasn’t ‘looking after their plot properly’ (Barbara, fieldnotes 20/06/2013). Attitudes about what was acceptable within the allotment site surfaced as participants pointed out plots that ‘use too much weed-killer’, or had let things ‘go to seed’ through negligence, for example (Cathy, fieldnotes, 15/07/2013), helping to understand how the boundaries around ‘proper’ gardening were policed.

Walks varied in length, and were usually shorter in private back-gardens. However, in small, intensively cultivated spaces there was much to talk about. Though these go-alongs became less related to the physical activity and rhythmical action of walking (Middleton 2009), what on first impression looked like a small garden was often shown to be rich in personal history and biography, with stories attached to almost every plant - where that plant had been ‘salvaged’ from (Nina, fieldnotes, 21/06/2013) who else was growing this variety, and so on. De Leon and Cohen (2005) suggest the material and environmental cues available in such contexts can be useful because they stimulate memories or prompt avenues of discussion difficult to access in traditional ‘sit-down’ interviews (Carpiano 2009, p.264). In short, mobile methodologies revealed a multitude of attitudes, spatial elements and ‘context-sensitive reactions of the interviewer and interviewee’ (Carpiano 2009, p.267) that might have remained hidden had we stayed in one place.

Photographs also acted as a type of ‘object’ prompt (De Leon and Cohen 2005) and contributed to the multi-layered methodological approach. As well as taking my camera on research visits, I asked core participants to take photos over several months as part of a ‘photo elicitation’ method (Lombard 2013). The photographs produced were discussed in a final interview. The intention was not to produce images which could then be analysed, but to use the pictures and the process of photographing to elicit discussion of otherwise obscured topics (Johnsen et al. 2008). In her discussion of what has been termed ‘auto-photography’, Lombard (2013) notes an important part of this method is discussing with participants how images were produced and the selection of subject matter.
I gave twelve disposable cameras to thirteen core participants (one camera was shared between a couple who gardened together), who were asked to take at least fifteen pictures over the course of the growing season in response to several questions:

- Why is saving and swapping seeds important to you?
- What do you most enjoy about it?
- What is the biggest challenge?
- How does it feel to be a seed-saver?

I hoped this approach would help me understand the hidden dimensions of gardening and seed-saving more effectively than interviews, and would enable participants to construct responses on their own terms and in their own time (Johnsen 2008; Rose 2008). In practice, this method was less successful for several reasons. Firstly, the cameras I provided were poor quality, which I didn’t realise until after the photos were printed. Many pictures failed to develop or were out of focus, which was disappointing for participants given this element required considerable time and effort (Lombard 2013). Secondly, because I had usually visited, participated and interviewed in the gardens several times already, interviews relating to the photo elicitation method often duplicated previous discussions.

A further limitation lay in the interpretation of the task, or perhaps my explanation of it. In his discussion of the ‘picturing practices’ of tourists, Crang (1997) stresses that photographs are never mere description, but are situated within ‘established photographic genres’ (Rose 2008, p. 155) which influence what is expected and deemed socially acceptable to photograph. With some exceptions where participants took a very creative approach, many assumed the task required either documenting the different seeds they were growing, or that I wanted artfully constructed images. Hitchings and Jones (2004) note photographs can have a flattening and fixing effect, meaning the dynamism and embodied interaction which characterises gardening practice is lost in photos of gardens and plants. Rather than managing to convey the ‘liveliness’ of seeds and plants the images produced in my research often treated plants and gardens as objects to be looked at and judged on aesthetic merit, and seeds as items to be catalogued by variety. Being in the spaces themselves, was, unsurprisingly, more useful in accessing both sensory experiences and biographical information about plants and their connections with people and places.
Despite these limitations, there were positive outcomes from the photographic methods. The fact that participants could take photos throughout the summer meant I was able to ‘see’ gardens at times when I could not physically access them. In one case, I was unable to visit the garden of a core participant (Anita) due to some personal issues, and instead met her in a local café and her workplace. In this instance, the photo method proved extremely useful in ‘accessing her gardening space virtually if not physically’ (research diary, 26/11/2013), and discussing elements that may not have been prompted in an ordinary interview. On reflection, this photo method may be better suited to researching the ‘hidden’ spaces otherwise difficult or contentious for a researcher to access (Johnsen et al. 2008).

Merriman (2014, pp.182-183), however, voices a caution that mobile and visual methods have been enthusiastically taken up along with problematic assumptions that their proximity and ‘first-handedness’ enable researchers to ‘gain a more accurate or authentic knowledge of a situation’, and his critique is relevant to the ‘go-alongs’ and photographic methods discussed here. Merriman (2014, p.177) hints that the processes of conducting innovative methods might be ‘more instructive than the images, data or experiences gathered’. Taking my camera on field visits helped identify what was significant to participants, evident in the types of things pointed out for me to photograph or their reactions when I asked to take a picture. It also highlighted the different aesthetic demands and anxieties entailed in ‘picturing’ (Crang 1997) plants and home spaces compared to experiencing them, as weeds were hastily removed from inside a greenhouse (Nathan, fieldnotes, 15/07/2013) or participants apologised that things weren’t tidy or under control (Jean, fieldnotes, 09/11/2013; Susan, fieldnotes, 04/10/2013) when I asked to take a photograph (Ellis 2003). The processes of taking photos, talking about photos, and identifying what they couldn’t show was ultimately more useful than the images themselves (Hitchings and Jones 2004; Merriman 2014).

**Data analysis**

The materials I collected and constructed throughout the fieldwork included interview transcripts, participant observation fieldnotes, personal reflections, email communications and items like seed packets, swap posters and promotional literature. I also had photographs taken by participants, though these were not formally analysed.
but were used as prompts to ‘elicit’ discussion with core participants in recorded interviews (Lombard 2013). A ‘thematic analysis’ approach was drawn upon to analyse this range of different materials. This entailed a time consuming process of systematically looking for ‘repeated patterns of meaning’ across the various sources of data (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.86; Ryan and Bernard 2000). Crang and Cook (2007), however, stress that analysis must be both systematic and creative, and whilst this approach dictated looking for patterns and similarities, it was important not to discount seemingly contradictory themes or points of disagreement between participants, which would risk generating an oversimplified and tidy account of practices that were multi-layered, heterogeneous and often ‘messy’ in practice (Law 2004).

The research drew on participant led methods and un/semi-structured interviews, and the process of analysis was largely inductive, driven by the data rather than by a pre-existing theoretical framework. The approach taken therefore aligns with ‘grounded theory’ since theories and explanations were generated in response to the data generated through situated empirical fieldwork (Denscombe 2010). However, the questions I asked participants were theoretically informed, and analysing and writing meant connecting participants’ words and my observations to existing theories and concerns. It is important also to note that though this discussion of the analytical process is positioned towards the end of this chapter, analysis is not an ‘add-on’ undertaken once the fieldwork is complete, but a recursive process that continues throughout the duration of the research and includes formulating questions, selecting participants and typing interviews as well as writing up (Crang and Cook 2007).

I aimed to retain as much detail as possible in interview transcripts and felt it was important to transcribe all interviews manually, seeing this as a stage of the analysis, itself an ‘interpretive act’ (Bird 2005, p.229). Through this process I re-experienced the soundscapes of encounters: seagulls, a plane overhead, a spluttering lawnmower, or a kettle boiling, which invoked a strong sense of being back in that place, and reiterated that the analysis of data can be a corporeal process in itself (Pink 2009), part of the extended ‘field’ of the research (Crang and Cook 2007). I tried to avoid ‘mining’ interview transcripts for apposite quotes (Silverman 2013) and instead aimed to relate the wider context of the interview in both transcription and the writing of my findings.

Having transcribed the interviews, I printed and read through all transcripts, fieldnotes and collected materials without coding to get a broad sense of the data and to remind
myself what I had covered throughout the year. At this stage I noted themes, ideas and significant sections, which I used as a template to begin the process of coding. The main challenge in coding was striking a balance between identifying everything interesting in these assorted documents, and generating more codes than useful or practical to handle (Braun and Clarke 2006). I then read over everything for a second time, this time assigning codes. The process inevitably threw up new codes, so I then revised my coding schema, amalgamated those that seemed repetitive, and read through and recoded the documents again. I initially began doing this by hand, but given the volume of paper this generated, I decided to code transcripts in NVivo, predominantly as a way of organising the data (Crang and Cook 2007) so I could more easily look across documents to see which codes occurred together frequently.

Having a better overview of the data, I was then able to group these codes under thematic headings, experimenting with several iterations and allocating ‘themes’ on the basis of their significance and logical relationship with one another. Thematic analysis was used here to identify ‘semantic’ themes, and to take seriously and describe the realities of participants in their understandings (Wetherell 2012). The approach taken was therefore to interpret these expressed experiences and meanings with relation to the literature and relevant theories, rather than trying to provide a theoretically informed explanation of the underlying ‘latent’ content of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.80). However, Braun and Clarke (2006, p.86) caution against the idea of themes ‘emerging’, which they argue implies a naïve realist view that these themes ‘reside’ somewhere in the data rather than being actively constructed in a process whereby the researcher chooses what is significant (Fine 2002).

**Ethical issues**

Although gardening and seed-saving might superficially seem to be uncontentious topics, any study involving human participants must carefully consider ethical implications in order to protect the rights and dignity of research subjects. This was particularly important given my research covered issues of the intimate and emotional, and at times ventured into the private spaces of homes and gardens. The research was therefore planned in a way that minimised potential for distress or harm to either participants or
researcher by accounting for ethical issues arising before, during and after participation (Webster et al. 2014).

Voluntary informed consent is an important concept in social research ethics, broadly pertaining to steps taken to ensure individuals recruited are made fully aware of the research and its purposes so they can decide to take part or decline involvement (Webster et al. 2014). Participants were identified and contacted either by myself, gatekeepers, or they responded directly to seed packet flyers. At this point they were provided with contact details, information about my institution, an outline of the research project and what participation was likely to involve. I asked participants to contact me if they were interested in taking part, which gave them time to consider whether to ‘opt into’ the research, and I reiterated they could opt out at any point. All participants received a consent form (Appendix 2) explaining the research, how data generated would be used, and how personal information would be handled, which they were asked to sign if happy to continue. However, the duration and type of interaction drawn upon in participant observation meant ethical considerations were not suspended once a form had been completed (Sin 2005). My episodic presence among participants dictated an approach to informed consent that was dynamic and continued throughout the fieldwork through ongoing dialogue with those studied (Lugosi 2006).

Conducting research at large public events further complicates the question of securing consent. Whilst it would be excessive and unrealistic to obtain signed consent forms from every person attending a public event like Seedy Sunday, I took steps to ensure information about the research was freely accessible, made myself approachable throughout the day to explain the research in person, and anonymised all data arising from observation at public events. However, Lugosi’s (2006 p.544) reminder it is ‘a mistake to assume that ethnographic fieldwork can ever be fully open and overt’ troubles the presumed clear distinction between overt and covert research. His argument proposes researchers attend reflexively to the elements of concealment and deception inevitably entailed in all research, including the ‘partial knowledges’ about research intentions (p.555) and contrived friendships between researcher and researched (Duncombe and Jessop 2002).

Whilst the snowballing technique utilised was an appropriate and efficient way to identify prospective research subjects, the fact that several participants knew one another through various projects, seed circles, or shared volunteering experiences did
present some ethical challenges in maintaining anonymity and ‘internal confidentiality’ (Tolich 2004, p.101). For example, visits to Brighton often combined several meetings in one day. Participants might ask, ‘where are you going this afternoon?’, or ‘are you meeting up with so and so later?’ Whilst I tried to be vague in my answers, I found it difficult to be too evasive (research diary, 20/06/2013), yet recognised researching with individuals known to one another opened the potential for ‘accidental’ breaches of confidentiality (Wiles et al. 2008). I was probably the subject of conversations between some of my participants when I wasn’t there, and I felt avoiding questions altogether could damage the trust and natural conversational style we had developed. In answer to participants’ questions I usually alluded to visiting an unspecific area of the city, and I never repeated any of the content of my conversations or observations with others. This potential transgression highlights, however, both the difficulty of maintaining absolute confidentiality within communities of individuals who know one another, as well as the ethical tensions inherent in ‘doing rapport’ (Duncombe and Jessop 2002).

Visiting and walking in allotment sites with participants often meant interacting with other allotment holders, which raised issues of individuals becoming passively involved in the research without formally consenting to do so (Larossa et al. 1981). Given the opportunity I explained my research to people we stopped to talk to, and preserved the anonymity of anyone I encountered. However, I worried that the talk generated walking around allotments could be construed as ‘gossip’ (research diary, 06/06/2013), and that the people gossiped about had no opportunity to respond. It was also possible that others might overhear conversations on what were often very open sites, which may have impacted on participants’ frankness. Issues of passive involvement also arose from the photographic methodology in relation to securing anonymity and informed consent from individuals that might be photographed (Johnsen et al. 2008), since unlike discursive accounts, images cannot be anonymised with pseudonyms (Newbury 1999). I asked core participants to sign an additional consent form stating photographs produced would only be used in relation to the research and that I would not use images of other people where they could be identified in published material. I also asked participants not to take photographs of others without first verbally securing their permission.

Participants were also asked to give consent for audio recording interviews. I was careful to provide this information when I emailed, so participants had time to consider this request rather than feeling pressured to consent at the time of the interview. Whilst this proved an efficient and accurate method of capturing people’s words and
wider soundscapes, recorded data also raises the potential for the violation of privacy. To ensure that the research complied with the Data Protection Act and the University of Manchester Data Protection Policy, all data and results obtained from the research were only used in the ways for which consent was given, as set out in the participant consent form, and they were not given to any third parties. Personal details such as telephone numbers or addresses were not collected excessively or unnecessarily, and were kept securely then destroyed immediately after completion of the study. When analysing data, the real names of participants were substituted by code names, and names of individuals are replaced with pseudonyms in representations arising from the research. Where there was a possibility that organisations or individuals might be identifiable, this was discussed on an individual basis before the research began. Audio recordings and field notes were anonymised, stored in a safe place and wiped once transcription was complete, and all information and data generated was kept strictly for the purpose of this research.

The anticipated topics covered in interviews and participant observation were not of a particularly sensitive nature, and as such seemed unlikely to elicit responses that would cause distress to participants. However, research encounters designed in a relatively open style can travel in unpredicted directions, and as Lee and Renzetti (1990, p.512) note “it is possible for any topic, depending upon the context, to be a sensitive one”. Furthermore, I entered into personal spaces, moments and relationships by conducting research in domestic settings. Studying the emotional meant conversations sometimes covered the personal and intimate, which meant there were occasions where interviews raised issues that were upsetting for participants to talk about. Talking about plants often led to talking about people, memories, and at times lost loved ones or poignant events remembered through plants. Where judged appropriate in these instances I reiterated to participants that we could stop the interview at any point, or if they were happy to go on, continued to listen empathetically. Corbin and Morse (2003, p.350) note, however, that when conducted sensitively, being interviewed can be ‘validating and [can] offer… opportunities for introspection and growth’. Drawing on Kvale (1984), they suggest that ‘the very act of talking with another person that shares a common interest, is genuinely interested in your viewpoint, and who is not critical can be a richly rewarding experience’ (Corbin and Morse 2003, p.339).
Positionality and reflexivity

In addition to considering ethical issues, it is important to situate myself, how I interacted with participants, and the assumptions I brought into the research. Addressing my positionality is particularly important given my closeness to the topic under investigation (Davies 2008). With the exception of age difference in some cases, there were not hugely apparent differences between myself and research participants. Like myself, most participants were female, white British and had a similar level of education, and we shared common ground in our interest in gardening. Questions of power and representation are, however, imperative. As McLafferty (1995, cited in Rose 1997, p.307) suggests, the researcher almost always 'holds a “privileged” position by deciding what questions to ask, directing the flow of discourse, interpreting interview and observational material, and deciding where and in what form it should be presented'. Others have noted the reciprocal ‘give and take’ nature of interviews (Oakley 1981), and the emotional and identity ‘work’ entailed in building the trust and rapport necessary in intersubjective qualitative research (Coffey 1999).

Feminist scholars in particular have advocated reflexivity on the part of researchers to avoid the ‘false neutrality and universality’ (Rose 1997, p.306) inherent within academic knowledge production:

In contrast to the god-trick of claiming to see the whole world while remaining distanced from it, subjugated and critical knowledges work from their situatedness to produce partial perspectives on the world. They see the world from specific locations, embodied and particular, and never innocent; siting is intimately involved in sighting. (Rose, 1997, p.308)

Being open about one’s own position when writing research seems to suggest academics strive for absolute transparency, but as Rose (1997, p.307) argues, reflexive certainty is not only impossible to achieve, but undesirable and contradictory where epistemological approaches emphasise knowledge as ‘limited, specific and partial’. The following discussion centres on my position in the field so as to partially ‘situate’ the knowledge produced here, whilst recognising this cannot be a complete unveiling.

My interest in understanding everyday practices raised several issues. As a university researcher who had decided seed-saving was a topic worthy of a PhD study, my presence perhaps conferred legitimacy and importance to activities participants may
otherwise have viewed as fairly mundane or insignificant. This is particularly relevant to
questions about seed-saving and activism, and whether my findings relating to normative
notions around ‘being political’ (Isin 2002) were derived from emic or etic categories
(Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Whilst some seed-savers directly explained their
practice in terms of political and environmental impacts, for others the question of
‘activism’ was something I raised and encouraged them to reflect upon. Whilst several
participants said they had enjoyed discussing and reflecting on seed-saving (Greg,
fieldnotes, 28/08/2013; Kay, fieldnotes, 31/01/2013; Saira, fieldnotes, 22/02/2013) it is
not always easy to talk about things done routinely as part of everyday practice
(Hitchings 2012). I had to think carefully about how I related to participants to elicit
discussion and the ethical implications of these strategies (Duncombe and Jessop 2002).

In striving to build rapport with participants, I tended to present myself as fairly naïve, a
student or ‘apprentice’ in order to encourage explanation of processes and practices.
Some treated me as a novice, both in response to this self-presentation and my relative
age, since many participants were older and some had been professional gardeners for
many years. I ended up stating early on that I did not have a horticultural background to
reassure that I was not ‘judging’ (research diary, 28/01/2103) how participants did
tings, which may have impacted on the openness of our communication. Whilst useful
in eliciting responses and critically reflecting on my own biases and assumptions (Dwyer
and Buckle 2009), this affected naivety (Duncombe and Jessop 2002) is an example of
the tactical deceptions Lugosi (2006) argues are an often hidden aspect of research
practice. I always shared that I had been an allotment holder for several years, which
bought some legitimacy and awareness of a shared understanding about both the
challenges and pleasures of gardening. This seemed to encourage participants to
communicate with me about gardens in a way that went beyond simply relaying
information, to develop conversations that were grounded, contextualised, and
mediated by shared experiences. Having my allotment to talk about was useful in
interviews, and I often used it to make comparisons, mentioning the different layout of
my site, sharing stories, or comparing methods for growing specific vegetables to elicit
discussion of practices. Whilst this pre-existing shared understanding was certainly
beneficial in some respects, at times it could also close down avenues of conversation,
as participants might say by way of explanation: ‘you have an allotment, you’ll know this’
(Cathy, fieldnotes, 15/07/2013) rather giving a detailed description (Dwyer and Buckle
2009).
Despite identifying shared understandings, there is no single way of gardening or seed-saving, but a multitude of methods, cultural practices, techniques and superstitions. The landscapes and microclimates of growing spaces I visited both necessitated and reflected these heterogeneous cultivation approaches. I built questions into my interviews about participants’ individual methods for doing certain things, and my own taken for granted assumptions were brought to light during the research. For example, on one occasion in a community garden I was given some onion sets to plant, and I began arranging them into straight lines on the soil. I would usually plant onions like this in my allotment so I could hoe\(^4\) between the rows easily, but one garden volunteer told me with some consternation it might be better to stagger the planting, and ‘that way we would fit more in’ their limited growing space (fieldnotes, 20/06/2013). On another occasion, whilst weeding in Emma’s allotment I automatically sat on the scaffolding plank forming the edge of a raised bed, as I have a habit of doing in my own allotment, which is laid out in a similar style. After some time pulling handfuls of mare’s tail\(^5\), I noticed Emma was not sitting like this, and she had made some comments about the age of the planks, that the wood was rotting and starting to disintegrate. I realised that although Emma did not say it directly, she would have preferred me not to sit on the bed (fieldnotes, 12/07/2013). Noticing the way my body was accustomed to acting in an allotment brought a realisation of my pre-existing assumptions, and the sedimented embodied knowledges (Paterson 2009) accumulated through my own gardening practice that I carried into the research. Furthermore, in addition to my age, class, and gender, my physical ability as a researcher shaped the type of research I was able to undertake and therefore the findings I created.

My position in ‘the space between’ insider and outsider (Dwyer and Buckle 2009) shifted at various points in the research. Whilst I was at ease on allotments, I felt much more like a researcher who had travelled from a different part of the country to observe committee meetings for Seedy Sunday, for example (research diary, 27/01/2013). I sensed group members might feel I was evaluating their organisation or professionalism and that my presence in the close confines of someone’s dining room impacted on how the committee meeting was conducted. This feeling of being an ‘outsider’ changed as I got to know the committee, particularly after I had volunteered at the swap event and proved myself to be a ‘safe pair of hands’ (Daniel, fieldnotes,

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\(^4\) To agitate the soil between plants using a metal tool to remove weeds.

\(^5\) A deep rooting weed, difficult to remove from the soil.
However, my position here was always ambiguous. Volunteering as a committee member at Seedy Sunday meant I was treated as knowledgeable by members of the public, but whilst I was wearing the same t-shirt as committee members, I was only marginally involved and responsible for running the event. At times I was asked questions about the organisation that I was not in a position to answer (research diary, 03/02/2013), which highlighted the uncertain positions and expectations that must be negotiated as a researcher inhabiting multiple roles (Crang and Cook 2007). In contrast, community gardens were often already set up for ad hoc participation, which made joining in with everyday activity relatively unproblematic. However, whilst I could fit in easily, there remained a separation between myself and regular contributors. Acting as a ‘volunteer’ was very convenient for me, but managing volunteers takes time and effort, and my dipping in and out was perhaps less ideal for organisers reliant on committed, long-term contribution. Conscious of this I tried not to burden participants unnecessarily and to work productively when attending community gardens, but this had to be balanced with my main motivation to research, observe and take notes. My concern about ‘using’ participants meant I was careful not to over-commit, or make promises I was unable to keep.

Concluding the research and leaving the field

In ethnographic projects of this nature, it is difficult to know when to stop gathering data. It can be emotionally difficult to withdraw from ethnographic research (Ortiz 2004), particularly where there has been significant immersion. Whilst my visits were spaced out, I had built good relationships with people, and had become quite attached to participants. The geographic dispersal of the research meant leaving the field was a staggered process, though one event that marked the ‘end’ of intensive fieldwork was volunteering at Seedy Sunday one year on (fieldnotes, 02/02/2014). However, the blurring between field and home which played out as I tended my allotment throughout the course of the fieldwork and beyond means it is perhaps impossible to completely leave the field. Even as analysis and writing neared completion, I continued to garden, to sow the seeds I collected and tend the plum tree I was given by research participants. The biographies of the plants accumulated and the practical techniques and approaches I learnt are now embroidered into the fabric of my allotment and my own gardening practice.
In mid-winter and early spring towards the end of fieldwork, I wrote to all core participants and thanked them with a card and two packets of seed I’d saved in my allotment as a small gesture of thanks. Although intended to mark the end-point of the research, this very small act of reciprocation in fact keeps open possibilities for future gifting and exchange, and therefore contact. I was contacted six months later by one participant with pictures of ‘my’ pea seeds growing in her allotment, and another individual who had picked up my achocha seeds at a swap and was planning to grow them in a garden in the West Highlands of Scotland. This highlighted to me that though the research may have ended, it is impossible to completely leave people’s lives, and we cannot revert to being strangers once the research is complete (Duncombe and Jessop 2002). The continued circulation of seeds and their future potentiality means that at certain seasonal points, where thoughts about sowing and growing resurface, the seeds and connections made through the research are likely to be revisited as connections are sustained, albeit in a less intensive way.

This chapter has provided a justification of the methodology pursued in this study. It included an explanation of the philosophical underpinnings and concerns of methods drawn upon, and conveyed the practical challenges, ethical issues, and messiness of conducting fieldwork and analysis. As I have outlined in this chapter, tracing complexity and multiplicity are central to understanding how seed-saving is made meaningful. A research design sensitive to practice was therefore pursued, and I argued that a ‘more-than-discursive’ methodology was necessary to understand the meaning-making in everyday activity around food. Due to my prior interest and practice in gardening and seed-saving, considerations of ethics and positionality are paramount. The discussion here highlighted the need to convey something of my closeness to the subject under investigation. I develop this in the following chapters which outline empirical findings of the research, starting with a discussion of the storytelling, emotional attachments and responsibilities entailed in ‘Saving seeds’.
Chapter 4

Saving seeds: stories, attachments and responsibilities

Saving seed, gardening and growing all involve embodied engagements in the landscape and thoughts about the past, present and future (Nazarea 2005; Carolan 2007b; Phillips 2013; Hawkes and Acott 2013). What has yet to be fully unpicked is the entanglement of these affective and emotional dimensions with the distribution and exchange of seed, plants, and food. This chapter thus develops theoretical work on ‘reconnection’ in the ethical consumption literature by addressing individuals’ attachments to self-provisioned, home-grown seeds and elucidating the emotional and affective geographies of seed-saving practice. It considers ‘saving’ in its dual meaning. ‘Saving seed’ refers to collecting and keeping seeds for future growing seasons to provide subsequent generations of plants, and is therefore intimately bound with ideas of temporality, futurity, memory and continuity. The notion of saving also implies a rescuing relation between gardeners and seeds, hinting at responsibilities felt by individuals to nurture and protect.

Outlined in this chapter is the centrality of ‘sharing’ – a term participants drew on to encompass diverse relations including gifting, barter, and swapping (Belk 2010) – to gardeners’ everyday practices with plant material, including and beyond seeds. I begin by looking at ordinary exchanges taking place between gardeners, and disentangling the reciprocal expectations and social functions of ‘generosity’ (Barnett and Land 2007) to expose the complex interpersonal, temporal, and at times self-interested dimensions of swapping and sharing. I then examine how gardens and allotments are saturated with memory and ‘sensory reminders of identity and alterity’ (Nazarea 2005, p.53) through the stories told about seeds, before considering the embodied and emotional labour as plants are tended and seeds collected, passed on, and continued. In concluding I examine how relations of rescuing and nurturing coalesce with ideas about attachment and ownership.
Everyday garden and allotment sharing

A near ubiquitous feature of research interactions was the ‘sharing’ of garden produce: seeds, excess seedlings, cuttings, or food crops, as well as tools, labour and space. As outlined in Chapter 2, Belk’s (2010) definition of sharing stresses it is a fundamental, if overlooked consumer behaviour which creates and strengthens bonds between people, and differs from commodity exchange and gift-giving in that there are no reciprocal expectations. Whilst Belk (2010) attempts to delineate gifting, sharing, and commodity exchange in terms of their unique reciprocal expectations, in practice seed exchange exhibits slippage between these different forms. Though often described by participants as ‘sharing’, the exchanges taking place most often resembled Belk’s definition of gift-giving. Rather than getting hung-up trying to distinguish one form from another, as Appadurai (2014, p.13) notes ‘it is important to see the calculative dimension in all these forms of exchange’.

Self-interested expectations were identified in seed-savers’ narratives, and reciprocities were realised in material, emotional and interpersonal rewards. Barnett and Land (2007, p.1073) however, question preoccupations in moral geographies particularly with delineating self-interested and altruistic behaviour. Instead the authors stress their interrelationship though the notion of ‘generosity’, which they argue is a fundamental and ‘constitutive practice of sociality, community, and being together’. Seed-savers’ reciprocities were sometimes incomplete, manifested in temporally staggered, imbalanced transactions or in anticipating and imagining gifts being ‘passed forwards’ to other recipients. Significant in Barnett and Land’s (2007) theorisation is their prompt to consider these partialities and contingencies as the negotiation of ethics played out in everyday practices, rather than the causal motivations that generate moral action. Also interesting is that the term used by participants, ‘sharing’, expresses a practice with ideals closer to giving free from self-interested expectations. Furthermore, there were few instances of participants speaking to me about unappreciated gifts, greediness, or disappointment. This might be because uneven exchanges were overlooked or uncalculated, but it also signals a preference for emphasising the positive aspects of sharing. This raises questions about the stories it is socially acceptable to tell, and the need to look beyond the surface of sometimes romanticised narratives provided by participants.
Seedlings, cuttings, crops and seeds were routinely swapped on allotments (Ellen and Platten 2011; Platten 2013), and several participants spoke of unwritten understandings that excess plants or produce left on communal paths between plots were free to take (Barbara, fieldnotes, 20/06/2013; Becky, interview#2, 08/11/2013), a practice I recognised from my own allotment as a way of redistributed unwanted items. This type of swapping appears closer to one-sided, altruistic sharing (Belk 2010) because it affords the possibility of anonymity, though as I will demonstrate, there were complex reciprocities, expectations and emotional impacts entangled within ideas about giving and generosity (Barnett and Land 2007). Spontaneous direct exchanges between plot-holders also occurred frequently (Barbara, fieldnotes, 06/07/2013; Cathy, fieldnotes, 03.06.2013). I observed this when Emma, a seed guardian and plot-holder in Manchester suggested we walk around the allotment site at the end of one visit (fieldnotes, 12/07/2013). At the end of the central path we passed a family working together on a plot which looked particularly productive, neat and weed free in comparison to others we had passed. Emma asked how long they’d had it. ‘Eight months’, the man replied. Emma said they were ‘doing really well’, and complimented them on how the plot looked. After chatting for a few minutes, he asked if we’d like some lettuce, Emma said, ‘yes, if you can spare any’. The man gestured to a row which contained about eighty fully-grown lettuce plants, ready to pick. He cut about ten heads of lettuce, put them in a carrier bag, and gave them to Emma.

Lettuce perishes rapidly, and would not last long if cut and placed on a communal path in the July sun, yet taking excess lettuces from someone else’s plot when they were not there would be frowned upon (Ellen and Platten 2011). The sharing here arose after a chance encounter, likely influenced by my presence, in which Emma, a long-standing plot-holder and member of the allotment committee stopped to speak to gardeners she did not know. Emma’s act of sharing a conversation which affirmed both the man and his family as experienced gardeners, successfully producing bountiful crops stimulated the offer of the lettuce, which was made after she complimented their progress and productivity. It also seems likely that the evident excess of fresh, ready to eat lettuce plants contributed a sense of duty to give some away, raising questions of how the different materialities and temporalities of seeds, plants and food are implicated in how they are exchanged.

Seed-savers’ feelings of responsibility to share perishable items to avoid waste surfaced frequently, evident in their explanations and observed on numerous occasions where
individuals went out of their way to identify recipients (including me) of food and seedlings (David, fieldnotes, 04/10/2013; Susan, fieldnotes, 04/10/2013; Jean, fieldnotes, 06/05/2013). This was reflected as Emma divided the gifted lettuces and gave me a bagful, saying that ten lettuces was more than she would manage (fieldnotes, 12/07/2013). This instance also highlights the multidimensionality of gardeners’ sharing practices which extend beyond produce to the sharing of labour, tools and space both within families and between fellow plot-holders or neighbours. Allotments and community gardens are prime examples of communally shared spaces that entail working with and alongside others, a topic picked up in Chapter 6. The research also exposed creative domestic sharing arrangements, such as Kay, a seed swap organiser who exchanged help cultivating her neighbours’ garden for vegetables (fieldnotes, 31/01/2013), or others who practiced gleaning and foraging, for example (Becky, fieldnotes 04/07/2013; Nina, fieldnotes, 21/06/2013).

Beyond the territorially defined communities of allotments which provide opportunities for chance encounters and impromptu sharing, home gardeners also took part in similar, yet perhaps more purposeful sharing of produce. Emma left bags of excess rhubarb on a neighbour’s doorstep (interview#1, 07/06/2013); Jean, a retired teacher of horticulture, seed guardian and allotment holder in Greater Manchester saved apples and pumpkins for her grandchildren (fieldnotes, 01/10/2013); and allotment holder Nathan took produce to share at the pub (interview#1, 03/06/2013). Like many participants, Anita, a seed guardian who cultivates the garden of the home she shares with her parents in Greater Manchester, takes excess garden produce into her workplace:

[T]here are times when I just take stuff to work because I’ve got buckets and buckets of them, and people are happy to swap. So, I think there’s more of that culture goes on as well, now, say if we are overrun with courgettes now, would you like some, then later you might get some plums in return, or something… (Anita, interview#1, 07/05/2013)

Anita locates her exchanges within a swapping ‘culture’ that has been initiated. Her description highlights an expectation that her gifts of courgettes, a vegetable gardeners often spoke of producing in ‘gluts’, will be reciprocated by others, though this is not certain. She ‘might’ receive produce when others have a different seasonal glut, such as plums which ripen later in the year. Descriptions of the spaces of sharing interactions bring into view the social networks in which sharing relations are embedded, and the
types of recipients sought out and embroiled in practices of generosity (Barnett and Land 2007; Smith and Jehlička 2013).

Clive shares his allotment in Greater Manchester with his wife Cathy, two humming beehives and often Nathan, who visits from a neighbouring plot to share a cup of tea. Clive takes some produce into work, but also donates excess food to charities and foodbanks for redistribution:

> [Y]ou need to share it. You don’t need to bulk keep it, or anything like that. For example, if we grow excess, we share it, we take it all out, and as much as we can, we don’t want to let it rot either. You know, it’s a sin. So any excess that you’ve got. Send it out. And if you have to, make the effort to do that, amongst your neighbours, your friends. I take a lot of produce to work. I mean the rhubarb has been an absolute… it goes like a forest on fire. I take a few sticks in, and then they’re all wanting it. (Clive, interview #1, 03/06/2013)

Clive sees sharing food as both obligation and pleasure. It is a ‘sin’ to hoard food or passively ‘let it rot’, and he states that gardeners have a responsibility to ‘make the effort’ to ‘send it out’. Sharing thus satisfies Clive’s own desire to avoid the ‘sin’ of waste and the negative emotions associated with watching valued produce rot, as well as facilitating and building social relationships.

It seems unlikely Clive and Cathy will reduce the amount they grow to minimise the risk of overproduction because of the opportunities for sharing and sociability that excess food affords, but also due to difficulties in predicting how much will grow each year given the vagaries of the weather. Some vegetables might produce a glut if climatic conditions are right, whereas others are expected. Courgettes, for example, are fairly easy to grow, often arrive all at once, and are notoriously difficult to share (or get rid of) between gardeners because usually everyone has more than they need. That the summer of 2012 was particularly rainy and difficult for certain crops meant conversations with seed-savers often touched on our shared experiences of not having enough courgettes to give away (research diary, 06/07/2013).

Gardeners’ talk about ‘gluts’ of vegetables also functioned to demonstrate their success as producers (Platten 2013). Clive’s explanation hints at the satisfaction and pride that accrues from having enough produce to distribute. His depiction of rhubarb going ‘like a
forest on fire’ indicates his pleasure in being able to provide for others, a point his wife, Cathy reiterates:

I used to take the wicker baskets in, and I’d put them in, in the staff room. And you’d lay them out, really nice. And the feeling of pride, doing that, and everyone come in, and Clive said the same thing. Er, and they’d come round and [I’d] say, “help yourself”, and people would say, “oh no, we must give you something”. “No, help yourself”. And that’s a really nice feeling. (Cathy, interview#1, 03/06/2013)

Though Cathy and Clive say they don’t expect anything material to be reciprocated, the interpersonal returns should not be understated. Cathy echoes Clive’s feelings of pride in sharing with colleagues and displaying her produce. Importantly, this display is taking place in a different context to the allotment where Cathy and Clive spend their free time. It serves to demonstrate Cathy’s status as a grower, extending her passion and sharing it with others beyond the plot, as well as maintaining relations with work colleagues.

David and Claire manage a large back-garden where they keep chickens, a small orchard, and aim to live a mostly self-sufficient lifestyle. As committed seed guardians, each saving several varieties for HSL, David and Claire use sharing and gifting to promote the associated Garden Organic charity:

[W]henever I’ve had surplus veg in the past or we’ve had surplus veg, you know, I’ve sold it...very...very cheaply and given the money to Garden Organic basically. […] Tried to get people to appreciate… different things, you know, like if you have a pound of tomatoes there might be six different types; different shapes; different colours… And now we’ve got people that would swear blind... blue eggs are better than the ordinary ones! (David, interview#1, 09/05/2013)

David and Claire use gifts of often unusual produce as a gentle way to raise awareness about heritage seeds, organic growing, and the variety found in home-grown varieties. That blue-shelled eggs and unusual tomatoes are difficult to buy commercially makes them closer to what Belk (2010) describes as the ‘perfect gift’, because they are further removed from the commodity form and monetary exchange. Interestingly David corrects himself here, replacing his initial ‘when I’ve had surplus’ with ‘we’ve’, preferring to stress food growing as a joint enterprise, but also hinting that the attachments and implied ownerships of produce and productive capacities aren’t entirely straightforward and play out differently dependent on context, as I discuss later in this chapter.
David also spoke about a friend’s father, a long-standing gardener so taken with a gift of unusual tomato seeds that he’d given David back some seedlings, and had been giving them to neighbours:

David: [It] can encourage some seed swapping then… buying these odd ball tomatoes

Claire: Yes, so…

David: … you know, people who’ve been growing things for generations that will have grown the same tomato year after year after year… you know, the Gardeners Delight, or whatever it may be, the Moneymaker or whatever… they’ve never gone beyond the traditional varieties so it’s been quite good to get them growing something a bit different.

(David and Claire, interview #1, 09/05/2013)

By drawing other people into their stories about seeds and plants, David and Claire divulge their gardening as a connected and connecting practice. David’s experience of heritage and unusual varieties is something he can to pass on to others. It is not simply the material seeds or plants that are important in this sharing, but the knowledge and inspiration for other gardeners to go ‘beyond’ what they are used to, depicted here as outdated and repetitive. David is happy he influenced his friend’s father to try something
different to the standard tomatoes like the (aptly named) popular commercial variety ‘Moneymaker’, and that a living connection in the form of swapped tomatoes has been forged between their gardens (Brook 2003). The reward for David and Claire is not getting seedlings in return, or receiving produce in the future, but is derived in demonstrating their knowledge, knowing friends have been inspired by their gifts, and hoping this influence might continue as seeds are passed forward to others.

![Figure 4.2: Diverse tomatoes in David's polytunnel](image)

Participants were eager to share produce in research encounters as a material demonstration of the exchanges they explained to me, but also as a way of building and reinforcing our newly initiated social relationship (research diary, 06/06/2013; 15/07/2013). As touched on earlier, due to the seasonal staggering of harvesting different crops and collecting their seed, gifts between gardeners are often imbalanced. An important aspect of gifting in Belk’s (2010) typology is that someone is always in debt, and as Barnett and Land (2007, p.1072, drawing on Young 1997) concur, ‘it is in relations of asymmetrical reciprocity that ethical relationships find their feet.’ Temporal imbalance links individuals and thus maintains social relationships, unlike simultaneous commodity exchange, which Belk (2010, p.718) states is ‘about the reproduction of rights to objects, not the reproduction of relationships between people’. Perhaps
prompted by our conversations, I left visits with David and Claire on one occasion with six blue eggs, and another with two punnets of plums, a bag of heritage tomatoes and several apples to sample on my journey home (fieldnotes 09/05/2013, 04/09/2013). The gifts I received and gave during the research enabled me to participate in the typical exchanging, sharing, and gifting between gardeners, which I recognised from swapping with my allotment neighbours and gardening family members. They were slightly different, however, as I was not fully part of these visited allotment communities or social networks, but was perhaps instead a ‘guest to impress’ through the giving of presents (Chevalier 2014) or the mowing of lawns before my arrival (fieldnotes, 15/04/2013).

As outlined in Chapter 3, conducting fieldwork entailed formal and informal reciprocal negotiations. In return for participants’ time and thoughts I listened to their stories (Corbin and Morse 2003), offered advice and reassurance, helped with practical tasks in gardens, and in taking their plants and seeds acknowledged their tacit expectations that I would grow and look after them. Participating in gifting was extremely useful in furthering bonds between myself and participants, since these gifts unbalanced and therefore extended our relationship beyond the relatively defined ‘give and take’ of an interview, and kept open possibilities for future swaps and therefore contact (Belk 2010; Gregory 1982). I was conscious, however, that I was already asking a lot of participants who then bestowed gifts upon me when visiting their allotments and gardens.

I tried to rectify these feelings of ‘indebtedness’ (research diary, 20/06/2013) by bringing biscuits or cake to share at meetings. However, on one occasion my attempts at instilling a marginally more balanced exchange were met with increasing offers of produce in what started to feel like a sharing arms race, with Cathy resorting to subterfuge. Knowing I would be offered tea on arrival at the allotment, I baked some scones, which seemed to be appreciated by Cathy, Nathan and Nathan’s mum, and I felt much more comfortable not arriving empty handed. Cathy gave me a jar of honey, so I said I’d leave the jar of jam I’d brought with the scones. Cathy said that sounded like a ‘fair swap’, and then Nathan said he would give me some lavender plants he’d grown from seed. Earlier on, I had remarked on some peppers in the greenhouse, and Cathy said I should take some of those too. I felt she’d already given too much, so politely declined, despite her insistence. When I got home I found that when I was on Nathan’s plot collecting the lavender she’d snuck some peppers into the empty scone tin (fieldnotes, 15/07/2013).
Given that earlier conversations about exchanging seeds and plants with Cathy, Clive and Nathan often centred on how much they enjoyed giving things away (Barnett and Land 2007) and the ‘sin’ of hoarding, it is unsurprising that Cathy wanted to demonstrate this practically by giving me presents to take home, particularly since I had brought something with me to share. Cathy and Clive’s general encouragement of Nathan’s gardening progress perhaps encouraged him to follow suit in offering the lavender plants. Interesting in the example above is that the sharing did not stop when Cathy considered we had engaged in a ‘fair swap’. By reciprocating her special gift of honey too quickly, with something similarly sweet and in a jar, my counter gift had actually denied Cathy her intended feelings of generosity and made the transaction too equal. This was my third meeting with Cathy and Nathan, and I was starting to get to know them. That Cathy wanted to give me a present on this visit also hints at how I was ‘placed’ in this encounter and how my relative age, status as a student and gardening experience influenced the type of gifts I was offered (Chevalier 2014). Cathy’s planned gift of the honey was also a reinforcement of our continuing connection and my beginning to be included within their allotment community. An unfair swap, with one party indebted was actually more desirable for Cathy, as the secreted peppers attest (Belk 2010).

This preference for unbalanced sharing is also evident in what seems initially like a more straightforwardly reciprocal arrangement where garden produce is exchanged in return for volunteer labour. Brian and Jack, organisers of a large community garden save a large quantity of seed to sow and swap. Here they describe how food produce is shared and received:

_Laura_: [H]ow do you… share out the produce, how do you… distribute it?

_Brian_: Just… dump it on the table, at the end of the day. You get some people that have got… yeah, they’ll take all they can. There’s people that are really humble and take nothing. Uh… a lot of people won’t take anything their first visit. That’s quite interesting…

_Jack_: Yeah, it’s funny that.

_Laura_: Until they’ve put in some more time?

_Brian_: Most people are sort of like, ooh… yeah, they, they recognise the value of it, and… we will… insist and push it on people, but I quite like that sort of… it’s an
acknowledgement from them of the value of it. It is like a paying it forward attitude, you know? (Brian and Jack, interview#2, 04/07/2013)

In this garden, food is not allocated based on the number of hours spent working, but rather is ‘dumped’ on the table, and volunteers must decide how much to take. Brian notes volunteers often wait until they have contributed more than a day’s labour before feeling comfortable to take food, which he feels shows they recognise the ‘value’ of the produce, and describes this as a ‘paying it forward attitude’. His comment that ‘we will insist… and push it on people’ indicates a valorisation of the ideals of giving freely, even if he does concede that the share volunteers take is something they need (or ought) to earn. In ‘paying it forward’ the prospect of future sharing of food and labour exists and maintains a social relationship between new volunteers and garden organisers (Chevalier 2014; Belk 2010; Gregory 1982). Although premised on a more direct exchange of labour for food, this arrangement reveals complex reciprocities that are temporally delayed, intertwined with Brian’s own views on the ‘value’ of the produce and his hopes volunteers appreciate the vegetables they take.

In a similar sense, seed circles (considered further in Chapter 6) have clear expectations of what each member contributes and receives, and involve direct and simultaneous reciprocation between known individuals. Seed circles involve groups of growers agreeing in advance to grow a specific crop, then distribute seed to the rest of the group, making it closer to a ‘like-for-like’ exchange (Ellen and Platten 2011, p.573). Louise (interview#1, 09/05/2013), a seed guardian who organises a community garden and several seed circles describes the personal benefits of exchanging with others: ‘if everyone makes a little bit of effort… then you all get a return on your investment, so to speak.’ Louise indicates that she is motivated by the expectation of receiving seeds and uses monetary terms of getting a ‘return’ on her ‘investment’ to explain the rational motivations of taking part.

However, this is neither entirely calculated nor direct. Louise goes on to explain how peoples’ generosity extends beyond the moment of exchange:

[P]eople are really ridiculously friendly, and you know, one of the things I’ve learnt is that the more you give away, the more you get… It just seems to multiply. And people then, do you a favour, it’s like, three years later they go “oh yeah, you gave me some seed, I’m just going to send you this because I found this, cause it’s really interesting”. And you kind
of, yeah, it just sort of snowballs really. You don’t, you know, if you give freely, it comes back to you tenfold… (Louise, interview#1, 09/05/2013)

The social aspects of sharing are of key importance here. The group of seed swappers with whom Louise identifies are depicted as ‘ridiculously friendly’, giving more than expected or anticipated. Louise learnt about this friendliness through *doing* seed swapping, as her contributions to the circle were reciprocated in offers of seeds and meaningful interpersonal relations. Like my experience of sharing on Cathy and Nathan’s allotment which began to get out of hand, Louise explains how giving ‘freely’ create a virtuous circle of sharing that seems to ‘snowball’ and is temporally extended.

**Seed stories**

Looking closely at seed-savers’ divestment of excess produce highlights the centrality of sharing as a way of bridging ordinary cultivation practices and maintaining social relationships. Notions of seed stories and ‘heirloom’ varieties frequently appear in non-academic literatures on seed-saving (Whealy 2011; Ray 2012). This suggests an understanding of seed exchange as story-telling (Cameron 2012; Langellier and Peterson 2011), a more-than-material transaction that involves a multifaceted cultural transfer. Storytelling is an integral part of everyday life and communication, which enables people to ‘make sense of their experiences, claim identities, interact with each other, and participate in cultural conversation’ (Langellier and Peterson 2011, p.1). Smart’s (2007, p.34, drawing on Gillis 1996) distinction between personal and cultural memory highlights the entanglement of ‘everyday activities and the realm of the *imagined*’ and has implications for thinking about how saving and sharing seed forms social connections through the imagined geographies of other people’s gardens. As Carolan’s (2007b) research at the Seed Savers Exchange in the US identified, savers recognised seeds as ‘living histories’, connecting backwards to people who had previously protected and cared for them, and forwards to future generations of growers and plants. Heirloom varieties encompass material, genetic heritage and diversity, but they are also vehicles of cultural transmission.

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I developed a lengthy list of varieties recommended to me: tomatoes, beetroot or beans felt to be particularly flavoursome
or vigorous, often with interesting stories or names. Some varieties cropped up several times, such as the tasty, compact and prolific ‘Whippersnapper’ tomato (Claire, fieldnotes, 04/11/2013; Scott, interview, 22/02/2013), or the unusual ‘Crimson Flowered’ broad bean (Jean, fieldnotes 26/11/2012, 06/05/2013; Abigail, fieldnotes, 21/11/2013) rescued from obscurity and now flourishing in gardens and allotments around the country. The most famous of these stories seemed to have reached mythical proportions, like the ‘Cherokee Trail of Tears’ bean (Roy, interview, 28/02/2013; Barbara, fieldnotes, 20/06/2013), an heirloom climbing bean brought by the native North American Cherokee people when they were driven from their homelands in the state of Georgia by the US government in 1838 in a forced march known as the ‘Trail of Tears’.

However, my discussions and observations with gardeners revealed the significance of the personal biographies of seeds and plants, the ‘small stories’ which illuminate ‘the personal, the mundane and the local’ (Cameron 2012, p.575). As Cameron suggests in her discussion of the recent interest within geography in ‘storying things’, of interest here is ‘not so much the biography of things themselves… but rather the material practices and relations through which ‘things’ come to matter’ (Cameron 2012, p.578; Appadurai 2014; Kopytoff 2014). The following discussion of ‘seed stories’ therefore divulges how nurturing, propagating and sharing plant material embeds growers into emotional landscapes, rich in personal and cultural biography (Jones 2007). It fleshes out the processes through which swapped seeds accumulate the ‘feeling’ that distinguishes them from ‘fetishised’ mass-produced commodities, examined further in Chapter 5. Revealed here is ‘the role of remembering in constructing… meaningful place’ (Everts 2010, p.855), as people and places are folded into gardens and allotments through seed-savers’ enduring and fleeting attachments to seeds and their stories.

Swapping seeds often included sharing their ‘fascinating’ (Michael, interview, 27/08/2013) or ‘heart-warming’ (Brian, interview#1, 28/02/2013) stories, as well as cultural information about how to grow them. Knowing (or imagining) where seeds had come from was particularly important to Becky, a gardener in Brighton who makes and sells seedbombs:

That's one of the amazing things about seed swaps, as well, because, you know, people are swapping seeds, as well as stories about where the seeds have come from, as well as like, tips on how to grow them, and… you know on the back of a packet of seeds, it
might tell you a few very… sort of generic things, but… it doesn’t tell you how to harvest them, or anything like that… (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013)

The personal experiences of seeds’ provenance communicated at seed swaps are contrasted here with ‘generic’, placeless information found on commercial seed packets. Many of the seeds Becky uses in her seedbombs originate from wildflowers growing in the local area, which she collects in small quantities and propagates in her allotment. She explained seeds felt more ‘meaningful’ (Becky, fieldnotes, 20/06/2013) when she could link them with a story, a personal memory or a local landscape, and said she told these stories when she sold seedbombs or ran workshops.

Whilst some participants, like Becky, were interested in wildflowers and ornamentals, many focused on growing unusual or ‘heirloom’ fruit and vegetable varieties. The notion of a ‘variety’ inhabits a contested discursive terrain. In botanical terms, a variety is a ‘sub-species taxonomic category historically used to refer to populations that developed different traits due to geographic separation’ (Aistara 2014, p.21). However, the term ‘variety’ also has legal connotations, and according to the Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) must be ‘recognizable by its characteristics, recognizably different from any other variety and remain unchanged through the process of propagation’ (UPOV 2015, my emphasis). Drawing on theories of population genetics, Demeulenaere (2014, p.52) contests these notions of fixity and stability, stressing the continual evolution and genetic heterogeneity that remains within recognised varieties, and arguing: ‘varieties have no natural boundaries, they are, rather, a social construct’. As Aistara (2014, p.13) notes, the science of taxonomy and categorisation strips plants ‘of both their ecological and social connections in a process of bringing order to chaos.’

Whilst legal understandings of varieties as stable and static inform EU seed laws and help to determine intellectual property rights, home gardeners and organisations such as HSL acknowledged the continual evolution and changeability of seeds. Due to their inherent genetic heterogeneity, human interactions with seeds hold potential to shape the evolution and variability of varieties in different directions, through different practices of cultivation, adaptations to local soils or climates, accidental mislabelling or cross pollination. The dynamic processes of evolution and cultural transition are reflected in seeds’ names and stories, which demonstrate this flux and changeability. Anthony, who works at HSL outlines this co-evolution of seeds’ genetics and narratives as he explains the difficulties of identifying varieties brought into the collection:
Sometimes people give packets saying, ‘unknown bean’, and things like that. People change the spelling because they’ve forgotten the name of it, so you know, instead of calling it ‘Mrs Miggins’ it becomes ‘Mrs Higgins’ you know, and it’s just silly, but you think, are they the same? […] People lose the labels, they weed it away, they’re grown too close, they cross over and they don’t know which is which... (Anthony, interview, 23/04/2013)

The varieties Anthony and others talked about, shared with me and demonstrated growing in gardens are better understood as culturally produced, existing and evolving in relation to human maintenance in cultivated places: as stories rather than discrete capsules of genetic material (Carolan 2007b).

Mysteries surrounding how plants came to be named, perhaps after place or person, were a source of intrigue for several seed-savers. Aside from the physical characteristics of a variety as plant or food, individuals fostered attachments to certain seeds when their names held a particular appeal. Carol, a nurse and volunteer at Seedy Sunday talks about the pleasure she derives growing a bean with a name that resonates with her professional identity:

Carol: [There’s] something… really amazing about finding a packet of seeds called ‘District Nurse’, so… and there’s some other nurses who go to Seedy Sunday. And it’s just lovely having beans, growing beans that are called district nurse, it’s just really funny. And seeing the old potatoes… erm, you can rummage through and pick out. And… [they] print out a little history of the potatoes, and what they’re good for, and also where they’ve come from… so it is a feeling of heritage, and thinking, wow, well maybe my grandfather grew these, or my great grandfather, or… you know. (Carol, interview, 31/01/2013)

Carol suggests she is not alone in enjoying this almost whimsical connection with seeds, from discovering them at a swap to their continued presence in her garden (Brook 2003). She describes feeling connected with the past by growing ‘old’ or heirloom varieties of potatoes and imagining earlier generations engaged in the same practice.

‘Heirloom’ seeds, perhaps saved within a family or passed through several generations of gardeners, were often talked about with fascination (Roy, fieldnotes, 28/02/2013; Abigail, fieldnotes, 07/02/2013; Jim, fieldnotes, 02/05/2013), and as enabling a ‘living connection’ with history that can be practiced in the garden (Brook 2003, p.228; Aistara 2014). A combination of age, mystery, and portrayal as under threat or out of favour connotes ‘heirloom’ seeds with qualities of novelty and difference, and of needing
protection, as demonstrated in this conversation between allotment holders Cathy and Nathan:

*Cathy*: I just like the idea of it being old fashioned seeds that nobody else has got. And someone’ll say, what’s the name of that, and it’s not like an F1 seed…

*Nathan*: And you’ll… and you look back... It’s like the old English pea that I’ve got, you look back and it’s like 1908 even, eighteen something, you think... wow.

*Laura*: Yeah?

*Nathan*: You don’t even think how far back it goes. So it’s something different than if you just go to Wilkinsons or somewhere like that, and buy a pack of peas or beans or something like that. Where you don’t know where they’re coming from. It’s just in an envelope, or, a packet, and that was it…

*Cathy*: But also this is the soil, hopefully that’s where that originated from. So that would be, hopefully more disease resistant, because, it… this is the area it should have been grown in. And we’re talking like two hundred years ago some of these would have been grown. And… why can’t we go back to that? I think… this sort of allotment, I think it cries out for it, especially in the inner city. You know, that’s what we’re looking for, isn’t it? [...] And hopefully it’ll have that resistance to… disease resistance. (Cathy and Nathan, interview#1, 03/06/2013)

Thinking about the cultivation of these peas in the distant past gives Cathy and Nathan a sense that what they grow is special and different to other allotment holders. Their historical pea seeds are rare, superior to those easily obtained commercially. Like seedbomb producer Becky (interview#1, 29/01/2013), Nathan distinguishes between seeds in a ‘packet’ where provenance is unknown, with peas named after their local (English) heritage. Beyond the novelty, rarity, and difference to ‘run of the mill’ supermarket seeds, in the latter part of this extract Cathy attributes characteristics of disease resistance and local suitability to the heirloom pea, exposing the multi-layering of rationalised and more whimsical stimuli. She wants to think these seeds originated and developed in similar growing conditions to her allotment. In part this demonstrates Cathy’s hopes that ‘local’ seeds will confer positive attributes like resistance to diseases, but also divulges a sense that allotment culture parallels a perhaps more ‘authentic’ former agricultural past, distancing Cathy and Nathan’s growing practices from modern agribusiness and industrial agriculture.
This idea of agricultural heritage is particularly important to Michael. A retired history teacher, Michael has researched the local varieties of his area, and introduced several of his discoveries into HSL. We chatted sitting on upturned buckets next to a large glass house at the garden where he regularly volunteers. Our conversation touched on the well-known stories of seeds like the ‘Cherokee Trail of Tears’ bean mentioned earlier, and those with personal histories and associations with his grandparents and local places. He spoke proudly about varieties he had brought into the library and said he felt he had played a small role in continuing their ‘botanical lineage’. I asked Michael to explain the difference between commercially produced seeds, and those shared socially and at seed swaps:

*Michael:* I just love to pick up the seeds that are locally grown. I know there’s a history behind them…

*Laura:* Yeah?

*Michael:* And…this pack of seeds is so, I know it sounds silly but, there’s no history to it, no feeling about it. I can talk about every plant in my garden, and I could tell you a story about each plant in my garden. And for a lot of people that may be very boring! But to me it’s so interesting, you know, everything I put in. And my wife will turn to me and say, Michael, you’ve got so many experiments going on in this garden, I said, well, yeah, but I just enjoy growing them just to see what’s gonna grow. (Michael, interview, 27/08/2013)

Michael explains his passionate involvement with seeds derives from knowing their history and imagining who may have grown them in the past. He propagates this enthusiasm through multiple experiments and by narrating his plants’ ‘eventful biographies’ (Kopytoff 2014) to those prepared to listen. Like Becky and Nathan, he emphasises the difference between the ‘feeling’ in swapped and saved seeds and those you might buy commercially, in a ‘pack’. Interestingly, commercial seeds were often talked about in terms of the packet, their outward display of commerciality seeming to act as both a material and symbolic barrier to felt, tactile and warm (Müller 2014a, 2014b) engagement with seeds.

Michael goes on to describe some parsnip seeds he was given at a swap:

I think they’re better seeds actually, they’re stronger seeds. I don’t know if that’s the case, I’ve no idea. But they, they feel…they’ve got a history to it, and the history to it really
gives me such pleasure in knowing that I’m continuing that thing. (Michael, interview, 27/08/2013)

Michael expresses his joy in continuing the living history of the seeds he grows and playing a role in perpetuating the sense of human ‘feeling’ they hold. Though swapped seeds seem to grow better, Michael does not know whether home-saved seeds are stronger. He is certain that the ‘feeling’ of the seeds is different, however, even if what constitutes this sense of feeling remains somewhat elusive.

**Memory and continuity**

Michael had a particular passion for exploring the local history of agricultural production in his area compared with other gardeners in the study. Although he was concerned I might find his seed stories ‘boring’ (fieldnotes, 27/08/2013), in fact this retelling of plant and seed biography reappeared time and again, particularly during garden tours, where the ‘potted histories’ of individual plants arose frequently. As Crewe (2011, p.44) notes, ‘[t]hings rarely hold value in themselves as objects but act as material memory joggers to an emotional state or moment that their owners want to recapture.’ Charting the journeys of rooted plants, seeds in their less physically mobile state, reveals how distant times, places and people are remembered in material forms that take root in the garden (Brook 2003).

In Nazarea’s (2005 p.45, her emphasis) work on marginality and memory in seed-saving, she suggests seed-savers’ capacities for subversion and resistance lie within ‘visceral embodiment in sites of memory’. As Jones (2007, p.213) outlines, memory is ‘bound up with processes of place and emotional attachments to place’. Allotments and gardens are places that allow both a sense of futurity and the performance of remembrance (Hawkes and Acott 2013). As plants continue to grow, connections with people, places, and memories are renewed, remade and resurface with the changing seasons (Aistara 2014). Gathering seeds or taking cuttings were ways participants deliberately remembered happy or pleasurable events, from maintaining connections with family members or the country of their birth to more impulsive reminders of places visited. Memories are not always positive or pleasurable however, and what seldom featured in seed-savers’ narratives were accounts of those seeds discarded, lost, or forgotten (Crewe 2011). These somewhat selective memorials indicate what was most meaningful
to participants through the plants they continued to nurture, and the stories they chose to tell.

Saira, a seed swap attendee, saved and passed on her grandfather’s Indian radish seeds as well as collecting on holidays, relishing the challenge of getting seeds from warmer climates to germinate and grow in her Brighton garden:

I shouldn’t admit to but, often if I’m walking in gardens, and if I see some seed on the ground, I’ll always be tempted to pick a bean pod, or an olive that I’ve seen in Turkey, on the ground, or a pine nut, and I do get tempted to bring them here and sprout them, see if they’ll grow in our climate… (Saira, interview, 22/02/2013)

Similarly, seed swap volunteer Nina (interview#2, 21/06/2013), mentioned the Green Zebra tomato seeds, ‘a little bit of Los Angeles’ she brought on moving to the UK, and Heather (interview, 25/02/2013) told me about seeds collected whilst on holiday in Lanzarote and Mexico: ‘I know that’s a bit naughty, ’cause you’re not meant to bring… but I do things that are, that I know… will grow’ […] Not something like Japanese Knotweed!’ These examples illustrate how seed-saving practices draw distant places into ethical negotiations in the garden (Massey 2004; Malpass et al. 2007b). Interestingly, all acknowledged bringing back seeds from different countries was subversive and at times illegal, yet continued to collect seeds in this way. Heather, who works as a professional gardener justified her illegal seed collecting through her knowledge of invasive plants like Japanese Knotweed. Whilst the introduction of ‘alien’ species or diseases might have serious negative consequences (Brook 2003), other seed-savers also rationalised these transgressions by pointing out seeds’ abilities to colonise new spaces without deliberate human intervention (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013).

As well as providing sensory reminders of cherished places, cuttings and seeds were swapped in the hopes of generating collective memory which continues and circulates beyond the garden. As I helped seed swap organisers Daniel and Nick package seeds for the upcoming event they told me they always looked for seeds when on holiday together. Recounting a hollyhock seed collected on their honeymoon in Greece, Nick explained they always brought envelopes with them ‘just in case’. Much like taking out a camera, the envelopes were taken in anticipation of a memorable day:

Nick: [W]e just stopped in this little craft shop, didn’t we? And in the carpark there was this very very pretty, deep pink hollyhock…
Daniel: So we got the seedheads…

Nick: …the seedheads!

(laughter)

Nick: And we did, I'm not quite sure what happened to them, the Lassithi Plateau ones?

Daniel: You got bored of them.

Nick: Yeah…

Daniel: You got bored of hollyhocks… friends of ours have got them, and we've, and we sell them. So they're in other people's gardens.

Nick: …and people have probably got hollyhocks in their gardens, labelled 'Lassithi Plateau'…

Daniel: Yes! Yes, yeah…

Nick: …thinking that's its name, just because that's what we'd written on it… (Nick and Daniel, interview, 28/01/2013)

Pleasant holiday memories and sensory reminders of the Cretan landscape are continued in living form in Nick and Daniel's suburban English garden (Aistara 2014), and they enjoy wondering where the seeds have ended up and who might grow them into the future.

That this interview was conducted whilst handling seeds, putting them into paper envelopes and thinking about passing them on to others perhaps prompted Daniel and Nick to tell the story of their seeds, and to relate their privileged knowledge that the onomatology of the 'Lassithi Plateau' hollyhock could be traced to their act of collecting and sharing (fieldnotes, 28/01/2013). Though Daniel and Nick's story signals their attachment, they say ultimately they 'got bored of hollyhocks'. However, in breaking company with the Lassithi Plateau hollyhock, Daniel and Nick are consoled by sharing the seeds with friends, and knowing the plants are likely to be growing in somebody's garden. Attachments to seeds and plants can be enduring or fleeting, severed more easily in the knowledge that others are continuing the lineage of a once treasured plant. Sharing and swapping seeds therefore allows a degree of letting go, as seed-savers
recognise seeds have lives outside their control and beyond the confines of their gardens.

Interviewing ‘on the go’, particularly in garden tours allowed participants to draw on a vast range of material and environmental prompts (De Leon and Cohen 2005), which provided further insight into how participants navigated the emotional terrain of the garden (Kusenbach 2003; Carpiano 2009). As we walked together through gardens and allotments, participants responded to the landscape and stopped to point out various things that caught their interest (Nina, fieldnotes, 21/06/2013; Susan, fieldnotes 10/06/2013; Emma, fieldnotes, 12/07/2012). Sometimes these were salvaged and rescued plants that had arrived with something a story. Participants demonstrated once unpromising specimens, perhaps in danger of perishing or abandonment, now planted in the ground and flourishing (Cathy, fieldnotes, 15/07/2013). Trees featured as purposeful memorial plantings due to their relative longevity, given to mark birthdays or anniversaries (Susan, fieldnotes 10/06/2013). Examining these attachments sheds light on the entanglement of practical, everyday ethics and cultivated landscape (Nazarea 2005; Hall 2011; Brady 2006), played out through seed-savers’ nurturing relationships for plants in their care.

Nina, who is in her twenties and campaigns on food issues in her role in the voluntary sector, showed me around the garden of the home she rents with her partner one overcast afternoon in June. She explained with delight that a hedgehog had recently been visiting her greenhouse, and lingered on plants that were unusual or had been ‘salvaged’:

Nina: [T]his is lemon mint that actually, this is a really sweet story. Cause this plant originally came from a packet of herbs that were being thrown out by a local greengrocer, because some of them had gotten squidgey. And I brought them home, and noticed that some of them were growing little tiny root bits. So I placed them all in the ground, and some of them actually grew. And it’s been growing ever since?

Laura: Ah… so it’s was rescued?

Nina: Yeah, it was a total rescue. But they’re really woody, and they don’t grow very bushy. But I kind of just like its presence. And, that’s my partner’s um, graduation lavender, which I gave him. Instead of a bouquet I got him… And that’s the sweet cicely, um, which has recently been transplanted, and is all the happier for it. It used to be very very small, it used to share a pot, that wasn’t working. And then, Chilean guava.
Laura: Oh, ok…

Nina: Yeah… and then loads of salvaged rhubarb. Some of this rhubarb actually came from a compost heap, somebody actually dug up, and I was like, these are rhubarb, why did anyone throw them out? Um, and so, and then the other ones are actually, I’m babysitting them for somebody until they have space to put them. (Nina, interview#2, 21/06/2013)

As Nina walks me through her collection of plants she describes their aesthetic properties and how they have been grown. Plants serve as formalised memorials, like the lavender bought for her partner’s graduation, chosen instead of a short-lived bouquet of cut flowers. Nina also shares the informal, mundane histories and biographies of individual plants, particularly those she had saved.

Figure 4.3: Nina’s collected and salvaged plants and garden materials

Notably, this extract performs Nina’s role as one of nurturing and rescuing, and providing the necessary care for plants others had abandoned or thrown away. Though the lemon mint is ‘woody’ and not ‘very bushy’, she says that she still ‘likes its presence’.
Despite its limited utility as a culinary herb, it serves as a reminder of something she played a role in keeping alive. She explains how she keeps plants ‘happy’, responding to the needs of the sweet cicely that didn’t like sharing a pot, for example. She also points out ‘surprise’ plants - a Jerusalem artichoke volunteer, which has been allowed to remain rather than being weeded away - as well as recycled and repurposed materials forming paths and raised beds (Nina, interview#2, 21/06/2013). Nina spoke at length in our meetings about her passion and commitment to reducing food waste and this enthusiasm is written into the fabric of her garden through the plants she has collected and salvaged. Nina’s stories about her plants position her as opportunistic, resourceful, nurturing and thrifty, and the space of the garden ‘go-along’ (Kusenbach 2003; Carpiano 2009) sheds light on these ordinary ethical concerns and negotiations and how they become embedded in cultivated landscapes.

The examples considered here touch on the ways that collecting, saving and swapping seed enables ‘living connections’ with places beyond the garden to be maintained within growing plants (Brook 2003). Saving and exchanging seed opens the potential for diverse place-connections to be folded into growing spaces (Massey 2004; Darling 2009). The findings outlined here complicate discussions around ethical consumption and ‘caring at a distance’ (Silk 2004) by revealing how memories and places embodied within seeds and plants bed in and take root in the landscape (Aistara 2014). The emotional and affective dimensions of remembering with seeds and plants relate to more than simply looking at artefacts of the past (Nazarea 2005), but crucially are concerned with continuity, futurity and anticipation.

**Tending and caring**

So far, this chapter has considered how individuals become attached to seeds and plants and extend these attachments through their exchange and divestment. Important questions remain around how seed-savers develop feelings of responsibility for seeds and become implicated in their care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2010), and the emotional and embodied labours this entails. ‘Care’ is understood as a universal human activity, encompassing ‘everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible’ and as involving ‘our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web’
(Fisher and Tronto, 1990, p.40). Theorists, particularly within ethical consumption have questioned how far the scope of care can reach (McEwan and Goodman 2010; Silk 2004, 2000), and have begun to consider how caring obligations are developed in relation to non-human others and environments (Puig de la Bellacasa 2010; Snyder and St. Martin 2015; Barron 2015; Singh 2013). In Chapter 6 I question how practices of caring for seeds extend the scope of responsibility to develop a wider, collective ethic of care, but first, following Barnett and Land (2007), I outline the ordinary practices of care already existing and stretching outwards from individual gardens to distant and different others.

Phillips’ (2013, p.180) observation that seed-savers practice ‘a kind of selective anthropomorphism’ was reflected in participants’ depiction of caring for seeds and plants in terms of ‘looking after’ (Barbara, fieldnotes, 06/06/2013), ‘guarding’ (David and Claire, fieldnotes, 09/05/2013), ‘protecting’ (Louise, interview#1, 09/05/2013) or ‘babysitting’ (Nina, interview#2, 21/06/2013). Talking about plants and seeds as children in need of protection and nurture reappeared numerous times, and whilst beyond the scope of this thesis, suggests a feminist reading could prove fruitful in unpicking the themes of heritage, legacy and kin. Becky, a mother of three, relates caring for plants and seeds directly to her identity as a parent in her discussion of a tour of the X-ray room at the Millennium Seed Bank:

**Becky:** And [they] put all that energy into cleaning them to… see if they’re alive…

**Laura:** They can show that?

**Becky:** …and you see… the little embryos! And it’s… and it was… just reminded me of when I had the scans when I was pregnant, and… for me personally, I can feel that they’re alive, and that makes me love them. Um, I don’t know if it’s like that for everybody, but that’s what it’s like for me. And maybe some people… like the idea that it’s something that’s free… I think essentially, it’s about nurturing something, it growing, and giving back… it’s like, what you put in, you get back out of it. (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013)

Here, Becky talks about seeds as ‘embryos’, the X-rays reminding her of her pregnancy scans. She parallels the knowledge about seeds’ vitality with her maternal love for her children and the embodied, emotional work of ‘nurturing something, it growing’ to explain why caring for seeds is important to her. What she ‘gets back’ from this relationship is the opportunity to ‘give back’ and the affective reward of feeling seeds’ ‘livingness’ (Whatmore 2006, p.602). Interestingly, she stresses this is her personal way
of feeling about seeds, and in saying ‘some people like the idea that it’s something that’s free…’ distances herself from economic or materially reciprocal motivations.

![Image of beans isolated with meshing and peas inside polytunnel](image)

Figure 4.4: David and Claire’s photos of beans isolated with meshing and peas inside polytunnel

Participants also explained the additional practical tasks and precautions necessary to save viable seeds and maintain varieties. Beyond the caring required to grow fruit and vegetables to eat, saving seeds requires extra attention to ensure plants are correctly labelled, selected and isolated, and that seeds are harvested, dried and stored properly. As Phillips (2013, p.130) suggests, these close-up, tactile engagements give seed-savers a more ‘drawn out and involved relation’ with food. Participants described, for example, growing seeds in dedicated greenhouses that could be isolated more easily (Susan, fieldnotes, 10/06/2013), or closer to the house where it was easier to practice vigilance, to protect from pests and minimise failure (Barbara, fieldnotes, 20/06/2013; Louise, fieldnotes, 27/06/2013). Providing extra care and attention for precious seeds was one
way of alleviating feelings of stress and worry about plants’ survival. Barbara, a retired allotment holder who has volunteered with a local seed swap for many years, talked about her disappointment when a crop of her favourite peas was destroyed by rats (fieldnotes, 15/08/2013). She told me she usually shared her peas at the annual swap, and outlined steps taken to protect them in future. Emma (interview#1, 07/06/2013) mentioned ‘having sleepless nights’ after signing up as a seed guardian and becoming responsible for the survival of endangered ‘orphan’ varieties, and David (interview#1, 09/05/2013) spoke of being ‘heartbroken’ about crop failures.

This sense of responsibility is deepened when saving is practiced to share seeds with others. For many, saving seeds is not only about securing next year’s crop, but passing favoured seeds to other gardeners. This requires ensuring shared seeds are good quality, likely to germinate and grow well. Student and swap volunteer Tom had a particular interest in ensuring optimum storage conditions for his seeds in terms of temperature and humidity:

[E]specially if you’re growing something quite rare, or you know you’re growing something that’s a really old variety, or if you’re one of the, um… one of the seed guardians, if you’re one of those people, you know you’ve got to get your seed [s] in really good condition. (Tom, interview#1, 16/08/2013)

As well as responsibilities to the people to whom seeds are given, contained within these desires to provide the best conditions and protection for seeds is a sense of responsibility towards those who shared these seeds in the past, particularly if they’re ‘rare’ or ‘really old’. Savers’ attachments to seeds, and their practices of caring about and for them (Silk 2000) were often difficult to disentangle from associations with and connections to people, which were extended and deepened through practices of sharing.

Other seed-savers explained their motivations more explicitly as feeling a sense of moral responsibility. Louise guards a relatively large amount of seeds for HSL each year in her allotment and the community garden she runs, and she actively promotes seed-saving:

A lot of seed guardians would just see themselves as being… you know, it’s up to us, if it’s not, if we don’t do it, we can’t expect other people to do it. We’ve got to kind of step up… (Louise, interview#1, 09/05/2013)
Louise’s statement that she and other guardians feel they need to ‘step up’ connotes an active, physical response to a rational imperative, a move from caring ‘about’ the issues of seed heritage and diversity to an invested, embodied process of caring ‘for’ seeds (Silk 2000), which requires concerted action. Louise sees her actions as playing a crucial role in ensuring the continuation of botanical heritage, encouraging biodiversity and leading by example. This sense of moral obligation bolsters Phillips’ (2005) suggestion that seed-savers fit Barry’s (2002) notion of ‘green citizenship as stewardship’, which recognises the political implications of private and individual practices like saving seeds. However, as Phillips (2005, p.44) notes this rational conception premised on thought leading to action overlooks seed-savers’ direct, embodied engagements with ecologies and environments, and she argues ‘does not leave much room for the spirit or joy that are important motivations to save seed’.

Though several seed-savers (e.g. Jean, interview, 26/11/2013; Nina, interview, 01/02/2013; Anita, interview, 07/05/2013), like Louise, explained their motivations in terms of a sense of moral responsibility, it is difficult to determine the direction of causality in stimulating caring dispositions. These explanations may have been examples of post hoc rationalisation, reordered into tidy narratives in response to my questioning, and there were many other seed-savers who did not articulate a clear sense of moral duty towards environmental protection. Saving seed with participants and interrogating the ordinary practices of sharing and tending plant material showed that ‘feeling responsible’ was only partially prompted by removed, theoretical rationales to protect the environment. Rather, these feelings developed through active, embodied, ‘conversational’ (Power 2005) relationships with and attachments to actual plants and seeds. The following discussion demonstrates seed-savers’ motivations as nuanced, heterogeneous and insufficiently represented by ‘causal knowledge’ models (Barnett and Land 2007, p.1073; Eden et al. 2008) prevalent in ethical consumption theorisations, premised on simplistic assumptions that action is prompted by information.

As mentioned previously, the imagined geographies of seed-saving involve thoughts about the past and future, and about the gardener’s place within a variety’s botanical lineage. Feelings of responsibility to save seeds could also be understood in relation to the potentiality contained within seeds. Claire, for example, talks about a pea she saves for HSL:
Claire: I don’t eat any of mine normally. I just grow the whole lot…. to save. Um, so I think, I sort of feel…. responsible because you’ve agreed that you’re going to send some back. So you feel you’d be disappointed if there aren’t very many going back. Um also, you feel that you’ve achieved something because it’s… it’s something that's perpetual. You think well, you’re giving something back that's going to go out many fold to lots of people...

Laura: Yeah!

Claire: ….but also they’re going to carry on, you know, for years hence…so I think you get that sense of achievement from doing it as well. (Claire, interview#1, 09/05/2013)

Claire denies herself the pleasure of eating her pea crop so the maximum quantity can be returned to the library, which she explains with reference to the ‘perpetual’ nature of seeds. This is a point she reiterated when returning the camera and photos I’d asked her to take, explaining in an email that she thought about her seed guardianship ‘as “in perpetuity”’ and said ‘I like to think I am doing my bit for history’ (Claire, email communication, 30/08/2013). That Claire would feel ‘disappointed’ if the quantity of seeds returned was diminished indicates her sense of ‘achievement’ hinges on the widest possible distribution of her seeds. Claire’s practices of care and nurture in her garden ‘carry on’ through seeds which continue and are spread out in time and space. The possibility that future plants, seeds and food might be enjoyed by others contributed to seed-savers’ feelings of duty to try to save as many seeds as possible, as well as engendering feelings of guilt where that potentiality was squandered.

As well as swapping seeds, gardeners spoke about deliberately sowing excess seedlings and therefore giving young plants away in spring (Ellen and Platten 2011; Platten 2013). As I have outlined, gifted seedlings and cuttings were often explained in terms of disliking waste (Barbara, fieldnotes, 20/06/2013; Clive, 23/08/2013), hoping others might enjoy them (Saira, interview, 22/02/213; Helen and Hannah, interview, 30/11/2912), or not wanting to discard the effort and love entailed in producing a seedling (Becky, fieldnotes, 04/07/2013; Rosemary, fieldnotes, 25/02/2013). Whilst notions of lineage, legacy and continuity were significant themes across the research, they were only occasionally articulated specifically (Claire, interview#1, 09/05/2013; Michael, interview, 27/08/2013). The histories and ‘social lives’ (Appadurai 2014) of garden plants leading up to the point of acquisition were clearly meaningful to gardeners. Also crucial to seed-saving practices were the affective and emotional imaginings of plants’ continuation.
However, participants were also pragmatic in their approaches, recognising it would be unrealistic to save seed from all plants in the garden. Barbara, who cultivated a small garden and allotment plot, and volunteered for a seed swap, spoke of her difficulty in knowing where to focus her energies:

I have to stop myself from saving seeds from everything. You know, and just having more than I can handle. I looked at something this morning, I was saving from some garden plant, I thought oh no, you know? I'm just going to put them in the compost, you know, there is a limit, it could be a completely, um, full-time occupation at this time of year. […] There's this sort of conscience thing, once you start, you could harvest all these seeds, but as I say, life isn't long enough, and space isn’t sufficient… (Barbara, interview #3, 15/08/2013)

Barbara explains how she negotiates the balance between saving and having too much to 'handle' in terms of the limits of her manual, embodied capacity in relation to the seasonal clustering of activity. Where she discusses discarded seeds, she refers to ‘some garden plant’ rather than a named, cherished variety, which touches on the earlier point made about the stories it is acceptable to tell about what is thrown away or forgotten (Crewe 2011). Notably, Barbara says ‘there's this sort of conscience thing, once you start’, which suggests that by starting to save some seeds and learning more about the practice, she has started feeling responsible for ‘all’ the seeds. To some extent, practices of caring for seeds might ‘lead to new beliefs and, thus, new subjectivities’ (Singh 2013, p.190) through which ‘nature out there… become[s] a part of the self that is nurtured through care’ (p.194). Though not necessarily practicable given the limitations of space and time, this desire to do more provides evidence that ethical negotiation and action is motivated by practice and embodied engagement with seeds (Puig de la Bellacasa 2010; Phillips 2013).

Participants sometimes mentioned the physical challenges of maintaining a patch of land: digging, weeding, watering, protecting plants from pests and so on (Stewart, interview, 21/02/2013; Geoff, interview, 27/02/2013; Jean, fieldnotes, 06/06/2013). My own experiences of struggling to maintain my allotment whilst conducting fieldwork helped generate discussions about the negative aspects of cultivation (Hayden and Buck 2011), and were useful in probing seed-savers’ sometimes romanticised narratives. Participants also described challenges specific to harvesting, processing and drying seeds. Separating seeds from plants, husks or chaff were depicted as at times difficult, monotonous and painful, yet ultimately rewarding and satisfying.
Becky, for example, explains how saving teasel seeds impacts on her body:

I made the end of my thumb numb for about six months, because I was trying to get seeds out of a teasel? And I thought, oh, if I get a fork, I can just scrape it like that for ages. And I just got really into scraping these teasels, and one hand had a glove on it where I was holding it, and the other hand, it was the pressure of the fork, it still feels a bit odd. (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013)

Processing seeds also affects seed guardian Louise’s thumbs:

Laura: [W]hat’s been the best thing about being a seed guardian?

Louise: The most traumatic thing is… the fact that when it gets to November, December, you’ve got so much processing to do. Because, you know, you have a huge great big box of beetroot seed-heads, and they’re long, and, you know, there’s only so much clicking off of… and you know, when there’s loads to do you just [rolling rrrrr sound]… peel them off, but then your thumb starts hurting, so it’s the processing that’s the worst. But the best thing I think is just, being part of the community, and, you know, seeing your comments in the HSL magazine. And, knowing that the next year that people will be choosing your veg, and going off and growing it. (Louise, interview#1, 09/05/2013)

Interestingly, Louise starts to answer my question about what she enjoys about being a seed guardian with a description of its painful ‘traumatic’ aspects. Whilst she goes on to elaborate the feelings of contributing, the social recognition and evidence of her efforts in the HSL magazine, Louise first emphasises the sacrifice and painful monotony that earns the right to feel proud of her achievements. For Becky above, though removing teasel seeds was repetitive and damaged her thumb, she didn’t see it as a chore but ‘got really into it’.

Like many participants, Becky enjoys the involved and embodied engagement required in labouring with seeds:

Like, yesterday I was sorting through some seeds that erm, I harvested in October. They’ve been drying in my living room for months. And then I had to get the seeds out of their pods. By trampling up and down on them for ages. Tipped them all out on the table. Sorted out the, you know […] And I’ve realised now that they make my hands go numb, so I have to wear gloves, when I sort them. But I was just like, my whole table is covered in these, in the seeds, and the kids coming in, and it was all a bit mad. And then I realised, erm, if I used cling film, and rub it on the kids heads, it sucks up all the… erm… the chaff? So I had all the kids round the table, rubbing cling film on their heads. […] They thought I
was mad, basically. But erm, I’ve realised, that it erm, it probably took about a week, to sort out… A jar of seeds. But it’s still worth it in my opinion. It’s still fun, really. (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013)

Becky enjoys explaining the innovative methods she devised for separating corncockle seed and chaff that require the use of her whole body (and her family’s), as seedpods are spread out and trampled upon and cling film is rubbed on hair. This task requires sustained effort and takes up space in the family home for months, but in Becky’s opinion, the resulting jar of seeds is both ‘worth it’ and ‘fun’. I also noted Becky’s enthusiasm for handling seeds and looking at them closely after a visit to a community garden (fieldnotes, 04/07/2013). She encouraged another volunteer and me to help her sow some wildflower seeds, and spent time explaining how to recognise the different varieties she had carefully tipped into the palms of our hands.

This idea that attachments to seeds are developed through labouring with and caring for them is something Becky goes on to articulate in more detail:

[W]hen you’re sorting something out, you can’t help but put… your love and energy into it as well. So by the time you’ve got those seeds in that jar, you kind of feel… attached to them, in a way? Which, I don’t get when I buy a packet of seeds. I don’t feel like they’re tiny little living things? It’s really weird. But I do think that’s something that seed-savers really enjoy about it, they feel that, by the time they’ve gone through this whole process, they feel… like, like they love their seeds! (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013)

Becky describes the attachment that comes from working with seeds, the repetitive and time consuming (Hall and Jayne 2015; Price 2015) process of ‘sorting’ them, describing this in terms ‘love’. The finished jar of processed, sorted seeds is tangible, material evidence of Becky’s labours caring for seeds (Thurnell-Read 2014). Becky’s repeated depiction of seeds as ‘alive’ echoes Michael’s (interview, 27/08/2013) difficult to express ‘feeling’ he found within saved seeds. Becky emphasises the different affective relationship she has with purchased seeds by saying ‘I don’t feel like they’re tiny little living things’, and suggests the embodied, laborious processes of saving give her a stronger sense of seeds’ vitality.

As well as stressing feelings of satisfaction derived from the strenuous sides of seed-saving, participants also explained the ‘fun’ (Kay, interview, 31/01/2013), ‘pleasure’ (Barbara, interview#3, 15/08/2013) or ‘joy’ (Anita, interview#2, 26/09/2013) gained from practices other might find boring or unpleasant (Soper 2007). Physical,
monotonous labour (Ann, fieldnotes, 10/06/2013), getting dirty (Heather, interview, 25/02/2013) or ‘really excited’ about manure (Cathy, interview#1, 03/06/2013) were all aspects seed-savers cited and demonstrated as seemingly perverse enjoyments, which non-gardeners might not understand:

[That's just me, I got mates who just look at me as if to say, what is that? You know what I mean? You know, like what are you doing, your hands are getting dirty, your hair’s a mess, or whatever. You know, so some people just don’t feel it at all, it’s your personality I would say. You know, I’m quite an earthy person... (Heather, interview, 25/02/2013)

Heather, who works as a gardener, explains her attitude towards messy hair and dirty hands in terms of personality, and suggests not everyone is able to ‘feel’ the connection with the soil as she does.

Heather also enjoys taking cuttings from tricky, time consuming plants, and explains the sense of satisfaction and accomplishment she derives from this challenge, saying: ‘I find gardening very therapeutic. And... it’s very nurturing, for me, and it just makes you feel good. It really makes me feel satisfied. Being able to accomplish something’ (Heather, interview, 25/02/2013). Heather doesn’t mind the hard work, the waiting or the slowness of this process, but finds it ‘therapeutic’ and ‘nurturing’. This is another revealing example of how care for plants and the environment becomes implicated in practices of self-care (Singh 2013). Heather’s explanation of her ‘earthy’ identity draws heavily on thoughts and feelings relating to the temporality of gardening, and she sees part of her ‘earthiness’ as relating to her capacity for sustaining effort over the long-term and delaying gratification (Miele 2008).

Preparing seeds for swap events was another activity through which participants performed emotional and embodied labours with seeds. Swap volunteer Barbara took a photo of selected seed packets she had collected at Seedy Sunday to demonstrate visually the craft, labour, and care put into hand-making a seed packet:

   *Barbara:* ... just that idea of getting a little bit of information. And the variety of what people offer... Just the pleasure, it represents the pleasure, doesn’t it? That people get. By the very fact that they do that...

   *Laura:* That they make the effort?
Barbara: Yeah, yeah. So they’ve put their pleasure into it, and then we receive it when we do our swapping, and it’s just a really nice exchange. (Barbara, interview#3, 15/08/2013)

Doing seed-saving herself means Barbara appreciates the love and warm human relations others have put into both the packaging and the seed itself (Müller 2014a, 2014b). This contrasts with descriptions elsewhere of commercial seeds ‘in a packet’ (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013; Nathan, interview#1, 03/06/2013), which refer pejoratively to branded packaging, signalling uniformity and placelessness. Barbara talks about her pleasure in sourcing a diverse variety of seeds swap events, but also stresses she receives the pleasure of other swappers who make the effort to construct unusual packets.

The imagined others sharing the spaces of these exchanges, similarly committed to and enjoying practices of caring for seeds, help explain how swapped seeds acquire their ‘feeling’ and are distinguished from ‘fetishised’ (Morris and Kirwan 2010; Carrier 2010) mass-produced seeds. Within what Demeulenaere (2014) refers to as seed-saving ‘communities of practice’, there is an encouragement, if not an expectation for everyone who receives seeds to also contribute them. The practice of saving seed is
therefore not specialised or left to ‘professionals’, since the consumers of seeds at swaps are, in theory, also producers of seeds. Their own experiences of growing, processing, labouring, and getting sore thumbs are recognised in the materiality of the seed packets gathered at a swap. This is indicated as Barbara says she receives other people’s pleasure in ‘a really nice exchange’, which goes beyond trading plant material and extends to sharing enthusiasm and enjoyment with one another.

Ownership and Responsibility

The examples discussed here emphasise the importance to seed-savers of seeing and feeling the impacts of their labours with seeds, and recognising how their practices influence others. This final section questions how thoughts and feelings about ethical ‘doings’ (Puig de la Bellacasa 2010) with seeds are aligned with ideas about ownership. Contained within the responsibility of ‘owning’ seeds is a sense of obligation to share and pass seeds on, both as a way of ‘ outing’ rare, endangered varieties and encouraging others to save seed.

In some cases, seed-savers directly cited rare varieties safeguarded as a result of their gardening practice. Michael (fieldnotes, 27/08/2013) spoke about his pride in seeing his seeds included in HSL, and Jean (fieldnotes, 06/06/2013) described the Crimson Flowered broad bean she helped reproduce, now grown widely, sold in commercial catalogues and therefore ‘ safe’. Seed guardians in particular could provide evidence of unusual seeds, once under threat, now preserved due to their actions (David, fieldnotes, 12/07/2013; Louise, fieldnotes, 27/06/2013). Participants also spoke about influencing others through sharing, by getting them interested in growing vegetables, or encouraging cultivation of more unusual, heritage varieties (David and Claire, interview #2, 04/09/2013; Anita, interview #2, 26/09/2013; Saira, interview, 22/02/2013). However, this sense of achievement felt in seeing or imagining the impact of one’s labours was still keenly felt when swapped seed was a ‘run of the mill’ or unknown variety. Seeing ‘your’ seeds grown by someone else was spoken about proudly, and during garden tours participants often pointed out plants that a neighbour or family member now also grew from a gifted cutting or swapped seed (Jean, fieldnotes, 06/05/2013; Barbara, fieldnotes, 06/07/2013). In short, gardeners liked the idea of ‘their’ seeds being continued.
Seeds are small, portable, storable and often easily propagated. These physical properties make them ‘eminently swappable’ as Angela (interview, 25/02/2013), a seed swap organiser in Brighton described. As indicated by the language of seeds as progeny, ‘babies’ (Nina, interview#2, 21/06/2013; Louise, interview#1, 09/05/2013), or ‘orphans’ (David, interview#1, 09/05/2013; Jim, interview, 02/05/2013), the prominence of ideas about legacy and lineage is brought into focus more sharply for seed-savers given the relative shortness of seeds' life-cycles. Unlike planting a pear tree, which might prove slow to fruit and could potentially outlive the planter, seeds are not only physically ideal for exchange, but relatively quick to reproduce. Furthermore, the annual or biennial cyclical duration of plant to seed means their multiplication, spread and continuation can be witnessed over a short space of time, prompting seed-savers to consider the role they play in seeds’ continuity.

Figure 4.6: Saved pea seeds: two heritage pea varieties saved by Anita for HSL (her photo)

Angela explains the greater sense of ‘ownership’ she derives from the simple act of sowing a seed, in comparison to purchasing and planting a seedling:
I think seeds, there’s more of a sense of ownership. And I’m always amazed when you go, and they’re sort of selling seedlings, and they sell, you know, pea seedlings, and I just think, why do they sell those? I mean there’s nothing easier than planting a pea. It’s virtually fool-proof. And it’s, you buy that, you take it home and plant it. It’s not nearly the same amount of satisfaction as if you put the pea in the soil yourself. [...] You feel like you’ve made that happen. You’ve, well not… you were fundamental to that. Whereas with the plant I don’t think you do. It’s a different relationship somehow. (Angela, interview, 25/02/2013)

Sowing a seed generates a ‘different relationship’ and a bigger sense of ‘satisfaction’ for Angela. She explains this different relationship comes from playing a more ‘fundamental’ role in the plant’s reproduction, yet she concedes that germination and growth is not happening solely due to her intervention, and downplays the skill required of the planter. The fundamental input of the gardener here is to facilitate, and rather like Phillips’ (2013, p.18) depiction, Angela is ‘practicing together’ with seeds. Angela’s comparison between the affective qualities of a self-sown seed and a purchased seedling rest on feelings of interaction between seed and sower, further elaborating the means through which self-provisioned seed acquires its sense of ‘feeling’ for savers.

Cathy and Nathan, allotment neighbours who are fairly new to seed-saving, here indicate a changed relationship with food and increased sense of satisfaction has arisen from sowing their ‘own’ seed:

*Cathy:* [I]t’s satisfying. I mean, when I did a very very hot chilli, er, and got the seeds out of it, and they actually came up, and I got lots of them, didn’t I?

*Nathan:* You could see the development…

*Cathy:* And it’s so…

*Nathan:* …made you think…

*Cathy:* …it’s really satisfying…

*Nathan:* …that’s yours, that. Instead of, oh that’s Wilkinsons’, I can see it’s…

*Cathy:* Yeah…

*Nathan:* …when you’re eating the stuff and getting the seeds out and stuff like that.
Cathy: I mean, it’s nice enough to grow your own on an allotment, but to do, to harvest the seed as well, again, I mean, yeah…

Laura: It takes it a step further?

Cathy: Yes, it does, yeah. Who knows what we’ll be doing this time next year. (laughter) (Cathy and Nathan, interview#1, 03/06/2013)

Notable here is the sense of wonder they feel about their involvement with seeds’ reproduction, and Cathy and Nathan describe saved seeds and their resulting plants as *theirs*. Nathan recalls the thought provoking process of watching germinating seeds’ progression, and knowing ‘that’s yours, that’, and Cathy sounds almost surprised the seedlings ‘actually came up’.

Seed production is usually a hidden process within the food system, since many gardeners growing their own vegetables purchase most of their seed for the coming year’s crop (Demeulenaere 2014). Nathan’s comment that ‘you’re eating stuff and getting the seeds out’ divulges a reconnection of the practice of eating food with the reproduction of seed. The food he eats now is connected with his future food, and this shift in relationship is prompted by saving and sowing seed. The final point made by Cathy also highlights the anticipation and imagined futurity central to gardening and saving seed, as she is already thinking about the following year and what else they might grow and save. Again, this suggests that starting to save seed initiated a learning process that has deepened and extended ethical relations with plants and food (Carolan 2007a; Phillips 2013).

Notions of ‘ownership’ surfaced at various moments, in interviews as well as garden tours and discussions of participants’ photos. In addition to the exchange and movement of plant material, questions of possession therefore bear further consideration (Crewe 2011). Ownership extends beyond plants most obviously ‘belonging’ to gardeners, rooted and contained within their growing spaces, to those passed on to other growers. Accompanying a meeting of seed circle members walking from plot to plot on one allotment indicated how feelings of ownership extended beyond exchange transactions (fieldnotes, 06/07/2013). Plot-holders demonstrated well cared for plants given by another group member, or inquired ‘how are *my* beans getting on’ of their fellow gardeners, for example. This continuation of ownership evident in the slippage of possessive pronouns echoes Ellen and Platten’s (2011, p.571) observation that names of
commercial varieties are often replaced with the donor’s name when seeds are swapped, which they cite as an example of commercially produced germplasm being ‘appropriated, manipulated, and governed by the ecological and socio-economic rules of the gardening sub-economy’. As Chevalier (2014, p.57) notes, in situations where there is a meaningful relationship between giver and receiver, ‘when a present is given, there is indeed a transfer of possession but not a complete transfer of ownership, which, in a way, becomes joint’. This partial transferal of ownership of plants and seeds is implicated in reciprocal expectations about continued care and circulation.

Though participants made occasional reference to joint ownership, describing a ‘seed commons’ (Barbara, interview#1, 29/01/2013) or ‘our seed heritage’ (Louise, interview#1, 09/05/2013) when explaining the wider rationales and moral arguments for saving seeds, in savers’ gardening practices they rarely spoke about ‘our’ seeds. Even couples, like David and Claire (interview#1, 09/05/2013) who gardened together and both acted as seed guardians for HSL, rarely spoke about their seeds as jointly owned, instead saying ‘my’ beans or ‘Claire’s tomatoes’, for example. One exception to this tendency was the Cherokee Trail of Tears bean maintained by several different growers on Barbara’s allotment site over numerous generations, and which she referred to as ‘our beans’ (Barbara, fieldnotes, 20/06/2013). In Barbara’s view, a local adaptation of the variety had been developed, which she spoke of as belonging collectively within the allotment site. That this long-term, mutual commitment to a particular seed was cited as a notable achievement demonstrates the flip-side of seeds’ quick reproduction.

Commitment to a seed takes considerable sustained and repeated effort, despite the notion of ‘local’ varieties finding frequent citation in promotional and non-academic literature as a logical rationale to save and swap (Ray 2012; Deppe 2000; Whealy 2011).

Seed guardian Louise, stressed her role as a guardian and ‘protector’ of seed varieties entails giving seeds away, thus sharing their ownership. This helps protect rare varieties both by spreading the physical seeds, but also promoting the practice of seed-saving:

[Y]ou’re kind of like a little protector really of that variety (laughing) of seed. And er, you then try and encourage everyone else. If you do give a packet of ten seeds away to your friends, you’ll tell them to save from them and spread them, so… (Louise, interview#1, 09/05/2013)

Louise’s act of sharing entails reciprocal expectations that others will grow, multiply and spread ‘her’ seeds further. Significantly, in seed-savers’ understandings of their
relationships with seeds, ownership does not preclude others from owning and growing seeds simultaneously.

Though the language of ownership suggests seed-savers relate to seeds as a type of property, it is important therefore to note Mansfield’s (2007a, p.399) reminder that property is ‘social relation’ containing both obligation and responsibility. In order to maintain seeds as a shared, common resource gardeners related to seeds in terms of individual ownership, where that ownership consisted of attachments and feelings of ongoing responsibility. This responsibility to (sometimes momentarily) ‘owned’ seeds implies both duty and generosity (Barnett and Land 2007) are involved in providing nurture and care for seeds as well as sharing and spreading them widely. Participants recognised seeds were safest when ownership was not concentrated amongst a small number of gardeners, due to the inherent unpredictability of the weather and possibility of crop failure, which could result in the loss of a favoured variety. ‘Outing’ seeds by giving them away is therefore a crucial part of managing and protecting seeds as common resources, and spreading risk by ensuring they are grown by as many people as possible. The individual, private acts of saving ‘my’ seeds, in ‘my garden’ are linked to collective efforts and ethics negotiated within non-direct and delayed reciprocal exchanges that are rarely ‘like-for-like’ (Ellen and Platten 2011, p.573).

Significantly, though responsibilities towards seeds sometimes involved negative emotions of guilt or loss, for example, feelings of ethical obligation are best understood as intimately bound up with sociability, giving to friends, and practices of generosity (Barnett and Land 2007; Smith and Jehlička 2013). Swapping, giving away, and allowing others to reproduce seeds does not diminish their value for savers, but increases it, as the cultural and emotional currency of seeds and their stories are multiplied with each exchange. By saving seeds and retelling their stories when they are swapped gardeners become implicated in the continuing biography and lineage of the variety.

**Conclusion**

Sharing is a fundamental aspect of everyday allotment and gardening culture, which makes practices of self-provisioning meaningful by enabling connections with people, places, and times to be sustained, imagined, and remembered. Participants found it difficult to express what made saved seeds special, often explaining their affective
qualities in terms of a special type of ‘feeling’ (Michael, interview, 27/08/2013) or ‘love’ (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013). Unpicking these ordinary sharing relationships contributes to theoretical debates about how involvement in ethical consumption and diverse economies is stimulated, by building a picture of how this ‘feeling’ is created through a nexus of responsibility, enthusiasm, embodied interaction and imagined connections that extend across time and space. Though moralistic rationales for saving seed played a part in savers’ explained motivations, responsibilities to seeds are better understood as developed through ‘practicing together’ with seeds (Phillips 2013, p.18) and sharing with others (Barnett and Land 2007). In this telling, seeds are more like stories than commodities (Carolan 2007b). Sharing increases their longevity as they are circulated and continue to grow and multiply in what is as much a cultural as material transaction.

Though heritage, unusual names or special stories might be important factors in ‘taking a shine’ (Louise, interview#1, 09/05/2013) to particular seeds, the ordinary biographies of plants play a crucial role in developing and perpetuating attachments. The very fact a shared seed has been grown in a known (or imagined) garden by someone who has cared enough to nurture that plant and pass on the seeds, connotes its own mystique, history, and narrative. The act of sharing seeds forms material and cultural connections between the person who gave them and who goes on to grow them. The continuity of swapped or gifted plants, evidenced by their material presence in the landscape (Brook 2003) connects places, people, and times, and importantly, enables gardeners to see the impact and influence of their personal cultivation practices beyond the boundaries of the garden.

This chapter has illuminated the emotional attachments implicated in developing ethical obligations and responsibilities towards seeds, environments and the practice of alternative economies. Yet what is uncovered here is not an ‘anything goes’ open-handed sharing that demands nothing in return, but rather reciprocations and rewards that are often complex, emotional, more-than-material, and related to expectations of continued care and circulation. ‘Ownership’ of seeds is thus better understood as incorporating collective obligations to nurture, to share and spread seeds across geographical space, and to extend the scope of these responsibilities.

These findings therefore extend existing understandings of the emotional and affective dimensions of diverse economic practices. They also lend weight to theories of
allotments and gardens as relationally constructed places (Massey 2004), by explicating the ‘relations which run ‘into’ and ‘out from’ place’ (Darling 2009, p.1938), constituted through real and imagined connections with other swappers, gardens and plants. Passing seeds forwards and imagining their progeny growing elsewhere are important aspects of seed-saving, prompting growers to consider the impact and legacy of their physical and emotional labours with seeds. This examination therefore depicts gardens as not only ‘constantly reworked, reopened and contested through the influx of various material, emotional and symbolic influences’ (Darling 2009, p.1940) but stretched across time and space through practices of exchange, as swapped seeds make peoples ‘journeys for them’ (Aistara 2014, p.15).
Chapter 5

Swapping seeds: crafting commodities, constructing boundaries

By examining the attachments and emotional dimensions of seed-saving, what I have shown so far is that maintained social connections, supposedly absent in archetypal commodity exchange (Belk 2010) are very present within the everyday sharing and swapping taking place between domestic growers. Here I focus on seeds: plants in their mobile, exchangeable, and arguably most commodity-like form (Bridge and Smith 2003). The temporalities of swapping seed differ from the more urgent exchange of tender plants or perishable food. Seeds’ small, portable, and durable physical properties mean they can be packeted and stored for many years, can travel great distances with relative ease, and therefore facilitate exchange between geographically separated gardeners (Nazarea 2005).

This chapter further examines how growers preserve their transactions as separate from commodity exchange, considering how the ‘commodity’ status of seeds and garden produce is destabilised by those invested in promoting seed-saving. Firstly, I look at everyday exchanges of garden produce, before examining the arguably more spectacular, self-consciously alternative space of a seed swap event. The seed industry has become increasingly commercialised over the last century, as growers were encouraged to avoid home-saved seeds by arguments they were poor quality and less reliable than new varieties and hybrids (Campbell 2012; Phillips 2013; Kloppenberg 2004). This has resulted in a spatial and cognitive separation of food and seed production (Demeulenaere 2014), and a decline in the skills required to save seeds amongst food producers (Larkcom 2012). It has been suggested contemporary seed swaps reinvigorate and reframe once commonplace practices of saving and swapping (Campbell 2012). Interrogating this re-framing as seed swapping is ‘scaled-up’ and practiced within extended communities of growers thus provides fertile ground for disentangling how seed exchange is made meaningful to participants.

The chapter begins by unpicking the discursive and practical ‘boundary work’ (DuPuis and Gillon 2009; Johnston et al. 2011) participants perform to maintain distinction of
their growing and sharing practices from ‘mainstream’ consumption and commodity exchange, as food and seeds are actively positioned as ‘priceless’. I then address the more consumerist moments of seed exchange, identifying motivations to swap that seem closer to rational self-interests of saving money, selecting and collecting. Next, I interrogate the shifting configurations of seeds in framings of swap events by those invested in their promotion. Discussions with volunteers, committee members and ‘punters’ about what seed swaps should be reveal valorisations of the handmade, reconnected and ‘defetishised’ (Morris and Kirwan 2010; Carrier 2010; Gunderson 2014). Moving beyond the ideal seed swap presented here to the practice of exchanging seeds at swaps, the final discussion suggests notions of reconnecting production and consumption and defetishising seeds are incompletely realised in practice. I argue repackaging seeds as ‘swapped’ and ‘saved’ acts to refetishise in different ways (Coles and Crang 2011), and consider tensions around the increasing commercialisation of swaps as they grow in scale and popularity.

‘It’s priceless’: selling, buying and crafting collections

As I have outlined, practices of sharing and exchange are central to gardening for many participants, and reciprocal expectations within these exchanges are often complex, temporally extended and more-than-material. As well as citing the positive aspects of sharing, participants often explicitly stated they did not want to sell their produce. Allotment holder and beekeeper Clive (interview#1, 03/06/2013), for example, said: ‘we could never eat the produce that we produce. We could never eat it. And we don’t want to sell it. That’s one thing we don’t wanna do.’ Clive and his partner Cathy often produce a surplus, and ethical concerns about wasting perishable food mean they have found diverse sources to redistribute their excess. Susan, a former dairy farmer, grows a large amount of fruit and vegetables on a section of the remaining pasture that now forms her large garden:

I never want to sell anything as I’ve got, that doesn’t do it for me, unless somebody will give me something for a charity or something like that. That’s it. It’s… just the pleasure of growing it, and being able to give it to somebody. (Susan, interview#1, 10/06/2013)
Like Clive, Susan states that selling produce ‘doesn’t do it for me’, though she would accept a reciprocal gift in exchange for her fruit and veg if that gift was destined for a charity she supports.

Becky, who makes and sells seedbombs, cultivates an allotment and community garden, tells me she recently took part in an organised ‘glean’. She and other volunteers were given permission to pick unharvested pumpkins, for free, after the farmer’s contract with a major supermarket was cancelled at the last minute. Becky reinforces that growers are usually happy to share food produce:

[W]hen you grow food, it just seems natural to want to share it? It’s probably the only thing, actually, that people enjoy sharing and don’t expect… don’t want anything back from it, apart from seeing someone else enjoy, the fruits of their labour, sort of thing? (Becky, interview#2, 08/11/2013)

According to Becky, producers of food take pleasure in sharing and seeing the enjoyment of others. Becky spoke in impassioned ways about ‘hating’ waste in our interactions, a sentiment echoed by many participants, as I outlined in the previous chapter. Here she suggests this aversion is heightened by knowing the effort that goes into production. Becky prefaces her comment with ‘when you grow food’, indicating that like the farmer who, she said, couldn’t bear to see a field of rotting pumpkins (Becky, interview#2, 08/11/2013), her relationship with food arises through the ‘labour’ of producing it herself. She stresses this desire to share without monetary gain is particular to food, and explains this by drawing on ideas of a desirable and ‘natural’ relationship premised less on economic calculation and more in terms of the fundamentals of human nutrition and flourishing.

Addressing seed-savers’ understandings of the alienability (Gregory 1982) of their crops builds on discussions about craft producers’ complex relationships with the material products of their labour (Thurnell Read 2014). As I go on to discuss, though savers did sometimes exchange plant material for money, it seemed illogical and perhaps taboo for growers to say they wanted to profit from garden produce, claimed to be valuable precisely because it is something ‘money can’t buy’. Brian and Jack are community garden organisers who produce a substantial volume of food crops from their large plot, and Jack (interview, 04/07/2013) describes their partly subsistent lifestyle as ‘mildly economically active’. Brian elaborates on his relationship with self-provisioned food:
Well, you say to people, when [they] try and offer you money… I say, it’s priceless. And they laugh. But it literally is priceless, you can’t buy it. You can only get this if… you grew it yourself. Or you did what I did, or whatever. It is priceless, in that sense. Er… you’re producing… such small amounts that you would want to eat all of that yourself, and not turn it into money. If you’re trying to grow a little bit of everything all year round. And the only way you could start to monetise, er, garden to sell, and that’s sort of what happens in a bit in London… it’s just focused on the niche crops. (Brian, interview#1, 28/02/2013)

Brian here delineates his home-grown food from that which is possible to buy, highlighting the different embodied and affective relationships in eating food and turning it ‘into money’.

By playing with the figurative notion of ‘pricelessness’, Brian hints at something so precious it is beyond economic valuation, but explains he means this literally as the food he produces cannot be bought elsewhere. As producer he is not willing to sell it, to value its exchange value over its use value. This is reinforced as he says: ‘[y]ou can only get this… if you grew it yourself. Or you did what I did…’ which suggests that what Brian ‘gets’ from growing his own food lies in the embodied and emotional dimensions of making as well as the intrinsic material qualities of the food itself (Thurnell Read 2014). A contrast is drawn between home and commercial production, as Brian explains the increased diversity he can experience when growing to feed himself, whereas the practicalities of selling would necessitate uniformity. Specialising in niche crops to ‘monetise’ gardening is antithetical to having variety and ‘a little bit of everything’.

Restricting variety in order to sell would alter substantively both the material and emotional qualities of growing for Brian.

Whilst profiting from seed was less forcefully opposed than selling perishable food, many seed-savers spoke about problems with corporate ownership of seed and the inherent risks of cherished varieties being ‘dropped’ (Jean, interview#1, 26/11/2012) if they ceased to be profitable (Ray 2012; Aistara 2014). Companies were viewed as lacking loyalty (Louise, interview#1, 09/05/2013), and reducing emotional investment and repeated commitment to questions of profitability (Emma, interview#1, 07/06/2013; Tom, interview#1, 16/08/2013), which clashed with participants’ experiences of their gardens. Jean, a retired allotment holder and long-standing seed guardian, spoke at length in our interviews about these risks, and often returned to the Crimson Flowered broad bean she guarded, overlooked by corporate seed producers yet favoured by
home gardeners for its unusual and attractive flowers. Jean was one of the first seed guardians entrusted to bulk-up supplies of this rare seed.

Figure 5.1: Crimson Flowered broad beans in flower

Here, Jean speaks about her anger on discovering a well-known gardener and seed merchant was selling ‘her’ bean:

Jean: Ooh… so angry (in a whisper) I was sizzling, I was absolutely… grrr!

Laura: Yeah?

Jean: And um, it, it really… that sickened me. And what even sickened me more, was that when, when I was talking to somebody, they said, ooh yes I’ve got those. I sent for them to [name of seed merchant]. Um, they were a pound a packet for ten seeds. We had been sent ten seeds, free, of course... (Jean, interview#1, 26/11/2013)

The idea of making money from these precious, rare seeds upset Jean greatly. Feeling someone else ‘took’ and was profiting from what she had been given, had gifted to others, and worked hard to save evoked a visceral reaction: she ‘felt sickened’ and was ‘sizzling’ (Hayes-Conroy 2010). Jean’s evident disgust arises in response to another gardener transgressing the ideal of sharing in a practice that for Jean should be about ‘loving what you’re doing, with your gardening’ (Jean, interview#1, 26/11/2013). That
Jean continues to feel affronted by this perceived transgression again indicates the continuing sense of ownership Jean feels over ‘her’ seeds.

Like others who hoped their acts of generosity might inspire others to save seed (e.g. David and Claire, interview#1, 09/05/2013; Daniel and Nick, interview, 28/01/2013; Barbara, interview#1, 29/01/2013), the reciprocities of Jeans’ saving and sharing include expectations that the beans will be valued and treated in the same way by those who have received them. For Jean, seed-saving is not purely about preserving and protecting varieties:

I think one of the loveliest… parts of it, is that it is, you don’t make money out of it. You shouldn’t make money out of it. And that’s the thing that I liked at the start. (Jean, interview#1, 26/11/2013)

Jean’s statement here that ‘you shouldn’t make money out of it’ again indicates expectations of others’ behaviour, and suggests a superior, natural relationship towards seeds (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013) is premised on giving rather than selling. What is significant, yet potentially overlooked in these normative presentations are the land and leisure time necessary to allow these ‘giving’ relationships. As Johnston et al. (2011, p.296) caution in their discussion of ‘ethical eating repertoires’, such ‘privileged perspectives tend to be normalised and presented as “classless”’.

This separation from pecuniary motivations highlighted by Jean was an aspect numerous seed-savers (e.g. Cathy, interview#1, 03/06/2013; Barbara, interview#1, 29/01/2013; Brian, interview#1, 28/02/2013; Susan, interview#1, 10/06/2013) particularly enjoyed about their gardening practice. However, seed-saving does not exist in pure alternative, non-commercial spaces, and exchanges more like monetary transactions did take place, though these were often reframed in a language of ‘donations’ or ‘sharing’ rather than selling, illustrated in Cathy’s (interview#1, 03/06/2013) statement here: ‘our ethos on here, we don’t sell anything. You know, even our honey, we don’t sell it, we just ask for a donation. And everything, every penny we get goes back into the bees’. Where participants told me about selling produce or seeds they emphasised selling it very cheaply and giving the money to charity (David, interview#1, 09/05/2013) or, like seed guardian and community garden organiser Louise (fieldnotes, 27/06/2013) who sold bulbs of unusual onions on Ebay, said the money would pay for next year’s seeds.
Like Louise, allotment holder Nathan rationalises the sale of produce by explaining how money generated is reinvested in food production:

Nathan: Me mam takes stuff into here work, for like the teachers and stuff like that, and they go “oh, let us pay”. “No.” My mam won’t take money. Now she’s thinking, not gonna take money, just get a pack of seeds. Get a pack of 29p seeds or something like that...

Cathy: I told you he was a seedaholic!

Nathan: …in the pound shop or something like that. And that’s all. Because, them seeds can be growing next year, and that stuff will go back in. (Cathy and Nathan, interview#1, 03/06/2013)

Exchanges substantively closer to mainstream commodity exchange are justified by Nathan stating he and his mother neither want nor expect anything in return, and by shifting the temporality of the exchange by promising to spend money on seeds in the future. Like Cathy’s ‘donations’ which are reinvested in her bees, cash transactions are explained not as selling to make a profit, but to ensure next year’s crop, either by directly swapping for seeds or for money earmarked for seeds. These examples begin to undermine participants’ explicit disavowal of selling food and seed, but what is particularly interesting are the different strategies for reframing what is ostensibly commodity exchange as something different. This alludes to Bourdieu’s (cited in Belk 2010, p.721) assertion that the maintenance of a distinct realm of gift giving is necessary ‘to prevent the economy from being grasped as an economy’.

As well as saying they did not want to sell produce, many seed-savers indicated a desire to remove themselves from ‘consuming’ in the sense of buying seeds, plants and other goods commercially. People preferred to use materials from their own land where possible. David and Claire (fieldnotes, 12/07/2013) demonstrated their complex rainwater collection systems, Susan, a seed guardian and retired dairy farmer cut all her pea and bean sticks from the hedges surrounding her large garden (fieldnotes, 04/10/2013), and many spoke of the simple pleasure in growing from your own seed (Cathy and Nathan, interview#1, 03/06/2013; Angela, interview, 25/02/2013; Brian, fieldnotes, 20/06/2013). Participants showed me what they were capable of creating, growing, or recycling, whilst buying tended to be depicted as passive and lazy, spoken about in guilty whispers or admissions of garden centre visits (Daniel, fieldnotes, 03/07/2013).
This sentiment is also evident in Louise’s description of why she became a seed guardian:

Louise: I think it’s, kind of like being part of a unique, elite, saving force! You know. Yes exactly!

Laura: Yeah?

Louise: It is… you see people, they just, they go every year. They buy their twenty packets. They throw them away when they, when the date is out of date, without even thinking, ooh they might go another year… and, you know, I didn’t want to be the person who goes back every year to the seed companies, you know, and buys the same thing, year in year out. I wanted to try new varieties, and I wanted to be one of the people that gives back into the fold.

In this extract, processes of distinction unfold as Louise talks about others buying packets of seeds, dispassionately disposing and renewing them through the act of purchase rather than playing a role in their production and giving ‘back into the fold’. Buying seed is associated by Louise with uniformity and sameness, and consumers are imagined as doing ‘the same thing, year in year out’, passively, ‘without thinking’. Here Louise positions herself as someone prepared to make the extra effort and engage in an active, ‘elite’ and giving relationship with seeds.

There were, however, moments where seed-savers appeared closer to traditional conceptions of rational consumers, interested in acquisition, saving money and maximising opportunities for sourcing diverse and unusual varieties. Yet apparent in participants’ explanations of their consumptive desires for seeds is a further negation and transmutation of the commodity status of garden produce, as seeds, plants and cultivars become incorporated into crafted collections (Campbell 2005; Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011; Belk 1995). Participants showed me the wide variety of plants they grew to explain their motivations for swapping and saving. Commercial uniformity was often contrasted with unusual or unique things they could only eat if they grew themselves. Supermarkets simply did not sell Nina’s Chilean guava and achocha (fieldnotes, 21/06/2013), or the range of tomatoes found in David’s polytunnel (fieldnotes, 12/07/2013).

Though the promotional literature on seed swaps at times downplays economic motivations for swapping, the affordable access to diverse seed varieties at swaps
emerged as a strong motivation, evident in the hum of activity around the seed tables at events I attended. Barbara, a long-standing seed swap attendee, said the opportunity to source cheap seeds at swaps enabled her to experiment in her Brighton allotment:

I think I was drawn to it because of the idea of not having to pay a fortune for seeds because seeds can be quite expensive. And… also once I went there and saw what was on offer and what was possible, it was the possibility of trying out things, you know getting lots and lots of things for the same amount of money that you’d get a few things, commercially. So you could try out, and even if it didn’t work, you didn’t have to worry about how much it had cost... (Barbara, interview#1, 29/01/2013)

Swapping not only enables access to wider variety, but offers opportunities for experimentation because outlay costs are kept down. The fun of trying unusual or unknown varieties is valued as well as their productivity. It is important to note here most of the gardeners I spoke to were growing as a hobby, and not for subsistence or out of economic necessity. Barbara had enough space in her allotment and small back garden to afford the luxury of trialling numerous experiments without the worry of failing to feed herself.

Though participants valued their produce in ways that surpassed economic benefit, they still often rationalised their growing in terms of cost-effectiveness:

_Nathan:_ …with me, because I’m on the sick, so that’s all I get, the sick pay, disability and stuff like that. But, that’s why I’ve got an allotment. To try… you try and save money…

_Laura:_ Yeah?

_Nathan:_ …and don’t spend… (laughs) don’t spend anything on it! And you do… but you know, instead of going to the shop and buying lettuce, or, a pack of tomatoes, and stuff like that, what you gonna… two pound for a tray of tomatoes? And you can pick ‘em yourself! (Nathan, interview#1, 03/06/2013)

Nathan laughs as he says his allotment is an attempt to save money, as he acknowledges he does spend much of his limited income on the garden. However, his pleasure comes from not spending money on ‘alienated’ food commodities, and instead eating food he can pick himself. He also mentions the health condition which means he is unable to work. The health benefits of eating vegetables and exercising in the fresh air are significant aspects of cultivating the allotment for Nathan, a point Cathy (fieldnotes, 23/08/2013) reiterated later on as she said to me quietly, ‘it’s done him the power of
good, look at the colour of him’ (Sempik et al. 2005). It is difficult to put a price on the value of Nathans’s allotment food or to account for its economic rationality. The benefits, like Brian (interview#1, 28/02/2013) said earlier, are ‘priceless’. Yet the idea of frugality is evident in Nathan’s account, and often emerged in seed-savers’ explanations. Several admitted to spending money on the garden (Daniel, fieldnotes, 03/07/2013; David, fieldnotes, 12/07/2013) and reflexively problematised the extent to which growing saved money, citing particular crops, like rhubarb, where ‘there’s no way it costs more to grow your own’ (Anita, interview#1, 07/05/2013).

Like Barbara, allotment neighbours Cathy and Nathan also describe swapping with one another as a thrifty way of accessing a wide variety of seeds:

**Nathan:** [Y]ou want something where… like, Cathy could grow so many stuff, and I could grow another lot, what are totally different. And then, next year I could do the stuff what Cathy’s grown, and next year, Cathy does me. My stuff… and then you can see different varieties.

**Cathy:** And that’s something, I think a lot of the seeds are so expensive in the shops as well…

**Nathan:** 2.99 for a pack at Johnsons…

**Cathy:** [T]hey are… yeah. And I mean, I’ve bought different seeds, and we’ve had a lot of good offers, haven’t we Nathan? I mean we had newspaper offers. I mean, he’s the coupon collecting king. He really is.

**Nathan:** Daily Mail, Daily Mirror. I collect so many tokens. I was getting the next-door neighbours to get the newspaper, just to get the tokens. (Cathy and Nathan, interview#1, 03/06/2013)

Cathy encourages and reinforces both Nathan’s responses and his gardening pursuits. They swap with one another, sharing the cost and the produce, and Nathan in particular has found diverse money saving sources to pursue his enthusiasm for seeds, bringing others into an extended sharing dynamic by roping in neighbours to collect newspaper coupons. These discussions about sourcing seeds reveal that though many seed-savers were interested in heritage varieties, they rarely limited their growing to heirloom cultivars or swapped seeds, often buying seed commercially as well if it seemed like a ‘bargain’ (Anita, interview#1, 07/05/2013). Participants were not puritanical seed-saving converts. Despite the various tactics enrolled to preserve boundaries around self-
provisioned produce (Johnston et al. 2011; DuPuis and Gillon 2009) seed-saving and exchange did not exist in pure ‘alternative’ spaces, but exhibited a coexistence of the commercial and home-made, as I go onto explain (Chevalier 2014; Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011).

The discussions with Cathy and Nathan reveal that whilst seed-saving and swapping are explained in terms of thrift, waste avoidance, and sharing they also involve consumptive desires of selecting and collecting (Belk 1995). Though promoting seed-saving in the context of anti-consumerism, swap organisers Faye and Alice described the continued desire for a ‘consumer fix’ when choosing seeds:

Alice: there’s no real reason to be supporting these big companies that produce seeds. We can save our own… but …there is something exciting about going to the seed catalogue, dreaming about…

Faye: We all do it, I do it. (Faye and Alice, interview, 23/02/2013)

Swap volunteer Tom (interview#1, 16/08/2013) also describes himself as a keen collector of seeds: ‘I do sort of generally just like collecting things that I’m interested in. And seeds are so… [it’s] so easy to just become a collector...’ The material qualities, relative ease of access, and associated excitement and anticipation make seeds ideal objects for collection (Nazarea 2005). Easily stored, relatively cheap, and like tiny precious ‘treasures’ (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013), one biscuit tin could hold a vast repository of genetic diversity, and many thousands of imagined future plants. Access to rare cultivars unique to individual gardens is opened by swapping.

The metaphors used by seed-savers to describe their collections suggest the practice of collecting can become addictive. Cathy (interview#1, 03/06/2013) said Nathan was a ‘seedaholic’ and Stewart (interview, 21/02/2013) spoke about ‘seed junkies’. Swap volunteer Nina (interview#1, 01/02/2013) described collecting seeds as ‘like Pokémon’ and likened swap events to a ‘gateway drug’ (Nina, interview#2, 21/06/2013), acting as a ‘hook’ to raise awareness about wider environmental issues. Stalp and Winge (2008) note similar tendencies in practices of handcrafters who refer to their ‘stash’ of collected craft materials, which alludes to addictive hoarding. Belk (1995, p.479) defines collecting as ‘an acquisitive, possessive, and materialistic pursuit’ which ‘commits the

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6 A popular turn of the millennium game that involved collecting fictional creatures with the tagline ‘gotta catch ‘em all’.
collector to a continuing quest for inessential consumer goods that are removed from any functional capacity they may once have served.’ Collecting seeds thus entails risks of hoarding and over-accumulation, and seed-savers often maintained collections that far surpassed in quantity what they could realistically ever hope to grow:

[You look in a catalogue, yeah and you’re looking at them and thinking, wow, look at these purple carrots, wow, they’re amazing. I’ve gotta have some of those! And there are bright red carrots, and some yellow carrots. I better get all of those! Why not?! And some are longer than the others. Oh, I’ll get both of them! (Tom, interview#1, 16/08/2013)]

Tom’s elaboration of the seductiveness of seed catalogues illustrates how the desire for novelty and new acquisitions, combined with relative affordability means a sizeable collection can become quickly amassed with few negative consequences.

Figure 5.2: Collection of tomatoes and squashes at Louise’s community garden
However, as Chapter 4 highlighted, savers’ attachments to seeds entail feelings of responsibility to ensure they are grown, which conflicts with desires to possess and keep seeds in a collection. Sharing seeds is one way seed-savers reconciled responsibilities to grow and continue seeds with having, keeping, and collecting. Louise, for example, says she swaps and donates seed when her collection becomes too large and unwieldy:

> [E]very now and then I… well I’ve got friends who come round my house, or we meet up around the country, and I’ll just take, cause I’ve got… three of those, I’ve got two, like suitcase-y things, and I’ve got a big, deep, er, box for my beans. So I’ll just take, all the ones out that I don’t wanna grow again. Bung them all in a bag, take them, and then people just snaffle them. And then, I bring them here, and, when we have meetings, and I say, just take, so I give, I give… tons away. (Louise, interview#1, 09/05)

Even though Louise no longer has a use for the ‘tons’ of seeds she gives away, her depiction of friends who ‘snaffle’ them alludes to hungry consumption. Like Clive (interview#1, 03/06/2013), whose shared rhubarb went ‘like a forest on fire’, Louise presents herself as fulfilling a desire and appetite rather than palming off unwanted gifts to assuage any guilt associated with hoarding.

Perishable food and plants are less easy to hoard and therefore often freely shared, but seeds, though ultimately perishable can in some cases be kept for several years. As well as facilitating exchange, their material properties mean they can, if temporarily, be kept ‘removed’ from their ‘functional capacity’ (Belk 1995, p.479) as objects in a collection. As mentioned previously, seed-savers often showed me or listed their collections. Seed guardian Susan (fieldnotes, 10/06/2013) demonstrated her dining table covered with bowls and plastic baskets full of drying seeds, Nina (interview#1, 01/02/2013) and Louise (interview#1, 09/05/2013) reeled off the numbers of cultivars in their personal libraries, swap organiser Daniel (fieldnotes, 28/01/2013) showed me his neatly labelled and organised seed tin, and seed guardian Jean (fieldnotes, 06/06/2013) displayed the filing cabinet in her garage filled with jars of seeds. Collecting relates to acquiring seeds and plants, but also requires gaining knowledge about rare varieties and learning how to track them down from specialist suppliers. Campbell (2005, pp.26-27) suggests that like gifting, collecting is an example of consumers ‘effectively “negating” the product’s status as a commodity’ and indicates collecting might be understood as ‘itself a form of craft consumption, with the “collection” as the “handmade” end result’ (p.34). Notable in these more
self-interested, acquisitive moments of seed swapping are the creative capacities
drawn upon and presented to me that make ‘working with one’s consumption’ a
craft in itself (Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011, p.233).

Figure 5.3: collections of drying seeds on Susan’s dining table (left) and HSL drying room (right)

**Framing seed swaps: doing, defetishising, knowing and imagining**

Seed production and consumption has been neglected in discussions of AFNs. It has
been claimed the separation of production and reproduction of food crops has
contributed to declining seed-saving skills amongst agricultural producers and increasing
commercialisation of the seed industry (Campbell 2012; Phillips 2013; Kloppenberg
2004). Many home growers have been persuaded by industrial seed producers and
gardening ‘experts’ that using saved seed means running the risk of less vigorous crops
or lower harvests than certified (and often hybrid) varieties (Larkcom 2012).
Community garden organiser Brian describes attitudes towards saved seed amongst
plot-holders at his allotment site:

[T]here was a lot of old wives tales, and… still, the old guys are like, ooh don’t save seed.
Don’t do it, buy seed. Buy new seed. It must come out of a packet, or they don’t trust it.
So there is still that around. (Brian, interview#1, 28/02/2013)

This continuing mistrust of saved seed forms the context for contemporary seed swaps,
which aim to reconnect reproduction of seed with ordinary practices of gardening,
growing and eating food.
Analysis of seed swap promotional literature reveals seed-saving is framed as both continuing a historically ordinary practice and breaking with contemporary consumerist norms:

‘Seed-saving and sharing is part of our heritage and time was when everyone who had a garden or allotment would save seeds as a matter of course.’ (Edible Eastbourne 2014)

This excerpt promoting Seedy Sunday Eastbourne uses ideas of historically ubiquitous practices to ground the normality of seed-saving, which used to be done ‘as a matter of course’. Similarly, the Brighton Seedy Sunday website (Figure 5.4) depicts seed-saving as practiced ‘since time immemorial’, with contemporary swappers ‘continuing this tradition’:

![Seed swapping: not a new idea!](image)

Figure 5.4: Seed swapping: not a new idea! (Sharpe, 2008d)

Whilst modern seed swappers are imagined as continuing age-old practices, they also break with ‘what we are used to’: the contemporary norm of buying seeds, depicted here as a historical anomaly. This illustrates how seed swaps frame everyday practices of cultivation as simultaneously ordinary and as embodying radical action in the practice of subsistent production (Wilbur 2012).

Seed swaps are also presented as reconnecting consumption and production (and reproduction), a core theme of defetishisation theses in analysis of AFNs (Morris and Kirwan 2010; Carrier 2010). The spatial and cognitive distance between production and consumption, often critiqued by AFNs, are purportedly overcome in acts of personally
saving one’s own seed. Furthermore, seed swaps are framed as providing opportunities to connect with other growers of seed (Figure 5.5):

Figure 5.5: A seed swap is a sort of fair (Sharpe 2008c)

The seeds described here are ‘home-saved’, those which attendees have ‘grown themselves’. Seed production and consumption is reconnected here in an exchange imagined to have more parity than commercial transactions between distinct and separated producers and consumers. The two parties in this exchange are framed as ‘kindred spirits’: both are simultaneously producing and consuming seeds and sharing in the same (perhaps whimsical) hobby and enthusiasm. The latter part of the passage further removes swap activity from commercial commodity exchange, as the seeds on offer are distanced from ‘bought ones’. The practice of swapping and saving seed is simultaneously positioned as marginal (‘eccentric’), and economical. Yet in saying that seed-savers are not ‘just stingy or eccentric’ it presents seed swapping as more than marginal or motivated by rational economic factors.

The social dimension of ‘reconnecting’ is also emphasised as swap events are described as opportunities for like-minded gardeners to meet, exchange seeds and offer one another support or ‘reassurance’. This is a sentiment Tracey (interview, 03/02/2013), a seed swap volunteer and allotment holder, reiterates: ‘people come here for information, as well. D’you know? Reassurance? As to actually, you can do that. … It’s about giving them confidence. And empowering them to do it themselves, really.’ Like Tracey suggests, many growers attending events like Seedy Sunday sought information and advice about gardening, food growing and seed-saving. Becky, who runs a stall for
her seedbomb business at several swaps spoke about the opportunities they provide for informal and intergenerational learning:

I think a lot of old, like, old dudes that have had allotments for years go there, and they like to share their wisdom... [Y]ou know, people think that they have to go to college to learn about growing plants, but, you know, if you go to an event like Seedy Sunday, you’ll find someone there that will tell you how to grow a tomato seed, from start to finish. They will, they will love that. If you go there with a little notebook. Or they might even write it down for you, that’s how enthusiastic they are. (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013)

Becky’s framing of the swap event articulates the joy and ‘enthusiasm’ experienced growers find in sharing their knowledge, encouraging and supporting newer gardeners. The gendered language of ‘old dudes’, like Brian’s (interview#1, 28/02/2013) earlier reference to the ‘old guys’ on his plot reflects a prevalent cultural image of allotments and gardening ‘experts’ as older men (Crouch and Ward 1988; McKay 2011), which, interestingly, was not supported by my predominantly female sample. Importantly, Becky reinforces that cultivation skills exist within the community, and intergenerational learning is accessible and achievable independently of formal education.

By reskilling the community in making their own seed (Demeulenaere 2014), swap events also draw on metaphorical connotations of seeds as fundamental to the wider production and promotion of local, resilient, alternative food systems. Paul (interview, 22/02/2013), who works for an organisation campaigning on food issues explains: ‘if people start thinking about seeds, then they’re probably gonna start thinking about where their food comes from, you know, and that’s… what you want.’ Notably, ‘thinking’ about where food comes from is encouraged by the practical and thoughtful encounters with seed around which organised swap events are based. In addition to providing opportunities to swap seeds, larger events involved programmes of speakers, including those aimed at novice growers (e.g. ‘Are you a first time seed sower?’) to talks about open-pollinated seeds or ‘Saving seeds from corporate control’ (fieldnotes, 03/02/2013) which organisers felt contributed to raising awareness and developing attendees’ skills as producers (fieldnotes, 27/01/2103; 27/02/2013; Rosemary, interview, 25/02/2013).

The opportunity for gardeners to meet and offer mutual reinforcement, depicted by Becky and Tracey above, is also seen by Barbara, a swap volunteer and organiser, as central to rebuilding local, self-organised seed systems:
It’s about awareness raising, it’s a fingers up to corporations, and saying well we can do this ourselves as well, and we will. Erm, and it’s creating a sense of community amongst people who share some of these ideas. And, who knows what other inspirations people will get to go and be active in other ways, by coming to something like this. (Barbara, interview#1, 29/01/2013)

Like Tracey, Barbara imagines the impact of events like Seedy Sunday in the ‘sense of community’, confidence and action they inspire within gardeners, and she envisions others might be encouraged to ‘go and be active in other ways’. As well as substantively doing seed production differently, this notion of ‘doing it ourselves’ represents a stance of defiance, a ‘fingers up’ to corporations as well as getting on with it (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010).

From these seed-savers’ perspectives, reskilling the community enables growers to see themselves as producers, and to recognise their capacities for growing food and making seed (Demeulenaere 2014). Faye, the organiser of a small seed swap connected with the local Transition Network and held for the first time this year, articulates this aim:

[I]t’s about building a sense that people are part of a community, have something to share with each other. I think some of the people that came this year, came without seeds, but we gave them flyers about encouraging them to save some seeds next year, and bringing them back... (Faye, interview, 23/02/2013)

Significantly, as part of a community purposefully developed around food, the framing of swap events by organisers like Faye encourages growers to share with one another on a more equitable basis than conventional systems premised on separated consumers and producers (Demeulenaere 2014). Seed-savers often explained notions of self-determination and resilience not as individual aspirations or qualities, but developed through collectively shared knowledge, skills and support within communities of growers.

Like Barbara above, some participants stressed that community skill building and ‘doing it yourself’ entailed not just learning seed-saving technicalities, but gaining independence from commercial entities:

[Se]ed saving is sort of a way to... take yourself out of the corporate cycle. That consumer loop that happens. And you do sort of separate yourself from that a little bit by doing these sort of things. Seed-saving, or making your own, you know, we make our
own wine and things like that, our own jam, and you do take yourself out of that loop a little bit. (Tom, interview #1, 16/08/2013)

Tom recognises the making and doing entailed in a range of food preparation practices (Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011) as a way of actively separating himself from the ‘consumer loop’. Whilst Tom depicts ‘opting out’ of consumerist practices that passively ‘happen’ by saving seed, making wine and so on, swap volunteer Nina described the collective impact of events like Seedy Sunday as enabling personal ‘resilience’:

[T]he purpose of Seedy Sunday, I think is to promote more gardening. And, and gardening in a way that’s, sort of, in the community’s hands. Rather than being beholden to the bigger, er, seed companies, that often provide hybrids, so, the plants you grow you can’t save seeds from them, so it’s that… kind of like, that resilience in… personal food growing. (Nina, 01/02/2013)

This extract expresses Nina’s vision of self-reliant growers who are not dependent on a separated realm of industrial producers. Growers gain independence and ‘resilience’ by making seeds in an embodied, active process of crafting rather than passively consuming.

Questions of who holds the production of seed and with what type of grip are touched upon here. Nina states the ideal promoted by Seedy Sunday is gardening that is ‘in the community’s hands’ rather than ‘beholden’, or in the ‘stranglehold’ (Brian, interview #2, 04/07/2013) of commercial production. Imagery on seed swap websites and promotional materials feature close-up pictures of people holding and displaying seed in open palms (Figure 5.4), which reflects both the embodied, reconnected ownership of seeds’ reproduction, and connotes the tactile and handmade qualities of the seeds on offer.

My observations of the spaces of seed swaps further reinforce this celebration of a handmade aesthetic (Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011). Helping organisers decorate the hall for Seedy Sunday involved stringing homemade bunting and hand-painted and embroidered signage. The community and commercial stalls continued this theme, displaying, for example, a felt tepee constructed from wool from local sheep; a knitted allotment made by the organic gardening group; printed vegetable artwork made in a children’s workshop and numerous crafted products.
Figure 5.6: Seed swap posters: Seedy Sunday Brighton 2015 (left); Seedy Sunday Eastbourne 2015 (right)

Figure 5.7: Handmade decorations at Seedy Sunday Brighton
The following extract (Figure 5.8) from the website of Seedy Sunday Brighton reiterates the handmade, distancing what is on offer at swaps from mass-produced seed:

Seeds are provided by the growers

These seeds are provided by the people who have grown them. Seedy Sunday volunteers and other gardeners donate saved seeds which are bagged up before the event. Some people bring jam jars full of seeds to the event where volunteers patiently bag and label them while others bring the seeds ready bagged and labeled with some growing instructions. The seeds come in all shapes and sizes with stories attached!

Figure 5.8: Seeds are provided by the growers (Sharpe 2008a)

Seeds are portrayed as home-grown, and the patient, time consuming labour of gardeners and volunteers who individually bag and label seeds is conveyed. This emphasis on handling, the handmade and the storied (Cameron 2012) signals attempts at humanising seeds, but also significant in this discussion is that ideas about *knowing* seeds better through producing them is at times conflated with imagined reconnection with other grower-producers (Castree 2001).

In contrast to prevailing views amongst ‘the old guys’ at his allotment site, Brian sees home-saved seed as higher quality than that which is commercially produced:

> It just is better. Simple as that. Save your own seed, it just is. You know… if you really know, how it’s been grown, which are the best plants you’ve saved from, there was a fair few of them. You know it’s gonna perform well. You know you’ve saved it well all winter, dried it properly, stored it cool, whatever whatever, so it’s just a control thing, it’s just eliminating… risk. (Brian, interview#1, 28/02/2013)

His valuations around quality here come from internal criteria and experience of growing, replanting, and embodying the multiple productive and consumptive practices necessary in crafting seed. Brian *knows* how his seed has been grown, processed and stored and how it’s likely to perform. Because he has grown it himself, he can trust its quality. The process of growing means he has empirical and experiential knowledge about the plant, the population size, and methods of cultivation. However, when seed swapping is extended beyond territorially or socially known and trusted communities of growers through organised swaps, there is a question (as with other supposedly ‘reconnected’ food) of how much can be *known* about seeds grown and saved by someone else, and the ‘imaginative geographies’ involved (Castree 2001, p.1519).
Emma, a seed guardian and allotment holder in Greater Manchester usually tries to shop at the local vegan shop where her partner works, and explains her motivations for seed-saving as an extension of being an ethical consumer. She talks about the ‘more personal feeling’ experienced when growing her own saved seed and that sourced from other seed guardians:

[I]t’s a nicer feeling sowing seeds that you’ve got yourself. Or things from the library where you know somebody else has done the same thing. There’s a sort of, more personal feeling about it […] Rather than, a large scale, production. Um, I mean I guess it’s a bit like, you know people buying food where they’ve got a bit more knowledge about where it’s come from […] Rather than, you know, buying it from Tesco’s and not knowing where it’s come from. Kind of, I think it’s all part of the same feeling that people have, or some people have about food these days, isn’t it? (Emma, interview#1, 07/06/2013)

Emma connects her motivations to grow seeds saved by herself or others with a desire to feel informed about her purchasing practices, which include avoiding retailers like Tesco, emblematic of ‘big bad supermarkets’. Home growing gives Emma control over what she grows and eats, what inputs such as pesticides are used, or in this case, avoided. Notably ethical consumption is spoken about here as something intuitively felt rather than cognitively rationalised (Barnett et al. 2011).

In explaining seeds from other guardians have ‘more personal feeling’, she hints at the limits of ‘knowing’. Whilst Emma can only know a limited amount about swapped seeds, grown elsewhere, there is a ‘feeling’ gained from imaging connections with others (Castree 2001) – both contemporaries and previous generations - who have ‘done the same thing’, similar to Carol (interview, 31/01/2013) who thought about her grandfather growing her heritage potatoes many years earlier (Chapter 4). Emma’s explanation here indicates how seed-savers at times conflate the increased experiential knowledge gained in growing and thus being physically and emotionally embroiled with seed and its reproduction, with socially connecting with other seed-savers (Coles and Crang 2011). Rather than empirical experience, this second type of connecting relies on imagining gardeners similar to you growing (and knowing) seeds, and imagining these growers behaving more ethically than commercial producers due to their intimate emotional and nurturing relations with plants. Whilst connecting with other growers through a swap might mean seed-savers feel their production and ethical consumption of seeds is a shared practice, contributing to a ‘movement’ (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013), their
knowledge of the actual, material seeds themselves might in fact be weaker, as I discuss in further detail below.

Unlike saving your own seed, the ability to control quality in swapped seed relies on trusting others to bring seeds that have been correctly isolated, labelled, stored and so on. Gardeners’ levels of experience in seed-saving vary, and there is no way of checking seeds’ quality without first growing them. Erik, an advocate of open-pollinated seed suggests community-run seed systems depend upon trusting others to produce seed of a decent quality:

In the seed swap you have a responsibility that maybe isn’t even talked about. To do a good job, because you don’t want to let the other people down. Because if you let other people down, you let everything else down. (Erik, interview, 01/05/2013)

Since seed swap events are officially prohibited from ‘selling’ seeds due to EU legislation, they sit outside the realm of consumer protection, raising questions around how trust is developed and negotiated between seed-savers sometimes known to one another, and sometimes strangers.

The seeds I observed being swapped were often offered with little information about their provenance beyond the variety name and perhaps a postcode indicating where they had been grown. Some packets were simply labelled ‘runner bean’, or ‘lovely yellow tomato’, for example (fieldnotes, 03/02/2013). Several participants raised questions about issues of trust and responsibility relating to the quality of seed available, including swap volunteer and organiser Barbara:

Obviously we can’t test the quality... it’s about trusting. And erm, you know we’ve all had the experience of erm, picking up a packet of seeds from Seedy Sunday and thinking they were cucumber, and you know, you get a pumpkin, or whatever, you know. But all sorts of anomalies, which can be fun, but also, it’s an issue. So we decided one of our plans must be to try and improve the community’s capabilities and skills in that area. (Barbara, interview#1, 29/01/2013)

Organisers attempted to mitigate issues around seed quality by improving attendees’ seed-saving skills. Swap organiser and allotment holder Rosemary (interview, 25/02/2013) described some measures taken to improve quality and give seed swappers more information about the seed they took home: ‘everything is now dated, we ask
Encouraging collective production of seed, considered further in Chapter 6, was another method employed to build skills and trust. Barbara (fieldnotes, 06/07/2013) hoped the seed circle developed on her allotment might inspire other gardeners to set up similar groups in which growers learnt together and reinforced one another’s skills. As well as swapping amongst themselves, members of her group planned to save seed for the annual swap, which would be distinguished with a ‘premium’ stamp showing the seeds were grown by a more experienced community of gardeners: ‘so… if it says it’s pumpkin, it’ll be a pumpkin, you know. Rather than, who knows!’ (Barbara, interview#1, 29/01/2013).

Doing seed-saving in groups acts to build trust through surveillance of one another’s practices as well as support (fieldnotes, 06/07/2013). Involving more people in seed-saving collectives or ‘circles’ means members can share skills and advice, and a larger quantity of ‘known’ seed can be produced and therefore, if not assured, given some kind of ‘premium’. In theory, participants in seed circles have a clearer sense of the duty Erik (interview, 01/05/2013) touched on above where he mentioned the unspoken responsibility of swappers not to let one another down. Doing seed-saving collectively maintains social relationships and expectations beyond the fleeting exchange taking place at a swap (Belk 2010). Barbara’s ideas about introducing premium stamps for certain seeds illustrates how trust is achieved, and how assurances must be created, and, at times, imagined (Castree 2001) by individuals coming together to configure new ways of practicing economies.

As demonstrated previously, saved seed was often valued for its mystique, rarity or individual biography compared with commercially purchased seed. Participants also exhibited more tolerance for less than ideal quality in swapped seed compared with that purchased from commercial companies:

[G]enerally I’d always trust neighbours and people up here saying “oh, I’ve got a bit of this seed”, over bought seed any day. Even if it is a bit weird and different. And whatever, just because it’s… I just would favour, value locally saved, individually saved seed over bought seed…. (Brian, interview#1, 28/02/2013)
Brian says that he trusts local and personally known allotment neighbours more than distant commercial producers. Within Brian’s statement there is a sense, however, that his preference for locally saved seed is not entirely to do with trustworthiness, but depends on different definitions of ‘quality’, as he claims ‘weirdness’ and ‘difference’ in saved seed are not issues that bother him greatly. The lack of control over swapped seeds’ quality perhaps involves rethinking expectations of seed, moving away from commercial criteria to do with assurance, reliability, and expecting the contents of a seed packet to be clearly explained on its exterior.

In a discussion with Barbara about the photos she took, she described some unlabelled ‘mystery’ seeds picked up at Seedy Sunday:

*Barbara:* It’s three rows of seedlings of flowers that I picked up at Seedy Sunday without knowing what they are, you know, just, oh well, I’ll try them.

*Laura:* Yeah?

*Barbara:* So then they come up and I still don’t know what they are.

*Laura:* Oh right!

*Barbara:* Um, and I’m quite, I think I’m slightly amused that I’ve got these little rows.

(Barbara, interview#3, 15/08/2013)
The surprise and amusement Barbara describes here about what one might end up growing - perhaps unusual flowers, perhaps cucumbers when you were expecting courgettes - was also cited as ‘part of the fun’ by swap organiser Kay (interview, 31/01/2013), who celebrated this novelty absent in commercial seed. Emphasising the positives of experimentation and surprise, and handmade qualities of saved seeds were ways participants dealt with their lack of control and knowledge. It is important also to note, however, that this relaxed attitude to seeds’ reliability is possible because most gardeners were not growing food for survival but as a hobby, and there is a class element in being able to allocate time and space on experiments that might fail (Johnston et al. 2011).

‘Notional giving’ and cleaning seed: refetishising, repackaging and mainstreaming tensions

Wilson’s (2012, p.14) study considers ‘Food Not Bombs’, a ‘radical collective kitchen’ that redistributes waste food. She argues the process of sharing and thus negating food’s commodity status makes this a radical and ‘stronger’ AFN than other initiatives focused on the quality of the food product itself (e.g. Eaton 2008). Critiques around the questionable quality of seeds available at swaps might indicate that, like Wilson suggests, it is the process of swapping that makes seed swaps a radical alternative economy of sorts. However, closer inspection of precisely how seed swapping was practiced at events and the emergent tensions are needed in order to assess this claim. In the discussion that follows, I outline several observations and critiques that illustrate the demarcation of seed and food as either commodity or shared is far from clear cut.

Though the preceding discussion outlined how seed swaps are presented as reskilling communities, reconnecting growers with one another and with age-old skills of making seed, it raises questions around the extent to which playing-up ‘warm feelings’ and imagining seeds’ backstories might present an overly romanticised account that is open to manipulation. Beyond the quality of seeds at swaps, some participants also questioned how different the seed on offer really was, including Brian (interview#1, 28/02/2013) who argues: ‘the specialist seed, there’s virtually no… there’s none. I mean, you go to the main table there, and I watched it closely. And there was nothing!’ Brian’s comment about ‘specialist’ seed here hints at consumerist desires for novelty and rarity.
It also signals a disjuncture between the framing of swaps, considered in previous discussions, and the experience of doing swapping. Though the promotional literature presents seeds as ‘produced by the people that swap them’ (Figure 5.8), the seed I observed was often less ‘handmade’ than suggested, qualifying claims that swapped seeds differed substantively from those commercially produced and provisioned.

Despite claims that swapping reconnects growers with one another and provides the chance to share seeds’ stories in the moment of exchange, my experience on the seed swap table indicated opportunities for face-to-face swapping were limited (fieldnotes 03/02/2013). Most ‘punters’ coming to the table spent money on seeds, though some did bring seeds to swap, sometimes a couple of packets, occasionally more. Volunteers put seeds in the correct tray or directed seed-savers to place them there. Their packets were counted out and exchanged for an equal number from the table. Occasionally someone would pick a packet straight up and this would initiate conversation between swappers, but the busyness of the event meant there was rarely enough time to talk to people about how they had grown things, or to observe closely what people were picking up.

So although there were fleeting moments of direct exchange, these were generally rare between swappers. Brian, a community garden organiser and keen seed-saver, was the participant most vocally critical of Seedy Sunday. Here he contrasts the limited opportunity for face-to-face swapping at Seedy Sunday with his view of an ideal seed swap:

[T]here’s a setup of… chucking your seed on the table, and walk away. And that’s not what a seed swap… is about. It’s like, the whole point of a seed swap, is that you… meet the grower […] and you don’t just swap the seeds, but you swap the stories, and you swap history, and an explanation of what that is, how it grows for you, how long you’ve had it. How well you know it. Is it a good year, how does it perform in a bad year. You know, you give information and your story with the seed. And that’s never been part of their format, they’ve never wanted to do that. They just want to, just turn up and just throw, maybe something that’s taken you two years to produce that packet of seed… just throw it on the table and walk away. […] And then someone comes along and just picks up a packet of seed and just walks away with it, and you don’t know if they’re going to look after it, value it. Or just, you know, just be a novice grower who’ll just throw it in the ground and watch it die. A lot of it will just probably stay in a drawer and never get grown on. (Brian, interview#1, 28/02/2013)
Brian’s depiction of an ideal swap here displays the significance he places on meeting growers in person so information on cultivation and seeds’ cultural biographies can be shared.

For Brian a seed swap should be an interpersonal and cultural exchange of seeds and their stories, not just a material or economic transaction. The development and maintenance of a social connection between growers is paramount, and Brian laments the way the current Seedy Sunday setup means swapping effectively takes place between strangers, as he says ‘you don’t know if they’re going to look after it’. This anonymous exchange devalues the embodied labour of cultivation, and does not allow the love, level of attention, or history of the seed to be shared. He describes swappers divesting of seed in a way that denies the sustained, emotional effort of its production and the complex reciprocities of sharing outlined in Chapter 4, as he says they ‘throw it on the table and walk away’. Seeds are here depicted as disposable, they are ‘thrown’ carelessly, onto the table, and then either onto the ground where they might be left to die by ‘novice’ growers, or forgotten and left in a drawer, collected and hoarded possessively, divorced from their true function (Belk 1995). Belk’s (2010) note that if sharing is practiced too widely, within too large a group, it can become difficult to maintain feelings of community is evident in Brian’s reflections here.

The majority of ‘swapped’ seeds were actually traded in cash transactions, in which swappers paid fifty pence for a packet of seeds, further undermining claims of a ‘radically’ different process of exchange (Wilson 2012). Several participants (Anthony, interview, 23/04/2013; Brian, interview, 28/02/2013; Daniel, fieldnotes, 27/01/2013) observed the proportion of seeds brought by attendees to swap was small, which was borne out by my own experiences. One volunteer estimated as little as ten percent of the seed on the table at Seedy Sunday was swapped, and only half of this was home-grown (Roy, interview, 28/02/2013). Though a minority of swappers brought armfuls of saved seeds, sometimes in ‘beautiful handmade and illustrated envelopes’ (fieldnotes, 03/02/2013), the vast majority bought seeds, rather than exchanging home-grown produce. Anthony, who works at HSL suggests this is common at swaps:

[T]here’s a lot of seed swaps, but everyone argues that there’s not enough people swapping seeds. People want to give donations for seeds, but there’s a small number of people giving, you know, actually doing it. (Anthony, interview, 23/04/2013)
Anthony notes the enthusiasm around swapping is limited by the small numbers of people saving and donating seed. In contrast to the widespread practice of home-saving presented in promotional literature, he suggests there is only a handful of individuals ‘actually doing it’, and a number of these ‘usual suspects’ contributed to my sample. Like others I spoke to Anthony hints that the practical, embodied doing of seed-saving that should be at the ‘heart’ of the swap (Barbara, interview#2, 02/05/2013), is marginalised.

Given the majority of seeds were exchanged for donations, it was necessary for organisers to buy seeds in advance of the swap to cater for demand (fieldnotes, 27/01/2013). Seeds were bought in bulk from a commercial seed supplier, then packed into handwritten brown envelopes by organisers. On separate occasions, swap organisers Daniel (interview, 28/01/2013) and Barbara (interview#1, 29/01/2013) told me the issue of buying in seeds had been a point of contention amongst organisers, raising thorny issues of which suppliers were most ethical and whether to openly tell people seeds had been purchased. As well as being exchanged for cash, a large proportion of seeds ‘swapped’ at events like Seedy Sunday were therefore materially similar to those commercially available.

Furthermore, many of the seeds that were brought into the swap by ‘punters’ were not home-grown. These took the form of commercial seed packets individuals no longer wanted, either unopened or after sowing part of the pack. For example, Geoff (interview, 27/02/2013), an allotment holder and Seedy Sunday ‘punter’ says he doesn’t think of the event as primarily about saving seed: ‘I mean, I would never have considered Seedy Sunday to be about… growing your own seeds, and then swapping. For me it’s just like, having some seeds, and then swapping.’ The seeds Geoff swaps are those that he has, acquired in other ways rather than those he has produced.

That much of what I observed at swaps was commercially packeted seed indicates the ordinary motivations of thrift and waste reduction are perhaps as important to swappers as the wider political issues of biodiversity and open-pollination promoted by organisers, an aspect overlooked in academic literatures on seeds (Campbell 2012; Phillips 2013). Furthermore, it confirms earlier points raised by swap organisers about the need to develop local seed-saving skills.

When people brought commercially packeted seeds to the swap table, they were usually encouraged by volunteers to take their packets to the ‘seed cleaning table’ (fieldnotes, 03/02/2013). This was also the case if swappers brought in jars of runner
beans, for example. At the seed cleaning table, they were instructed to split larger packets into the small brown envelopes provided, and hand-write labels indicating name of variety, date collected and location grown. The seeds bought in advance by organisers were packaged into the same handwritten brown envelopes. Where seeds were repackaged from commercial packets, less about provenance would be knowable from the brown paper envelope, undermining ideas about reconnecting as knowing seed. Perhaps this repackaging, and ‘cleaning’ seeds of the material traces of their commercial production (Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011) served another purpose, however.

As noted elsewhere, in both promotional literature and interviews there was a tendency to stress the types of packets that seeds were in when participants compared saved and bought seeds. Seed packets are the outward manifestation of the plant material contained inside, and an important cue for how people imagined seeds. Commercial seed packets seemed to stand for unknowable provenance, limited information, and mass-production, with handmade envelopes representing home production, care, and sharing. The repackaging of commercial seed into brown envelopes seemed to encapsulate their transmutation from commodities into something with more warmth and human feeling (Campbell 2005; Lapavitsas 2004; Belk 2010). The process of ‘swapping’ seeds at an event means they are valued differently, even if the actual, material seeds are less knowable, possibly appropriated commercial seed, and therefore substantively similar to those one might buy.

From a more optimistic perspective, the presence of commercially produced seed at swaps, as well as examples like allotment neighbours Cathy and Nathan (fieldnotes, 15/07/2013), splitting packets with one another, demonstrates the ways mass-produced items are appropriated by gardeners into ‘alternative’ networks of sharing and exchange, by repackaging and representing them as gifts (Chevalier 2014). This appropriation of commercial seeds into networks of swapping and sharing has received less focus in either promotional literature or existing academic research on seed-saving, which tends to emphasise home-grown and heirloom varieties (Campbell 2012; Phillips 2013; Aistara 2014). Rather than painting an overly negative critique of seed swaps, paying attention to these processes of appropriation hints at how seemingly contradictory rationalities might productively coincide, indicating the ‘borrowing’ and incorporation which Ferguson (2009, p.174) and others argue form important tactics within the armoury of progressive social projects (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008; Mansfield 2007a, 2007b).
Interesting here is not whether seed swaps incorporate elements of the systems they seek to change, but rather what the manipulation, reworking and negotiation of these categories says about seed-savers’ meaning-making practices. The radical potential of the ‘sharing’ taking place at seed swaps is exposed as far more complex than the tidier narratives found in promotional literature. The shifting and slippery categories of commodity and gift are bundled together in swap organiser Daniel’s (interview, 28/01/2013) explanation of the exchanges taking place as he says: ‘all the seeds on the stalls are given, although obviously we do buy, but they are notionally all given.’ This idea of notional giving is significant in its intimation that the category of gift is permeable and flexible (Chevalier 2014; Lapavitsas 2004) and its encapsulation of the affective dimensions of seed swapping. By participating in a seed swap, growers feel they are part of an extended network of giving, sharing, like-minded seed-savers, even if there are elaborate rituals within this that ‘prevent the economy from being grasped as an economy’ (Bourdieu 1972, in Belk 2010, p.721). Swapped seeds are made socially meaningful and are imagined as reconnected through the staging and marketing of the seed swap event and associations with the handmade and authentic. Moments of non-monetary exchange within this context constitute a kind of provenance. The notion of a gift implies continued ownership, as noted earlier in the ordinary exchanges of plants between gardeners (Chevalier 2014). This is reflected in participants’ feelings that by taking part in swap events they become linked with other growers in a ‘movement’ (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013; Barbara, interview#1, 29/01/2013).

This discussion shows that rather than celebrating the radical potential of ‘process over product’ (Wilson 2012) in seed swaps, (i.e. the process of swapping or ‘notionally giving’ as more important than the qualities of the seeds themselves), the repackaging of seed, in its broadest sense, can be understood as creating a new or ‘double fetish’ (Coles and Crang 2011). As several writers on ethical consumption have noted (e.g. Gunderson 2014; Morris and Kirwan 2010), claims about AFNs defetishising commodities, evident in the popular trope of reconnecting producers and consumers, can paradoxically ‘continue… and even strengthen… the mystification of objects of consumption’ (Carrier 2010, p.686). Putting commercially produced seed into brown envelopes was the clearest indication of seeds’ refetishisation, but the context and setting of the event, the handmade aesthetic and ‘notional giving’ could all be understood as forming the wider repositioning of seeds (Coles and Crang 2011). Performing seeds as not sold emerges almost ironically as a successful business strategy, evidenced by Seedy Sunday’s
continued growth and seen in the success of open-pollinated seed company ‘The Real Seed Catalogue’ (2015) which has become an extremely successful business despite (or perhaps because) it actively encourages customers to save their own seed.

This interrogation of the processes and products (Wilson 2012) of swapping seed indicates some contradiction and muddying of clearer ethical waters when the ideals of sharing and ‘doing it yourself’ come into conflict with the pragmatics of organising a widely attended event. Further differences of opinion emerged in concerns around the potential commercialisation and co-optation of the swap, and were apparent, for example, in committee meeting discussions about how many commercial and community stalls to offer, or whether to advertise on the noticeboard in Starbucks (fieldnotes 27/01/2013, 27/02/2013, 03/07/2013). Seedy Sunday was also criticised by some attendees in terms of the physical and practical challenges posed by the scale of the event. My overriding memory is the ‘overwhelming, panic-inducing stuffiness’ (research diary, 03/02/2013) that resulted from huge numbers of people crammed into the small space around the swap table and stalls, as Carl, an allotment holder and swap attendee also remarked:

It’s called Seedy Sunday, ’cause it’s there for people to go and swap seeds. And there was not enough room for people. There wasn’t enough effort put into that area? It’s like… it became a sideline for other people making money. (Carl, interview, 27/02/2013)

Evident in Carl’s reflections on the physical experience of the event is a sense that commercial success is achieved at the expense of seed swapping, which has been ‘sidelined’.

Allotment holder and organiser Barbara also worried about Seedy Sunday growing even bigger:

I mean we have grown, hugely, you know, just in the last couple of years. …Before that we were a bit more, kind of, dirt under the fingernails and, and get on with collecting the seeds, you know, and it'll sort of sort itself out. (Barbara, interview#1, 29/01/2013)

Barbara contrasts the current incarnation of the swap, which is well-publicised and professionally run with its earlier ‘dirt under the fingernails’ authenticity. She claims that previously there was more emphasis on the skills and material practices entailed in doing seed-saving than the running of the event. Barbara’s use of the ‘dirt under the fingernails’ metaphor conveys both material traces of the embodied connection with the
earth required to save seed, as well as emphasising the handmade qualities she and
other swappers celebrated.

Interestingly, Daniel (interview, 28/01/2013) uses a similar metaphor as he says,
disparagingly, that critics would prefer the event to be ‘terribly earnest… [and] slightly
muddy’. In a conversation between swap organisers Nick and Daniel, he contests claims
Seedy Sunday has lost its community focus:

**Nick:** … I think some of those people… are probably less engaged with Seedy Sunday
now, because it’s not grassroots and it’s not quite as… community as it was… you know.
We still think it’s actually… pretty damn… community.

**Daniel:** It is, it is…

**Nick:** And… to my mind… being professional and well run, and organised, and… a bit
more business like… doesn’t mean it’s any less community, and any less focused, and any
less…

**Daniel:** I think what it enables us to do is generate more money. Which we’ll then be able
to disperse to… other community groups, you know… so you’ve just really got to do it
properly…

**Nick:** …and it means we can reach out to new people… and new groups and new
organisations, and help them… (Daniel and Nick, interview, 28/01/2013)

A key issue in critical discussions about Seedy Sunday in particular, were claims that
what began as a ‘grassroots’ project had lost some of its community ‘feeling’. Evident in
the quote above are disagreements about what is required to do seed swapping
‘properly’. Tensions exist between widening the reach of the event, becoming more
professional and generating income to redistribute, and maintaining integrity and focus
on cultivation processes.

Brian, community garden organiser and vocal critic of Seedy Sunday echoes Carl’s
(interview, 27/02/2013) point about the sidelining of the seeds, signalling the main
beneficiaries of the ‘appeal’ of saved seed might be the commercial stalls:

**Laura:** How has it changed since the… first event?

**Brian:** Er, it’s just got bigger and bigger. And the seeds have just got more sidelined. And
the stalls are becoming more and more… about the commercial. And less and less about
seeds, and less and less about growing food. And then, branching off into just… gardening in general, ornamentals. And then this year, they’ve even got landscape gardeners having stalls, and… it’s just turned into a kind of… gardeners’ expo thing… And the seeds have just… yeah that’s nice, cos it’s got the… appeal, and. Yeah it’s still got the appeal to pull people in and get the BBC down there and whatever, and go ooh, see these. It’s still got emotive value, and still pulls a crowd in… (Brian, interview#1, 28/02/2013)

Interesting here is that Brian associates increasing commercialisation of the event with a decline in gardeners’ interest in growing food in favour of ‘ornamentals’, flowers and decorative plants further removed from the subsistent gardening he practices. This prioritisation of aesthetic over edible qualities of plants seems linked in Brian’s narrative with a general trend towards the superficial, the outward presentation of gardening rather than the embodied labour of doing food production, as he says it’s become an ‘expo’ and is media friendly.

Whilst seeds acted as a ‘pull’ to raise awareness on wider environmental and political issues, these critiques about the commercialisation of swap events indicate seeds, and in particular home-saved, handmade, warm and humanised varieties are also a hook for commercial stalls and competing, perhaps less progressive agendas. The appeal Brian touches on is not only the variety of seeds on offer, but the fact they are imagined as having more human feeling than commercial seeds, through the refetishing processes of repackaging discussed above (Coles and Crang 2011; Morris and Kirwan 2010). Even if substantively what happens is the exchange of seeds for money, repackaging seeds in a swap event like this encourages swappers to imagine a generous extended community of gardeners sharing with one another. Whilst some might argue this ‘hailing’ of diverse economic subjects broadens the spaces in which alternatives can be imagined (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006) there is potential for appropriation of the ‘feel good factor’ of swapped seeds and dilution of the political aspects of swap events.

Brian continues to suggest alternatives are readily co-opted to present a positive public image of local food which serves other interests in maintaining the status quo:

I think they’ve got it all pretty well stitched up … allowing people like us to exist in the cracks. Yeah, we’re not threatening the structures, we’re not threatening anyone, and we are… perhaps quite useable…er… face of, oh it’s alright. Sort of thing. And that’s what Seedy Sunday is, and that’s what an awful lot of local food stuff has been, it’s like, ooh like,
look at all these, lots of lovely pictures, we’ll just keep shopping at supermarkets. (Brian, interview#1, 28/02/2013)

Though it is unclear in this extract who exactly are the ‘they’ that Brian refers to, his statement that he and others are allowed to ‘exist in the cracks’ without posing a challenge to dominant modes of food production and distribution qualifies the political potentiality within interstitial and marginal spaces that others have celebrated (Galt et al. 2014). It reveals the sense of uneasiness amongst some attendees that as Seedy Sunday grows and professionalises, the repackaging taking place might obfuscate or assume more substance than the seeds themselves. Brian’s comment that ‘we’re not threatening the structures’ and ‘we are… perhaps quite usable’ disrupts some of the overly positive, at times romanticised narratives many seed-savers seemed keen to present, and which studies of this nature run the risk of reproducing.

**Conclusion**

This chapter drew attention to the arguably more self-consciously ‘alternative’ and consumption oriented seed-saving spaces of swap events. These events connect diverse individual gardeners and their everyday gardening practices into wider communities of intent in which seeds are acquired, collected, and sought after for their variety and novelty. I looked at the methods through which seeds are actively constructed as different to commodities, by addressing the discursive and practical work seed-savers and swappers do to position garden produce outside the realm of commodity exchange, and the tensions arising as a result of the slippage between moments of making/exchanging, and commodity/gift.

Against a backdrop of mistrust of saved seed and increasing commercialisation and fetishisation of seed production, seed swaps are framed as reconnecting gardeners with the reproductive part of a plant’s lifecycle. Though seed swappers played-up their capacities for making, creating and growing, they rarely saw themselves as engaged in producing commodities for sale. The findings outlined here extend theorisations of ‘reconnection’ (Pottinger 2013) in alternative food by considering the self-provisioning (Smith et al. 2015; Smith and Jehlička 2013) and handcrafting practices of growers. I have shown how production is made meaningful by enabling participation in networks of exchange based on sharing, gifting, and through sustained emotional and embodied
relationships with seeds and plants. Seed swap organisers and gardeners producing their own food and seed engage in ‘boundary work’ (Johnston et al. 2011; DuPuis and Gillon 2009) and practices of alterity creation (Holloway et al. 2010) to reinforce that the products of their labours are not commodities. However, whilst discussions throughout the chapter hinge on how gardeners actively construct their produce as shared or gifted rather than sold, seeds exchanged at swap events were produced for the purpose of exchange (Morris and Kirwan 2010; Bridge and Smith 2003), and often took the form of cash transactions. This troubles the clearer conceptual delineation around gardeners’ produce as ‘priceless’ and outside the realm of commodity.

Furthermore, the exploration of seed swap events raises questions about how much swappers can ‘know’ about swapped seeds and their growers, and whether swapped seeds differ substantively from mass-produced seeds. The discussion here showed that ‘defetishisation’ by reconnection is only partially achieved, particularly as events grow in size. The final part of this chapter considered how the ‘warmth’ and ‘human feeling’ entailed in nurturing and caring for saved seeds is commodified in organised swaps as seeds are configured and marketed as ‘handmade’, and neither sold nor bought. I highlighted how performing seeds as not sold but ‘notionally given’ (Daniel, interview, 28/01/2013) could act as a ‘double commodity fetish’ (Coles and Crang 2011). In considering how the ‘spectacular’ consumption space of a seed swap event reframes everyday gardening practice as radical and reconnected, these findings therefore build on existing literatures (Gunderson 2014; Coles and Crang 2011; Carrier 2010) by arguing that swapping seeds might entail their refetishisation.

By looking at the practices, imaginings and tensions seed-savers articulated and struggled over to make seed socially meaningful, this chapter therefore extends understandings of the nitty gritty of doing alternative food (McClintock 2014). Whilst seed swappers went to great lengths to demonstrate their production, consumption, and exchange of seeds and produce sat outside monetary exchanges and pecuniary motivations, seed swaps are not pure alternatives to the market, unsullied by commerciality. This is evident in participants’ stated discomfort at events becoming too big, financially driven, or professional, indicating potentials for appropriation of the feeling and presumed authenticity of swapped seed. Seed swaps thus emerge as hybrid spaces in which the commercial and the handmade, self-provisioned and self-consciously alternative overlap (Ferguson 2009; Mansfield 2007b; Galt et al. 2014), resulting in disagreements, distinctions, and redrawing of boundaries, a point I develop further in the next chapter.
Chapter 6

Connecting with seeds

Whilst previous chapters considered how individuals develop emotional attachments to seeds and valuations surpassing economic rationales, important questions remain regarding the wider impacts of relations of nurture and care with plant material. Morgan (2010, p.1861), writing on Tronto’s (1994) influential work on the ethics of care, suggests a key question demanding attention is that of ‘otherness’: ‘how to get along with “others” who are not like “us”’, noting ““others” can be spatially near but socially far – that is to say, they are not necessarily “distant others” in a simple, geographical sense of the term.’ Drawing on those considering how caring obligations extend to non-humans and environments (Puig de la Bellacasa 2010) and how gardening can develop ‘meaningful, affective relationships with nature’ (Hawkes and Acott 2013, p.1118; Crouch 2003) the following chapter fleshes out the embodied practices of doing seed-saving with others: plants, soils, the diverse wildlife sharing growing spaces, and other gardeners.

I consider how the sensuous, embodied and everyday ‘doings’ of seed-saving are connected by seed-savers to ideas about effectivity beyond the garden. Unpicked here are not the moral or rational arguments for saving seed, but rather the impacts of doing seed-saving for participants and beyond. Of interest is how ethical negotiations are grounded ‘in concrete relationalities in the making rather than on moral norms’ (Puig de la Bellacasa 2010, p.152), the potentials and limitations for embodied action to deepen affective, caring relationships, and to stimulate ‘recognition of our intersubjective being’ (Popke 2006, p.507).

I start by looking at embodied and sensory interactions with non-human others (seeds, plants, soils and so on) entailed in learning seed-saving, and foreground the kinaesthetic, haptic, and tactile (Carolan 2007a; Paterson 2009). Secondly, I consider seed-savers’ notions of self-sufficiency in relation to organised, collective seed-saving. Here, I touch on moments where boundaries are (re)drawn and expressed in judgements around aesthetics, taste, and what constitutes ‘proper gardening’. By demonstrating aspects of ‘othering’ integral to these practices, this discussion qualifies to a certain extent the
exuberance around the ‘fuzzy boundaries’ (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010, p.1279) and intermingling of self and other sometimes emphasised in accounts of embodied environmental encounters (Carolan 2007a; Puig de al Bellacasa 2010). Finally, I explore how individuals understand seed-saving as ‘ethico-political practice’ (Phillips 2013), by considering how ‘small’, mundane acts in the garden are made meaningful by participants and placed within imagined chains of influence.

**Sensing seeds, embodied knowledges and aesthetic dispositions**

Conducting fieldwork required immersion in multiple seed-saving practices, from processing, storing and packaging seed, to planting, tending, and socialising in growing spaces. My recall of experiences working at the seed library, for example, are difficult to disentangle from sensations of ‘heat, sweat, and humidity felt pollinating runner beans and measuring tomatoes in the polytunnels’ at the library (research diary, 28/08/2013), or the cloying smell of the flowering dudhi, a vigorous bottle gourd, which hung heavily in the thick air and clung to your skin and nostrils for hours afterwards (research diary, 27/08/2013). My field notes are peppered with observations, like these, of physical sensations felt in the process of doing seed-saving with participants. Some are distinct and memorable, like the taste of an aged homemade cider vinegar eaten with freshly picked broad beans together with volunteers at a community garden (fieldnotes, 20/06/2013), memories of the sweetly complex acidity returning and making me salivate as I transcribed the interviews from that visit some months later (Pink 2009). Often, though, sensations appear in my notes in conjunction, like noticing the unusual markings of the Major Cook’s beans at the library, and their cool smoothness to touch (fieldnotes, 29/08/2013); or the rough dryness of kale seedheads and the yielding crunch as we trampled on them to separate the chaff (research diary, 04/07/2013). The sounds and vibrations of the kale seed scattering onto the tarpaulin beneath us prompted one volunteer to remark ‘it feels like it’s raining under my feet’ (fieldnotes, 04/07/2013) in a vivid articulation of the multisensoriality of a particular seed-saving task.

Seed-savers were able to explain some of their diverse sensory experiences with seeds. Cathy (interview#2, 23/08/2013), for example said she knew Lupin seeds were ready to harvest when she heard seedpods popping at the allotment. Becky (fieldnotes, 04/07/2013) encouraged children in her seedbomb workshops to taste fennel seeds, and
Jack (fieldnotes, 04/07/2013) suggested I sample fragrant Clary Sage flowers, saying: ‘I think it does something to my brain, get a good spike of it and give it a really good inhale.’ Nathan (interview#2, 23/08/2013) told me he planted lavender amongst his cabbages to attract bees to the allotment, but also to enjoy brushing against them whilst weeding: ‘that’s what you want, the smell of stuff. Not just seeing it growing, and that’s it. The smell of it, really.’ Seed-savers not only noticed but sought out and shared with others these sensory garden encounters.

In Tilley’s (2006, p.327) research, he notes a hierarchy in the reporting of sensory experience, finding ‘the bodily senses that seem to be most important to gardeners are almost in inverse relationship to their intimacy’. His interviewees placed greater verbal emphasis on the ‘distanced’ senses of smell, sight and sound than touch and taste, which require immediate bodily contact, and visual aspects of gardening were rated most significant. Participants in my research often spoke about visual qualities of plants, made aesthetic judgements about neighbouring gardens (Jean, fieldnotes, 06/06/2013; Cathy, fieldnotes, 15/07/2013), or pointed out features planted or designed to look a certain way (Hitchings and Jones 2004). Indeed, they were perhaps encouraged to do so given the research often involved a ‘tour’, a method entailing elements of surveying, viewing and demonstrating the landscape.

However, there is a different engagement in crafting seed that sets it apart from gardening in general (Phillips 2013). Though this study did not quantitatively analyse the reported importance of different sensory dimensions as in Tilley’s work, the sense of touch, and tactile qualities of seeds and plants appeared frequently in both talking about and doing seed-saving. For example, showing me around the seed drying room at HSL, a staff member said ‘this is one of the things everybody loves’, and ran her hands across a tray of dry pea seeds (fieldnotes, 27/08/2013). Like Jack sharing the ‘amazing’ smelling sage with me, she then went over to a tray filled about an inch deep with round black turnip seeds, ‘this is a really good one’ she said, sinking her hands into the tray, and encouraging me to do the same. Other interviewees spoke about marvelling at the smoothness of conkers (Tom, interview#1, 16/08/2013), feeling the scratchiness of beetroot seeds, (Louise, interview#1, 09/05/2013; Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013), the patience required in the delicate work of separating lettuce seed from its fluffy chaff (Susan, interview#2, 04/10/2013), and poking around in the squelchy interior of a tomato (Jean, fieldnotes, 09/09/2013).
In short, the seed-savers I spoke to seemed very conscious of their sensuous interactions, perhaps due to their more manual engagement with seeds as they were processed, harvested, dried and stored (Phillips 2013). Like other crafts, seed-saving requires practitioners to develop skilled repertoires based on repetitive movements and manual dexterity in response to differing material qualities of the plants and seeds worked with (Price 2015; Hall and Jayne 2015). The importance of haptic knowledges (Paterson 2009) is apparent as community garden organiser and gardening teacher Louise describes encouraging students to think about vegetables’ ‘seediness’ by getting them to manually deseed aged, browning cucumbers.

Louise aimed to cement understanding by doing the tactile, ‘squishy’ and (she hoped) memorable practice of seed removal at the start of the course:

[I]n college, all my students save seeds, it’s the first thing, so between September and December, they will all squish out some cucumbers, even if I don’t actually use those, I will save twenty old cucumbers, so I know which ones I’ve isolated… and then they will grow those, grow the proper ones next year. So we’ll say, remember that squishy day? (Louise, interview#2, 22/11/2013)

Squishing overripe, almost decaying cucumbers provides an opportunity for students to step outside the ‘disciplined sensescape’ Jones (2012) argues has become pervasive, and is an encounter in what Carolan (2007a) terms ‘tactile space’. Carolan argues that by not privileging the visual, such encounters help blur boundaries between self and other (Paterson 2009), and as a result, encourage individuals’ to develop ‘deep commitments’ more effectively than linear knowledge-based approaches (Carolan 2007a, p.1265). Crucial to his argument is that encounters engaging all the senses reveal the
interconnectivity and relationality between people and the environment (Hayden and Buck 2011) and thus facilitate ‘the experience of mingling, of collapsing self and other, interiority and exteriority, making the distanced more proximate (and vice versa)’ (Paterson 2009, p.14).

Figure 6.2: Deseeding tomatoes in Jean’s kitchen

The senses also came into play in a more evaluative way, evident in the repetitions and sedimented knowledges (Paterson 2009) required in developing seed-saving skill. Participants showed me when seeds felt ready to harvest (Susan, fieldnotes, 04/10/2013) or sounded dry (Brian, fieldnotes, 04/07/2013; David, fieldnotes, 12/07/2013), and described the smell or feel of compost that meant it was well rotted (Louise, fieldnotes, 22/11/2013; Cathy, interview#1, 03/06/2013), for example. This idea of educating an ‘aesthetic disposition’ through embodied engagements with food has been considered in relation to gustatory pleasure and evaluation with ‘Slow Food’ as bodies acquire competency to discern between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ food (Hayes-Conroy 2010; Sassatelli and Davolio 2010). Seed-savers used the feel, smell and sound of plants to judge quality,
or identify when things were juiciest and tastiest. Volunteers harvesting beans at the seed library, for example, demonstrated the optimum crispness pods needed to reach before harvest in order to ensure good germination rates later on (fieldnotes, 29/08/2013). Jean (fieldnotes, 01/10/2013), a retired allotment holder, highlighted the diversity of apples in her community orchard, and showed me their seasonally staggered harvest by getting me to physically experience their relative ease of removal from the tree, a yielding stalk indicating the apple was ready to eat.

Nonetheless, participants often explained these bodily competencies in visual terms. Several talked about seeing the ‘whole cycle’ (Tracey, interview, 03/02/2013), ‘whole process’ (Tom, interview#1, 16/08/2013), or ‘full life-cycle’ (Greg, interview, 28/08/2013) of plants through allowing them to flower and collect their seed. Greg, for example, described the different relationships with plants developed in two voluntary positions, the first at a CSA farm where his work centres on food production, and the second at HSL, where emphasis is on seeds:

We’re mainly field based with the community farm, and we use a polytunnel. But it’s production oriented, so they’re harvesting things at the point where they’re ready to eat, whereas here, we get to grow, like beetroot when it goes to flower, and I’d never seen beetroot in flower before. And so all that’s a real eye-opener. You see the… full life-cycle of the plants. (Greg, interview, 28/08/2013)

Greg here explains his seed-saving practices mean he has got to know plants in a more complete way. Experiencing flowering beetroot plants, usually pulled and eaten before reaching this stage is ‘a real eye-opener’. Greg’s deeper understanding of beetroot as plant and seed, and not simply as a food crop, is spoken about in terms of vision, but importantly this ‘seeing’ and knowing about plants ‘seediness’ comes through the embodied doing of seed production.
Many seed-savers mentioned witnessing vegetable plants reaching maturity and setting seed as something unusual, eye-opening, or even transgressive. The notion of ‘going to seed’ has associations with neglect, laziness, decline and decay. Several participants mentioned conflicts with other gardeners who viewed seeding plants as untidy, messy or symptomatic of inattention (Tracey, interview, 03/02/2013; Louise, interview#2, 22/11/2013; Jean, fieldnotes, 06/06/2013). Swap volunteer Tracey describes the resistance of older gardeners at her allotment site encountered by a group of growers trying to set up a dedicated seed-saving plot:

Tracey: [T]here’s still a… oh, they don’t like things going to seed, it doesn’t look right, and it’s kind of like actually, that’s the whole part of the… it, that… whole cycle is really really important.

Laura: Is it something about what they look like, it looks like it's not… under control?

Tracey: That is, that was the sort of opposition, and I was kind of like, I can’t believe that. Because to me if you are a true gardener, you do the whole process. D'you know? (Tracey, interview, 03/02/2013)
This extract displays how propagating seed is key to meaningful gardening for Tracey, indicated in her struggle to find the right words to explain the centrality of the cycling of plant-seed-plant. Tracey links her interconnected and tolerant knowledge about the ‘whole cycle’ of plants with ideas of authenticity. ‘True’ gardeners ought to know how to save seed, yet this is at odds with traditional allotment aesthetics based on neatness and order.

Tracey’s description of the differing attitudes amongst allotment holders hints at the aesthetic dispositions ‘educated’ (Hayes-Conroy 2010) through tactile engagements with seeds. Seed guardian Louise, for example, took photos of seeding dill and fennel plants, and cited the architectural qualities of their seedheads as something she loved seeing in the garden:

I think, one of the things I enjoy is you do get these beautiful seed-heads. And you don’t cut them down in their prime, you kind of let them do what they’re actually naturally supposed to do, rather than, ooh, must eat it, must… Yeah, it’s quite good to let them be what they want to be. (Louise, interview#2, 22/11/2013)

Louise’s appreciation of the visual qualities of seedheads is linked here with allowing plants to ‘do what they’re naturally supposed to do’ and ‘be what they want to be’, demonstrating an ethical stance that is less about taming and controlling (Power 2005).

Figure 6.4: Louise’s photo of umbellifer seedheads
However, these appeals to naturalness, ‘true’ gardening and whole cycles bely underlying assumptions that superior ways of knowing food and plants are developed through seed-saving practice (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013). Nina (interview#2, 21/06/2013), who gardens, volunteers and campaigns on food waste issues as part of her job, explained she felt a closer emotional relationship with eating was earned through growing, and particularly handling edible produce, and suggested seed-saving deepened eaters’ ‘emotional connection’ with their food. Tactile interactions with fruit and vegetables also highlighted tensions between eating and saving. Seed guardian Susan (fieldnotes, 04/10/2013), for example, told me her daughter often said ‘I wish we could eat tomatoes without picking them apart’. Both Tracey and Louise use the word ‘actually’ in the extracts above, which serves the function of asserting a boundary between their way of working with plants and the cultural practices of others. Though Louise (interview#2, 22/11/2013) sees seeding plants as ‘in their prime’, she tells me she has to stop her partner pulling them out because they look dead and untidy. That some seed-savers felt the presence of plants ‘running to seed’ transgressed boundaries of what was deemed aesthetically appropriate (Naylor 2012) displays the need for continual negotiation between different cultural approaches within shared growing spaces.

The different understandings gained from embodied interactions with seeds are further highlighted in a discussion with Becky, who makes and sells seedbombs. Becky explained she wanted to find a use for petals of the Oxeye Daisy rather than throwing them away after removing the seeds:

**Becky:** [I] thought, surely I can do something with this, you know, maybe potpourri, or maybe I could eat it. Is it tasty? Maybe I could make herbal tea out of it or something. And I looked at the end of the petal, and there’s a seed on the end of every petal! […] ‘Cause in, all the flowers in that family, the daisy family, the petals are actually flowers as well. And the centre is formed of lots of little tiny flowers as well, that they call florets.

**Laura:** So they’re individual flowers?

**Becky:** They’re all individual flowers, yeah. And then the petals around the outside are called ray florets. Because they’re like rays of the sun. And I don’t know why I didn’t… because I knew that already, but I just didn’t think… that it would turn into a seed! […] I just never, I never connected the dots, I just didn’t think. (Becky, interview#2, 08/11/2013)
Though Becky ‘knew’ how this plant produced seeds in theory, and could explain the flowers’ terminology and construction, she explains her ‘discovery’ about the seeds on the ray florets arose only as a result of handling, processing, smelling and tasting the plant in order to find a secondary use for the petals. Before interacting with the flowers in this way she says ‘I never connected the dots’ and ‘I just didn’t think’.

Seed-savers also explained that processing seeds meant they looked more closely, noticed subtleties and came to understand plants more deeply:

There’s something nice… about actually having that process where you take in… I don’t know, that whole process where you’re taking seeds, and cleaning the seeds and just handling and looking at the seeds. I mean, seeds are quite beautiful when you actually get down to looking at them closely. I mean we save a lot of tomato seeds usually, year on year, […] and you can actually see the differences between each different one, which is quite amazing. You know, you’d think […] that the seed of the tomato shouldn’t look that different, but you can actually see differences. (Tom, interview#1, 16/08/2013)

Tom, a seed swap volunteer, talks about the pleasure taken in doing ‘the whole process’ of seed-saving, a tactile procedure requiring both ‘handling’ and ‘looking’. He notices and appreciates the aesthetic qualities of seeds because he has got ‘down to look at them’. It is only through practices of caring for seeds that he fully appreciates their variation, and he expresses surprise and wonderment at the gap between his prior assumptions about what a tomato seed should be and his experience of it in practice.

This tendency towards purposeful inquisition, seeking out and noticing subtle detail, and getting to know seeds and plants in close-up encounters appeared frequently. Becky (interview#1, 29/01/2013), for example, said she first became ‘captivated’ by seeds when she looked at them under a microscope and came to appreciate their textures; swap volunteer and allotment holder Roy (fieldnotes, 28/02/2013) showed me subtle changes in the markings of his saved beans after several generations, his curiosity about this quirk prompting a series of experiments; and Jack (fieldnotes, 15/08/2013) described watching with interest the way plants self-seeded and colonised different areas of his garden year on year, no individual weed ever completely dominating. My own reflections on sorting and packing seeds for the swap included similar observations of the curved and jagged calendula seeds (fieldnotes, 29/01/2013) or the seemingly infinite colour variation in cross-pollinated broad bean flowers (fieldnotes, 08/06/2013). These
understandings are not initiated by ideas to watch or experiment with seeds, but come about through *doing*.

Carolan (2007a, p.1266) notes Bateson’s (1972) suggestion that ‘the problem with modern, complex societies is that they have severed too many of these important relational feedback loops between events in the natural world and human behaviour.’ Doing the practical, repetitive tasks of seed-saving enabled participants to notice subtle differences and changes, giving them a different type of understanding through more intense, intimate relationships with plants, and as a result, the wider environment (Turner 2011). For example, allotment holders Clive and Cathy like to sit of an evening at the allotment removing peas from their shells. Clive said whilst others might think this was a ‘sad’ or boring way to spend free time, it had a wider significance (fieldnotes, 03/06/2013). He explained ‘you learn things about nature podding peas’, referring to noticing the different amounts of pea moth maggots present in the pods from one year to the next, which caused him to think about changing weather patterns and conditions that might have prompted this variation.

Some theorists have argued such ‘practice based’ knowledges have been eroded in contemporary times and replaced with disembodied, distanced and sensorially regulated ways of experiencing and knowing the world (Jones 2012; O’Sullivan et al. 2002).

Though participants learnt about seed-saving with books, the internet and other savers, competence came through embodied repetitions, (Price 2015; Hall and Jayne 2015) like shelling peas or digging. There were numerous occasions where I asked seed-savers about their processes for doing things, how they knew when seeds were ready, for example, which savers found difficult to answer (research diary, 10/06/2013). Knowledge about the multifaceted processes of seed-saving came from repeatedly performing the same actions year on year, building sensitive non-verbal knowledges about seeds, soils, plants, and how they behaved (Paterson 2009).

Community garden organisers Brian and Jack, for example, explain how they ‘know’ saved seed is better quality than that they might purchase:

*Jack:* Those leeks down there were saved from the biggest fattest leeks. You know, so next year…

*Brian:* They just do grow better. You… save seeds from a site, and you say, put it alongside every other variety that you can buy, the one that you saved on that site will
grow better. It just, it… I don’t know why, but… well I can guess why, but it just does, that’s all that matters.

_Laura_: Because you’re selecting those individuals, for whatever reason?

_Jack_: It’s just tuned into that soil, and that whatever. It just is. (Brian and Jack, interview, 04/07/2013)

Their knowledge about the quality of their own saved seed comes not from theory or controlled experiments, and does not arise from conscious selection, but rather is achieved in a process of continued, year on year interaction between seed, planter and place. Though I try to prompt for reasons for their seeds’ strength and quality, knowing the scientific reasoning is less important for Jack and Brian. Instead, they attribute success to their leeks being able to ‘tune in’ and respond to the soil if provided the right conditions, in an interaction beyond both their control and comprehension.

This relationship between doings and sedimented knowledges (Paterson 2009) is also reflected in approaches seed-savers took in educating others. An emphasis on kinaesthetic learning is highlighted here by my slightly clumsy question about whether Brian and Jack’s work with schools involved ‘talking’ to the students about gardening:

_Brian_: [W]e sometimes go into schools for an hour or two…

_Laura_: Talking about growing…?

_Brian_: No, doing! Talking – shut up!

_Laura_: Oh right, yeah!

(laughter)

_Brian_: Yeah, no, no. just practical. Straight in… Straight into doing whatever seasonal jobs, yeah.

The embodied experiences of ‘doing whatever seasonal jobs’ - handling, tasting, and temporarily inhabiting spaces of ‘sensory indiscipline’ (Jones 2012, p.645) - were seen as reinforcing understandings more effectively than merely talking, also evident in Louise’s (interview#2, 22/11/2013) hopes students would remember ‘that squishy day’ with the cucumbers.
The potential for practical, embodied learning experiences with seed to deepen understanding and awareness (Carolan 2007a) are also highlighted by Michael, who expresses the relationship between ‘putting stuff in the ground’ and ‘getting a sense of, a feel of the land around you’:

*Michael:* [It’s] the kinaesthetic sort of thing, yeah… You, actually getting involved in doing it is really important. Perhaps you don’t get that sort of answer from many people. But that, to me, you know, you’re actually taking control of what you’re doing, and getting a response from what, the seeds that you’re putting in, you’re seeing them come up, and you’re growing them, and you’re getting the pleasure and that sort of thing as well.

*Laura:* Yeah?

*Michael:* Really important. And then, that, you start looking at that, and you start looking at how the community’s developing, and why it’s developing that way, why are you gonna put a motorway through this area, is that a good thing? […] Because, if you’ve got your hands in the soil, you can relate to it better than if you’re just sort of walking round. Yeah, you actually have taken part in what’s gone on there. (Michael, interview, 28/08/2013)

Michael’s description argues the importance of seemingly small, practical, gardening tasks in engendering deeper understanding of plants and wider environments (Turner 2011; Phillips 2013). He suggests learners become alert to ‘political’ issues like pressures over land use as their attention is drawn towards the soil, and therefore the land and local community. Importantly, this awareness and ethical negotiation is not premised on obligation or duty, but the pleasurable feelings of relationality derived in planting a seed and ‘getting a response’.

Michael’s explanation here explicates the ‘feedback loops’ O’Sullivan et al. (2002) suggest have been eroded, mirrored in numerous interviews and observations (e.g. Clive, fieldnotes, 23/08/2013; Kay, interview, 31/01/2013; Heather, interview, 25/02/2013). Michael links handling the earth, putting seeds into soil and getting a response as plants grow with feeling connected, being able to ‘relate’ to place, community and the land. This is contrasted with the more distanced, ‘distal’ (Paterson 2009) and perhaps superficial understanding gained through ‘just… walking around’. However, Hayden and Buck (2011, p.9) suggest ‘[I]mmersion in tactile space sometimes produces negative rather than positive affect, leading potentially to withdrawal from interconnected understandings and an undoing of environmental ethics in the face of
hostile nature.’ One community garden volunteer (fieldnotes, 04/04/2013) for example complained about the monotony of work she had been given, saying ‘all I’ve really done here is weeding’. Though participants tended to emphasise positive aspects of gardening and seed-saving, I also observed instances and comments relating to the strain of repetitive manual labour (Jean, fieldnotes, 06/06/2013; Stewart, fieldnotes, 21/02/2013), the difficulty of ‘keeping on top’ of a large plot of land (Barbara, fieldnotes, 20/06/2013), and my own struggles managing seasonal tasks and encroaching weeds whilst carrying out fieldwork (research diary 15/07/2013), a point I develop further in the final section of this chapter.

Though, as I have suggested, there is a danger of romanticising notions of having ones ‘hands in the soil’ (Guthman 2008c; Slocum 2007), it is worth exploring how participants’ depictions of their tactile relationships with the earth might entail a blurring between self and other, or development of a collective ethics of care in which ‘the “me” disappears and what emerges is a type of… relationality with one’s environment’ (Carolan 2007a, p.1271; Puig de la Bellacasa 2010). Practicing in gardens with seed-savers often included tasks that added fertility and organic matter to soils, such as turning compost in the multiple plastic bins at Louise’s community garden, where I had to watch closely to mimic her technique for identifying what had rotted and what went back in the bin for further decomposition (Louise, fieldnotes, 22/11/2013). My observations also note instances where participants stopped working to demonstrate worms (David, fieldnotes, 12/05/2013), the textures of rotting manure (Nathan, fieldnotes, 15/06/2013) and the multiple processes at work in the earth (Susan, fieldnotes, 04/11/2013).

This relationship of care and fascination was evident in the way participants acted with and spoke about the earth. Jim (interview, 02/05/2013), a seed guardian for HSL, expressed his passion for composting, which he said could ‘make your soil like a treasure’. When I arrived at Jim’s house, I found him carefully watering transplanted lettuce seedlings. These were dotted around the borders of the small garden, in amongst his vast collection of fruit trees and bushes which were crammed into every available space, even extending outside the garden to the small verge beyond the pavement (fieldnotes, 02/05/2013). Jim explained the resonance of his caring practices for plants and seeds with reference to John Seymour, instrumental in the early self-sufficiency movement, and his notion of a ‘soil community’, saying: ‘it definitely brings out that sense of community… It’s an earth or soil community. And being in seed
guardians, er, makes you very very conscious of that’ (Jim, interview, 02/05/2013). The ways seed-savers like Jim act with soils suggest they are in both a nurturing and dependent relationship, implying a responsibility that is ‘constructed in relation to others’ (Massey 2004, p.9).

In cultivating gardens alongside participants around the country, I noticed how my body began to understand the characteristics of a place through the embodied repetitions of digging and weeding. I noted, for example, stark differences between the weeds proliferating on the chalky downland slopes of Brian and Jack’s community garden, with those in the heavy clay of my Manchester allotment. I shared this observation with Brian (fieldnotes, 20/06/2013). ‘You’ll get to know what chalky soil is like’ he said with a wry smile, implying cultivation here was tough. Initially I wondered how my fork would penetrate the hard, stony ground but began to find weeds shook out easily from the dry and powdery soil, and as I worked, gradually became accustomed to their growing habits and the best way to pull them (fieldnotes, 15/08/2013). Understandings about soil, land, and place that are instrumental to food production draw on these types of non-verbal, experiential knowledges gained through digging, growing and handling the soil in repeated interactions, often over many years.

There is evidently a limit to how deeply such practices can be understood in a research project of this nature, due to their temporal extension and difficulties in accessing and expressing what makes them significant. However, noting these limits can tell important things. Susan, a seed guardian and former dairy farmer identified herself as a ‘digger’. Her answers to my questions about what she enjoyed, her motivations, or the biggest challenges began with her stating ‘I like digging’ (Susan, interview#1, 10/06/2013). Yet as I pressed Susan to explain this statement, our conversations meandered into diverse observations and sensory experiences of the garden, recollections of how she had been brought up to hate waste, and ponderings on why the blackberries and marsh marigolds had been so fruitful this year. Susan could explain the processes of frost breaking up the earth, and could describe the soil’s characteristics in different parts of the garden (fieldnotes, 10/06/2013), but each time I put the question of what she loved about digging to Susan, she was unable to answer. In trying to find a way of explaining she said, ‘we’re all intertwined’ (Susan, interview#1, 10/06/2010). There isn’t a linear, easily graspable rationale with neat boundaries that exists beyond this relationality (Massey 2004). Susan’s affective experiences of the garden which make her ‘love digging’ are
elusive and indefinite. A discussion of this relationality is developed next as I address seed-saving as a shared, mutual practice.

**Saving seed as mutual practice**

‘Isolation’ is a practical seed-saving challenge relating to keeping plants separate to avoid cross-pollination, but it also implies social disconnection, enforced solitude or marginality. Preserving the characteristics of a heritage or heirloom variety requires savers to think about isolating with layers of meshing to create barriers between plants and pollinating insects, increasing distances between wind-pollinated crops, or growing only one variety, for example. Challenges emerge in shared growing spaces in keeping seeds ‘pure’ as well as in dealing with others socially. Across the research, there were different levels of sociability in participants’ gardening practices. Some talked about the strong sense of community they felt with other allotment holders or users of community gardens (Barbara, fieldnotes, 20/06/2013; Becky, fieldnotes, 04/07/2013), whilst others cultivated private spaces at home. Yet even where gardening was practiced individualistically or perhaps alongside a partner or family member, swapping seeds, plants or produce were ways growers made their practices social. Several mentioned their involvement in seed and plant swaps was in part motivated by wanting to connect with others, as a result of what could at times be a ‘lonely’ (Angela, interview, 25/02/2013; community garden volunteer, fieldnotes, 04/07/2013) and ‘solitary’ (Hannah, interview, 30/11/2013) experience.

Though some seed guardians for HSL communicated by email or swapped seeds in the post, most I spoke to said they rarely or never met other guardians in person. Yet the process of saving for the library maintained a sense of belonging and group membership, and engendered feelings of connectivity. As touched on in Chapter 5, allotment holder and seed guardian Emma (interview#1, 07/06/2013), for example, imagined her gardening was practiced ‘with’ others similarly concerned with organic methods. Beyond the affective qualities of joining in with an imagined community (Anderson 2006a) of like-minded seed-savers, covered in more detail later in this chapter, mutual seed-saving has the practical benefits to participants of efficiently mitigating risk and maximising diversity. Many seed-savers spoke about the increased sense of control gained from putting seed production and conservation into the many hands of a like-minded
gardening community, rather than concentrated in the grip of commercial entities (Jean, interview#2, 06/05/2013; Nina, interview#2, 21/06/2013; Greg, interview, 28/08/2013; Roy, interview, 28/02/2013). As Jean, who has guarded seeds for many years (fieldnotes, 06/06/2013), showed me the filing cabinet of seeds in her garage, she explained the ‘vision’ of HSL had been recognising that keeping seeds in a bank was insufficient, and that seeds needed to be ‘outed’ to spread their conservation more widely. Volunteer Greg (fieldnotes, 27/08/2013) said the ‘library’ of HSL existed not in the stored collection at Ryton, but in the network of guardians growing seeds around the country. Likening it to notions of a church referring to the congregation rather than the building, he said ‘the library is the people, the seed guardians that do all the saving, they make up the library, they are the library.’

Figure 6.5: HSL bean pods drying in Emma’s allotment (her photo)

The challenges of isolation, growing large enough populations and devoting the necessary space and effort make it unrealistic for one gardener to save all their own seeds each year. Sharing is therefore a practical way to maximise variety. Swap volunteer Nina describes the benefit of seed-savers coming together to share produce:
It's the potluck theory of social organisation, where you make a small dish, and you're not making a lot, but if you're bringing it to a potluck, everyone eats really well. And it's like, it's almost, you kind of… almost by magic, how that happens! … Yeah, you need to put in less if you're working together. (Nina, interview#2, 21/06/2013)

Indicated in Nina’s allegorical reference to a ‘potluck’ dinner is a sense of opportunistic rather than obligated responsibility to share seed with others (Barnett and Land 2007). By each member bringing something small to the table, ‘everyone eats really well’. What is offered becomes, ‘almost by magic’, greater than the sum of its parts. Seed swaps provide one opportunity for gardeners to share and maximise variety. Seed circles - groups of gardeners coming together and agreeing what each will grow and share - were another way gardeners localised and socialised processes of saving and swapping seeds.

The development of a seed circle on the allotment of retired seed swap organiser and volunteer, Barbara, arose in response to practical seed-saving challenges, and desires to improve the quality and variety of seeds plot-holders could produce for themselves and to swap. In particular, the group wanted to grow crops often avoided by new seed-savers, such as biennials (carrots, beetroot, parsnips and so on), which require an additional year in the ground before setting seed, compared with annuals like tomatoes and beans. An issue Barbara more recently became aware of was the need to grow large enough populations of these outbreeding plants to maintain genetic diversity within the seed crop. She explained the group planned to overcome these issues with each member growing a few plants (Barbara, interview, 29/01/2013). Barbara said the seed circle helped the group improve their seed-saving skills, but also mentioned the mutual support and simple pleasure of walking and looking at each other’s plots.

The seed circle meeting I attended involved four group members gathering one Saturday morning, walking around the allotment site to each person’s plot, looking at plants, examining drying garlic for white rot and so on. Barbara offered advice on trimming the roots of leek seedlings, how to save phacelia seed, and suggested why some beetroot plants may have bolted. At another plot everyone marvelled over an attractive crop of red cabbages. Afterwards, we sat on upturned buckets at Barbara’s allotment, and shared some bottles of juice and banana bread. The woman who’d grown the red cabbages said it was good to set aside time for ‘social’ activity at the allotment.
She liked the ‘supportive side’ because it reminded her that she was doing some things well (fieldnotes, 06/07/2013).

Though gardeners emphasised the positive elements of coming together and mutual support, there were moments where the tensions of working with others appeared more clearly. Conflicts arose as a result of sharing spaces socially as well as with nonhuman others, including plants, pests, garden visitors and the weather. Cohabiting gardens entails the gardener accepting (or mitigating) the fact that they do not have overall control, and there is always a trade-off between planning, organising, allowing for opportunism and letting go (Power 2005; Hitchings 2003). Pests might destroy plants, or like seed guardian Anita (interview#1, 07/05/2013) described, a family member could mistakenly harvest and eat your entire pea seed crop. Phillips (2013) and Puig de la Bellacasa (2010) note that gardening entails ethical reasoning around how ‘others’ in the garden are dealt with, which sometimes involves deciding to kill weeds and pests as a necessary part of providing care. Most interactions with gardeners at some point turned to questions of how slugs were dispatched or discouraged, and the various measures taken either to deal with pests or to let them be (e.g. Emma, fieldnotes, 12/07/2013; Barbara, fieldnotes, 20/06/2013). The weather was another unpredictable other that had to be accommodated, and participants explained various methods for protecting small plants from frost, creating preferable microclimates with milk bottle cloches (Jean, fieldnotes, 06/05/2013) or greenhouses (Susan, fieldnotes, 10/06/2013), and keeping crops dry (David, fieldnotes, 12/07/2013).

There was often a trade-off between countering problems and stoically tolerating some losses, self-seeding, weeds, and pests as part of a biodiverse ecosystem rather than spaces of pure production. Participants also spoke of joy on finding others sharing the garden, like the hedgehog in Nina’s greenhouse (fieldnotes, 21/06/2013), the deer spotted in Emma’s (interview#1, 07/06/2013) urban allotment, or the ducks that tried to nest on David and Claire’s pond (fieldnotes, 12/07/2013). Many felt cultivation entailed a responsibility to others inhabiting the garden, and saw gardening as sharing spaces rather than owning or controlling them (Power 2005). This was evident in a trip to the allotment with Jean, who had previously taught horticulture and campaigned on numerous environmental issues (fieldnotes, 06/06/2013). As we walked together, she looked nervously towards another person across the site. She said in a hushed voice this was the ex-secretary of the allotment committee, and she was not on good terms with him. She described him as ‘very bossy and very neat’, but said his type of growing
was ‘creating a desert’. She showed me a less cultivated, weedier looking patch of plants on her plot which she said she left for the insects, so there was always something flowering in July and August. ‘Some people ask me, why do you grow weeds?’ Gesturing to the ex-secretary in the distance she said: ‘what they don’t realise is that their little patch is not just for them, it’s there for other things’ (Jean, fieldnotes, 06/06/2013).

Jean’s decision to let buttercups and other so called ‘weeds’ flower in order to encourage and care for bees and pollinators demonstrates tolerance of others and recognition of the interconnectivity between her gardening practices and the diverse wildlife that shares her allotment. Yet creeping into this statement about tolerance of others – pollinators, micro-organisms, flowering weeds - is the drawing of a boundary between Jean and other allotment holders who garden differently (Naylor 2012; Johnston et al. 2011). In articulating her own tolerance and acceptance of interconnectivity, Jean’s statements here also convey her distinction from others (Paddock 2015). Asserting ethical choices, and explaining the reasoning in allowing ‘weeds’ to flower also entails Jean distinguishing her knowledge and suggesting her tolerance is a superior way of relating (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013). The positively cited benefits, such as feeling part of a community, learning and sharing expertise thus entail exclusions and boundaries (Bryant et al. 2008; Zukin 2008; DuPuis and Goodman 2009; Johnston et al. 2011), and raise questions of how certain practices and presentations of knowledge mark individuals out as alternative or expert.

The tensions surfacing between individuals sharing garden spaces also hint at wider conflicts around land use, attempts to defend common spaces and protect opportunities for food growing. Such negotiations were particularly apparent in community gardens in relation to how tasks were allocated and shared. In my visits, I noted anxiousness in the bodily gestures of garden organisers as they hovered, watching and sometimes intervening if volunteers walked on and compacted the soil, or pulled the wrong plants (Brian and Jack, fieldnotes, 20/06/2013; Louise, fieldnotes, 27/06/2013). Becky (fieldnotes, 15/08/2013) spoke about an occasion that had become ‘very tense’ at her community garden. She wanted to strim the lawn, to ‘get on and do it’, and another member got annoyed because it was disturbing her quiet enjoyment of the space.
Beyond these individual examples, distinction processes (Paddock 2015; Jordan 2007) like those demonstrated in Jean’s allotment surfaced in participants’ talk about what constituted ‘proper growing’ (e.g. Brian, interview#1, 28/02/2013; Jean, fieldnotes, 06/06/2013; Roy, interview, 28/02/2013; David, fieldnotes, 12/07/2013). These were often linked with the scale at which gardening was performed, as participants drew comparison between themselves and others growing in larger or smaller quantities. It is important to note that these participants claiming their own practices constituted ‘proper’ food provisioning, as well as the wider sample of seed-savers, shared characteristics of physical capital in the form of access to land, resources and free time, as well as ‘privileged’ ‘cultural repertoire[s]’ (Paddock 2015).

Those cultivating at smaller scales were sometimes disparaged as not growing food seriously or significantly, hinting both at normative aspirations towards self-sufficiency and processes of class distinction that asserted the superiority of certain ways of growing (Paddock 2015). Though many participants used the term, most pointed out that they were far from completely ‘self-sufficient’ in food production, and were pragmatic about buying a proportion of their food and seed (e.g. Emma, interview#1,
Being able to grow to share with others in non-commercial transactions was often a bigger motivation, further reinforcing that connecting with others through growing and sharing is a significant aspect of gardening practice for many (Smith and Jehlička 2013). However, given the distinction processes and class dimensions outlined here, it is worth noting, following Goodman et al. (2010, p.11) that the enjoyment in producing food for non-monetary gain may be predominantly ‘available for those who can afford it and/or for those who can marshal the necessary knowledges to make it meaningful or value-laden.’

Whilst complete independence from commercially produced food was not fully realised by any of the participants in this study, the ideal of producing as much as possible featured strongly in interactions. Evidence of self-sufficiency in certain crops or inputs (water, compost, pea sticks) were cited as markers of success:

> If I was to live on the allotment, we’d be very very hungry, you know. But, that’s not really, what it’s completely about for me, it’s just, it’s a hobby I suppose, if you like. It’s what I like doing, and it’s a bit of time for myself. And I mean… we are by no means, anywhere near self-sustaining. But, we are in some things, like soft fruit, we never want for soft fruit! But, it’s just nice to do, and I enjoy it, so, I don’t worry too much. (Emma, interview#1, 07/06/2013)

Interesting here is how Emma talks about cultivating her allotment as giving her ‘a bit of time for myself’, which links to questions of the small spaces people can carve for themselves through gardening and self-provisioning ‘hobbies’ existing beyond work and rationalised economic motivations. As mentioned previously, some seed-savers linked the idea of self-sufficiency to subversiveness, and suggested self-sufficient practices like producing your own seed countered mainstream messages around consumption-driven economic growth. This sense of marginality and the creation of spaces allowing retreat from commerciality augment earlier discussions about distinction and redrawing boundaries between self and other.

These themes were also evident in conversations with Brian and Jack, who run a large community garden. Like Emma and many other participants, Brian is realistic about the quantity of food even a large allotment can provide:
We’re not producers, and never will be. So... er, although we can connect people with
the natural world. And, those old skills of how to grow food, either together in small
groups, or as individuals on small pieces of land, and we can go some way to providing
high quality... top ups to our diet. We’re not self-sufficient, we’re not gonna be self-
sufficient. We’re always gonna be needing to have staples from elsewhere ‘cause we don’t
have the acreage needed. (Brian, interview#1, 28/02/2013)

Brian stresses their food production is small-scale, marginal, on ‘small pieces of land’ and
supplementary. He does not cite this as a lack, something that must be overcome or
scaled-up in the future (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010), however, but rather grounds his
explanation by saying ‘we’re not gonna be self-sufficient’. Though in terms of substantive
food production the output of the community allotment can only provide
supplementary ‘top ups’, in Brian’s view the practice of growing has significant other
benefits. As discussed in the previous chapter, self-provisioned food is valued beyond its
capacity to supplant commercially purchased food entirely, but in terms of other
intrinsic benefits such as reconnecting people with nature, sharing skills within small
groups of growers, and providing what he terms elsewhere ‘headspace’ (Brian,
interview#2, 04/07/2013) (Hawkes and Acott 2013; Turner 2011; Sempik et al. 2005).

Yet despite Brian and Jack’s assertions about the wider benefits of growing, at other
points in our conversation more critical attitudes emerge towards others growing as a
form of leisure. They were unhappy about recent moves on allotment sites in the city
‘chopping plots in half, calling them allotments’ (Brian, interview#2, 04/07/2013) to meet
growing demand. Jack argues this reduction in size of allotments will have negative
impacts on maintaining cultivation and seed-saving skills within communities of growers,
arguing that: ‘keeping any full size plots… are actually crucial to keep the skills alive, to
keep the culture alive, to let people have a chance. It’s like, people will actually give up’
(Jack, interview#2, 04/07/2013).

The following extract indicates concerns over the shifting purpose of allotments
towards leisure and lifestyle, and illustrates boundaries reasserted by growers like Brian
and Jack around what constitutes ‘serious growing’:

Jack: The thing is, there’s food growing, and then there’s food growing isn’t there. There’s
food growing like I can grow five lettuces, and then there’s food growing like… I can
grow enough lettuces to feed myself and my family for the year. And at the moment
those two things are barely distinguished. Food growing is food growing, and it isn’t. You
can grow yourself like a year’s supply of potatoes, or a year’s supply of carrots, and a year’s supply of…

*Brian*: Garlic and chillies…

*Jack*: That’s what I call growing. That’s what we think of as growing. But at the moment food growing just means, oh I’ve grown a basil plant on my windowsill, brilliant. Big difference…

Brian and Jack’s descriptions here differentiate their practices from what another participant, Roy (interview, 28/02/2013) described as ‘the barbeque and basil brigade’. Processes of distinction (Paddock 2015) were evident across the study as participants spoke about ‘other people’, for example, being disconnected from cooking skills and the food they ate (Nina, interview#2, 21/06/2013; Heather, interview, 25/02/2013; Kay, interview, 31/01/2013); lacking the long-term commitment necessary to sustain a productive garden and wanting ‘quick fixes’ (Brian, interview#2, 04/07/2013; Jean, fieldnotes, 06/06/2013), or being more interested in having outdoor space for family barbeques than producing food (Roy, interview, 28/01/2013; Nina, interview#2, 21/06/2013; Brian, interview#1, 28/01/2013). Whilst Brian and Jack outline their version of ‘proper’ growing as providing significant food crops, Jack argues substantial, subsistent food production is ‘barely distinguished’ from having a pot of basil on the windowsill.

Processes of distinction were also expressed in attitudes to consumption extending beyond food itself. Here, ways of growing that diverge from subsistent production are marked out and identified by talking about cars:

*Brian*: They’re all rich, and they… guy yesterday, he was trying to pass me in his new Porsche. You know, literally going off road, in a Porsche.

*Laura*: Up here, on the allotment?

*Brian*: Yeah! Really nice guy. But that’s, you know, and there’s Mercedes, and beamers, you name it, now.

*Jack*: They’re not growing to feed their families… (Brian and Jack, interview#2, 04/07/2013)

Expensive cars in this utilitarian landscape stick out as a symbol of class and moneyed consumerism. Brian and Jack feel this conflicts with the subsistent production which is the ‘true’ purpose of allotments, and is antithetical to their ‘mildly economically active’
(Jack, interview, 04/07/2013) lifestyle, which differed from the majority of the wider sample of seed-savers in the study, who were predominantly employed in or retired from professional or managerial roles (Appendix 4). Examples of ‘othering’ appeared fairly frequently but crystallise in Brian and Jack’s discussions, hinting at tensions between articulated normative ethical ideals around access to land and opportunities to grow food, with maintaining purer positions of alterity (McCarthy 2006a). Though allotments might provide opportunities for ‘headspace’ (Brian, interview#2, 04/07/2013) (Sempik et al. 2005), fresh air, connection with the natural world (Turner 2011) and opportunities to grow high quality food that Brian and Jack celebrate, there is a clear uneasiness as their marginal, ‘interstitial’ (Galt et al. 2014) safe space of the allotment becomes more popular.

As Brian and Jack bemoan the fact that there are not enough people growing ‘properly’, they articulate an ethical disposition that simultaneously performs their alterity and expertise, and which carries exclusionary undertones. Attending to these processes of othering and distinction is crucial to understanding how growers made sense of their practices, since, as Holloway et al. (2010, p.165) note, ‘[t]he alternative is performed, consciously or unwittingly, by people in their specific circumstances, and as such is likely to be associated with a diverse range of motivations’. This implies that rather than seeking out or theorising distinct alternative spaces, economies or social movements, the everyday processes of othering and alterity creation emerging from ordinary ethical negotiations deserve closer attention.

‘Actually doing it’: imagining collectivity and political impact

Though most seed-savers were cautious to claim individual seed-saving practices were hugely significant beyond their own gardens and personal enjoyment, some did explain their impacts in explicit terms of joining-up ordinary, everyday actions so that cumulatively they became globally important (e.g. Jean, interview#2, 06/05/2013; Nina, interview#2, 21/06/2013; Scott, interview, 22/02/2013; Alice and Faye, interview, 23/02/2013). As discussed previously, theorists of ethical consumption point out that mediating organisations work by making legible, representing and connecting individuated acts of ethical consumption (Clarke 2008; Barnett et al. 2011), and note that through practices of ethical consumption, individuals characterise themselves as
‘part of a wider, largely imagined community of like-minded consumers’ (Shaw 2007, p.135). Organisations like HSL and Seedy Sunday played important roles in evidencing contributions made by seed-savers and generating feelings of connectivity.

Jean (interview, 06/05/2013), for example, played down her individual involvement guarding seeds, saying ‘[i]t wasn’t me that did it, it was the movement. It was something larger than the person, each person. That’s the lovely thing.’ Jean, who has also actively campaigned against GMOs and is a member of several environmental campaigning organisations, frames the impact of her acts in terms of a wider ‘movement’, constructed in relation to others (Massey 2004), greater than the sum of its individual parts. She does not explain her contribution to seed-saving here in terms of choice, identity or sacrifice, but rather stresses her joyful involvement in a ‘lovely thing’ existing beyond her individual personhood and within a collective belonging. Importantly, the connecting function of such organisations serves to reinforce a sense of community, and to remind savers that others are interested in similar issues (Papaoikonomou et al. 2012). Barbara (interview#3, 15/08/2013), for example, explained her pleasure in attending seed swaps by saying ‘it feels connected’. She enjoyed ‘seeing how you fit into a wider web’ (Barbara, interview#1, 29/01/2013), which included local gardening groups, individual gardeners, and international organisations like Kew Millennium Seed Bank (KMSB).

In depicting a ‘web’ of loosely connected, like-minded gardeners stretching internationally Barbara validates her individual practices of cultivation as globally significant. Examining visualisations of an extended community of seed-savers troubles oppositions between space/place and local/global pointed out by geographical theorists (Massey 2004; Harris 2010). This strong sense of relational place is also apparent as Seedy Sunday’s website (Figure 6.7) explicitly frames the event as connecting small, known garden spaces with wider global issues:
This locates seed-saving within a stretched out and joined-up conceptualisation of relational place, in which gardening practices are simultaneously far-reaching and local, tangible, and ‘rooted’. This not only illustrates how ‘the habitual… routinely draws in engagement at a distance’ (Massey 2004, p.7), but also the ways seed-saving is promoted through appeals to gardeners to recognise their ordinary seed-saving activity within wider political registers.

The sense of efficacy that practical, localised action gives to individuals is also significant. Faye, organiser of a small swap event connected to the Transition movement, says that though seed swaps are ‘nothing in the order of stuff’, they enable people to avoid feeling daunted by global challenges that require concerted action:

[T]hey feel very hands on. It feels like something you can do. Whereas I think often, the really big issues, you can feel, you know, nothing I can do is gonna make a difference. Things are so big, so overwhelming. […] And it’s a way for you to feel like… it’s little things, a seed swap. It’s nothing in the order of stuff. But because it’s part of a Transition movement, and you feel like there’s nine hundred thousand groups around the world doing things, that if all of them are doing small things, it’s got to add up to something a bit more. (Faye, interview, 23/02/2013)

Like Barbara’s statement about ‘feeling connected’, Faye’s explanation is couched in terms of feeling rather than thinking and hints at the affective dissonance between being overwhelmed and feeling there is ‘something you can do’. Collectively saving and exchanging seed is a worthwhile ‘hands on’ action in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges, echoing Papaioikonomou et al.’s (2012, p.15) findings that collective ethical consumption offers ‘a greater sense of effectiveness and control when compared to individual actions.’
Similar sentiments were revealed as seed-savers spoke of seeing themselves as a ‘tiny pinprick’ (Jean, interview#3, 01/10/2013) or ‘link in the chain’ (Scott, interview, 22/02/2013) within a wider whole, as they positioned their individual actions within a broad movement or community of intent. In response to my question about the impact of seed swap events, swap volunteer Nina outlines her understanding of the ‘emotional resonance’ gained through ostensibly inconsequential cultivation practices, suggesting these are amplified when performed en masse:

[]It creates an emotional resonance. That you have a better emotional connection, so when you look at what you’re doing, and it seems like a small action, something like growing your own potatoes […] And it’s this tiny action, but actually, in this context, it is globally important. And, in the sense that the more people are doing these… little actions, the more of a massive impact it can make. (Nina, interview#1, 01/02/2013)

Nina’s suggests Seedy Sunday and other events provide a ‘context’ which makes individual actions meaningful and ‘globally important’, again demonstrating the interweaving of contrasting scales and ‘mutual constitution of the global and the local’ (Massey 2004, p.7) rather than the unreflexive localism often denigrated in academic analyses (Harris 2010; DuPuis and Goodman 2005). Studies critiquing AFNs’ abilities to ‘scale-up’ (Mount 2012) or provide substantial challenge to processes of neoliberalisation (Guthman 2008a, 2008b) have tended to overlook the affective and emotional dimensions of participation that Nina articulates here.

The metaphors seed-savers employ help elucidate how they imagine impact and connectedness. Jean used numerous images associated with ‘smallness’ across our interactions as she explained her place within a wider movement, referring to herself as ‘a speck of dust’ (interview#2, 06/05/2013), ‘a wee pinpoint’, a ‘miniscule pinhead’ (interview#1, 26/11/2012), and a ‘worker bee’ (interview#3, 01/10/2013):

Laura: You often talk about… the little people…

Jean: Well we’re little people. We’re little people in the sphere of doing anything. But by god, when there’s a lot of little people together it makes a big mass!

Laura: Yeah?

Jean: It can. And I was the tiniest little pinprick, but I feel very proud! (laughter) (Jean, interview#3, 01/10/2013)
Whilst Jean stressed the smallness of her actions particularly frequently, other participants made similar comparisons (Barbara, interview#1, 29/01/2013; Clive, interview#1, 03/06/2013; Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013) sometimes drawing directly on seeds as metaphors for growth and potentiality. Barbara (interview#1, 29/01/2013), for example used the allegory of ‘the oak tree and the acorn’ when talking about the potential of small individual acts. In what seems almost like a reversal of the ‘selective anthropomorphism’ (Phillips 2013) outlined earlier, Becky (interview#1, 29/01/2013) likened herself to ‘a little seed’ when talking about her personal development. In Clive’s (interview#1 03/06/2013) depiction of his efforts to set up a beekeeping cooperative the group takes on seed-like qualities, as he explains ‘we’re a little acorn at the moment. Well, we’re a very tiny little seedling at the moment, not even as big as an acorn, you know…’

This positioning by participants as ‘small’ was also evident in the way seed-savers spoke about the ‘big boys’ (Louise, interview#1, 09/05/2013) or ‘big guys’ (Nina, interview#1, 01/02/2013) in reference to an unspecified ‘they’ which was resisted or opposed:

I think looking at it on a micro level, like what Seedy Sunday does, like ok, you can’t change what’s up there, but if you just do this, and do this passionately, and share it, and encourage others to do it, you know, you can’t wait for the big guys to change? We often just have to get on with it. And, uh, rely on each other. (Nina, interview#1, 01/02/2013)

This identification of the targets of seed-savers’ activist practices rests on scalar and gendered characterisations in opposition to a (perhaps romanticised) smaller, gentler, resistance from below (Nazarea 2005).

Interesting points develop from participants’ articulations of the additional strength and power derived from smallness and gentleness. In contrast to individual self-aggrandisement, participants’ depictions of themselves and their actions as trifling or insignificant could be read as in fact evidencing strong understandings and acknowledgements of the wider collectives with which they felt connected. Furthermore, Chatterton and Pickerill (2010, p.486) critique academic preoccupations with ‘scaling up’ and ‘scale-jumping’, suggesting these concerns are ‘as much about the desires of progressive intellectuals to find evidence of a heroic local ‘David’ who will resist and take on the neoliberal Goliath rather than actually understanding the messy particularities of activist place projects.’
As well as smallness, participants emphasised slowness, long-termness and gentleness. Mum of three and seedbomb maker Becky (interview#1, 29/01/2013) described her work as ‘gentle activism’; swap volunteer and allotment holder Rosemary (interview, 25/02/2013) called it 'long-haul'; whilst swap organiser Elena (interview, 27/02/2013) used the term ‘slow-cook activism’. The notion of ‘self-seeding’ - allowing a plant to set and scatter seed, thus producing new plants with minimal human interference - was not a metaphor verbalised directly by participants. However, it emerged as a motif in seed-savers’ practices in gardens, in happy accidents, tolerated weeds and chance encounters, and it echoed through participants’ hopes that their small, individual acts might spread and ‘disseminate gently’ (Barbara, interview#3, 15/08/2013).

As Faye (interview, 23/02/2013) explained in relation the Transition movement, involvement in imagined and real seed-saving communities is stimulated by the tangible sense of control at a local, individual scale that it provides. Seed guardian Jim, for example, describes the satisfaction and sense of achievement gained saving seeds for HSL and knowing he had helped safeguard endangered ‘orphan’ varieties:

> [W]ell it's a wonderful feeling really, wonderful satisfaction. When they tell you that you, your orphan’s no longer in danger, that’s a very nice feeling that you’ve contributed, it makes you want to do more. And grateful that others are doing the same thing. And also, it’s one way to stand up to these companies… Usually you feel so helpless with them, but this is one way that you’re, you’re not helpless. One area. (Jim, interview, 02/05/2013)

Jim speaks of his gratitude that he is not alone in his endeavours. Notably he says this is ‘one way’ in which he can ‘stand up’ and not feel ‘helpless’, which in itself betrays the limited efficacy and powerlessness individuals feel in the face of global environmental challenges.

Though the discussion has so far unpicked the embodied, affective and emotional dimensions of collective seed-saving practice, questions remain around whether acting in private back-gardens could be seen as individualistic, solitary, or inward looking in comparison to ‘traditional’ political practices (Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Maniates 2001; Luke 1997). Like many participants, swap organiser Kay felt seed-saving was a pragmatic form of action. Her discussion of campaigning, demonstrating and letter writing indicates that growing food and saving seed sits alongside more traditional methods as a ‘practical’ political strategy:
I think, on sort of a political level, you can campaign, and write letters, and, and, demonstrate, and… but, this is something you can do very, very practically. […] It’s the first step to connect with the world around us and… the biosphere, the environment, and all the… well, all the things that happen in climate change. It makes it very real, when you’re trying to grow something, in the garden, especially last year, we got virtually nothing! (Kay, interview, 31/01/2013)

According to Kay, the practicality of seed-saving action has a connecting effect. Relational, empirical knowledges about wider environments are developed through gardening, rather than providing opportunities to act on removed, theoretical imperatives. ‘Trying to grow something’ entails interacting with and responding to tangible others – the soil, the weather and so on - and negotiating the challenges of interaction make seemingly distant environmental challenges ‘very real’ for Kay.

As well as gaining control through practical acts in local, known spaces, participants also felt first-hand experience gave them a depth of understanding and ability to reflect on wider environmental issues (Turner 2011; Cameron et al. 2011). ‘Emotional resonance’ was the emic term Nina (interview#1, 01/02/2013) used to suggest that when immediate practices are contextualised by the messaging at a seed swap, growers gain a better understanding of distant, global issues to do with the environment, agriculture, and biodiversity. Here she depicts the political aspects of Seedy Sunday such as talks and stalls as connecting seed-savers’ small, everyday practices in the garden with global issues, experienced ‘elsewhere’:

[T]hey realise that what they’re experiencing is a minute micro version [of] what is happening the world over. So it’s kind of, you get a very tiny slice of the kind of devastating issues that people elsewhere are dealing with… (Nina interview#1, 01/02/2013)

Nina goes on to elaborate on the connecting resonation that occurs through the practice of a more conscientious gardening:

[Y]ou start kind of putting those two together, so when you’re thinking about your garden, you’re also thinking about… the whores of Monsanto, GM seeds, the destruction of livelihoods across the world, and soil. And er, quality of soil, and ecosystems, so you kind of think about what you’re doing in your tiny little garden, as like, having a relationship with these bigger issues, that you as an individual… have no control over, whatsoever. (Nina interview#1, 01/02/2013)
Importantly Nina does not say that change lies with individuals, their choices and atomised acts. In fact she says individually you have ‘no control, whatsoever’ over many of these issues.

This adds a qualification to arguments that consumer or lifestyle politics reinforce ideas that individual consumer choice is key to creating change (Low and Davenport 2007). Nina’s explanation of the political potential of practicing seed-saving and attending swaps raises questions of how ‘emotional resonance’ translates into concerted political ‘activism’. Yet the valorisation of connections made by Nina and others between pressing global concerns and ‘micro’, ‘tiny’ garden practices is not necessarily premised on their potential to be scaled-up or extended further, but rather acknowledges these connections already exist within and through everyday gardening practice (Barnett and Land 2007).

I asked participants whether they considered themselves to be politically active, and though the overwhelming majority were very cautious to ascribe themselves with the label of activist (Bobel 2007; Chatterton and Pickerill 2010) there were interesting variations in response. Some closed down this line of questioning immediately and said they weren’t political at all, that politics ‘took the fun out of things’ (Cathy, interview#1, 03/06/2013), or that political action was distinctly separate from gardening and seed-saving (Jean, interview#1, 26/11/2013). Others, though not directly accepting the label, problematised the question, qualified the term, or offered their interpretations of what it meant to be politically active.

Practices conforming to more traditional notions of ‘political activism’ including demonstrating, letter writing, or membership of a political party were occasionally mentioned in relation to seed-saving. Many participants expressed mistrust of political parties, democratic systems, and traditional forms of protest, finding moves towards self-sufficiency to be more personally fulfilling (e.g. Louise and Hayley, interview#1, 09/05/2013; Cathy and Clive, interview#1, 03/06/2013; Jean, interview#1, 26/11/2013; Stewart, interview, 21/02/2013; Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013). Several spoke about disillusionment resulting from previous experiences that had failed to effect change, such as marching against the Iraq war in 2003 (Heather, interview, 25/02/2013; Tracey, interview, 03/02/2013). Barbara (interview#2, 20/06/2013), for example, told me she had been blocked from emailing EU Commissioners about changes to seed legislation. In this context, ‘being political’ (Isin 2002) was often seen negatively as passively waiting for
Bobel’s (2007, p.149) suggestion that ‘one can “do activism” without “being activist”’ is useful here. Similarly, Chatterton and Pickerill’s (2010, pp.479-480) interviews with autonomous activists found ‘a strong desire… to reject simple divides between activists and their other – the non-militant, ordinary citizen’. Though rejecting the activist label, almost all individuals I spoke to were involved in some way in raising awareness and encouraging others to grow and to save seed. Chatterton and Pickerill suggest this ‘activist self-critique’ might in fact reflect ‘attempt[s] to transform activism into a more accessible set of practices and politics that can resonate and influence the political mainstream rather than existing on the political fringe.’

As indicated in the discussion above, where participants did (cautiously) accept the title of ‘activist’ or the idea their practices were political, this was often qualified with words like ‘gentle’ (Barbara, interview#3, 15/08/2013; Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013; Kay, interview, 31/01/2013; Rosemary, interview, 25/02/2013), ‘subtle’ (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013; Louise, interview#1, 09/05/2013), or ‘quiet’ (Louise, interview#1, 09/05/2013; Emma, interview#1, 07/06/2013):

*Laura:* Would you describe yourself as politically active?

*Becky:* I think erm, I am. But I… on a very quiet, like, scale. Like… I think if you… can do something, in a gentle, subtle way, it means more than shouting about it. Do you know what I mean? Because if you shout about it, yeah ok you’re making everyone aware, of what you’re doing. Um, but… is that necessarily doing anything, apart from shouting? (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013)

Becky here suggests that ‘gentle’ and ‘subtle’ approaches might have more impact than shouty attention seeking. These tactics might raise awareness, which Becky concedes has some value, yet in her question of whether shouting contributes to ‘doing anything’ she indicates practical action is paramount.

She goes onto explain her approach to awareness-raising is centred on education as opposed to ‘making a ruckus’:

*Becky:* [I]n terms of like… I dunno, heading a movement or, er, a political movement, or going to London and… er, what they called, like… signs…
Laura: Placards?

Becky: Placards, yeah. Um, I’m not really at a point in my life at the moment where… I’m keen on doing that. I just like working with kids… And if you can work with the kids, and make them aware… then that's like, worth more than just causing a ruckus outside… some monument in London. Do you know what I mean? […] You know, I'm a mum… I've still got to do school runs. It's like, so maybe when I'm older I'll… and my kids have all left home, and I can’t embarrass them anymore, maybe I'll just. Maybe… I will get more into the kind of frontline activism. (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013)

Becky explains the activism she engages in is workable within her current lifestyle, and she views working with her community as more worthwhile than heading to ‘some monument in London’. Becky’s depiction of protesting as inconvenient and potentially embarrassing to her children echoes Bobel’s (2007) findings that ‘activism’ is often perceived as incompatible with ordinary life, requiring individuals to give everything up in order to be a ‘real activist’. Yet tellingly, at the end of this passage Becky hints she might be able to do more, that maybe her gentle approach isn’t quite enough, and, given more free time ‘frontline activism’ is something she might consider.

The ‘quietness’ (Smith and Jehlička 2013; Smith et al. 2015; Askins 2014, 2015; Hackney 2015) of seed-savers’ practice was repeatedly contrasted with the shouting, talking, or ‘placard waving’ that many participants felt characterised being ‘activist’, as Louise (interview#1, 09/05/2013) articulates: ‘I’d rather just, do what I do, quietly, and give away stuff, and… swap stuff, rather than placard wave…’. Others were more explicit in their renunciation of the designation ‘activist’, like swap volunteer Roy, who stated he had moved beyond ‘strident’ campaigning activity to action that was practical and would ‘achieve results’:

Roy: I think there’s a real, I have difficulty with the word activist ’cause sometimes it implies to me somebody who is, um … a strident campaigner who will demonstrate.

Laura: Yeah?

Roy: And for me, I hope I’ve got a long way beyond that. Because I want to achieve results, and so there’s no point in you know … campaigning for organic gardening groups … go and bloody well set one up.

Interesting in these quotes from different seed-savers is the preference each expresses for practical, embodied ‘doing’ over ‘shouting’, talk, and ‘making a ruckus’ (Becky,
interview#1, 29/01/2013), perhaps echoing Eliasoph’s (1998) findings that political talk was seen by individuals ‘as the domain of those who think too much of themselves’ (Bobel 2007, p.153).

This emphasis on ‘doing’, on ‘actual action’ is again evident in Elena, a seed swap organiser’s response to my question of whether she considers herself politically active:

No. I wish I was, but no… I think things like Seedy Sunday… do you know, for me, it’s much more about the doing. So actually, you know, doing the seed swap. In a way, that is politically active. But in a slightly subversive way, you know, we’re just doing something, you know, we’re doing a seed swap. It’s an actual action. I’m not very good at, like, doing all the talk… [and] meetings and stuff. It’s just about action. (Elena, interview, 27/02/2013)

Elena here identifies the practical organisation and running of a seed swap as ‘in a way’ a political action in itself. Interestingly she also hints that the practical ‘quietness’ of ‘just doing something’ might hold additional political significance in its power to subvert and go under-the-radar (Smith and Jehlička 2013; Hackney 2013).

Tilley (2006, p.329) describes gardening as ‘doing rather than saying’, arguing that for his participants ‘not having to talk about what they were doing or feeling was one of the primary attractions of gardening. It provided an escape from verbal discourse.’ Elena’s indication that effective action is achieved through practical acts hints at a prefigurative politics, described as ‘scenarios where protestors express the political “ends” of their actions through their “means”’ (Yates 2015, p.1) and in which ‘social change isn’t deferred to a later date by demanding reforms from the state, or by taking state power and eventually instituting these reforms’ (Maeckelbergh 2011, p.4). However, Elena’s suggestion that she is ‘not very good at, like, doing all the talk’ indicates escaping the verbal discourse and confrontation of shouty, placard waving ‘activism’ is a preferred place for Elena that enables her to align her political, environmental concerns and attitudes with realisable personal practice. Yates (2015, p.18) argues practices based around ‘building alternatives’ must be combined with setting an example and attempting to inspire change if they are to be considered prefigurative politics and not simply subcultural activity. Though many participants refused or qualified the activist or political label, the self-described ‘small’ acts of awareness raising in which most participants engaged perhaps elevate seed-saving beyond the counter-cultural or individual lifestyle.
As outlined previously, seed-saving and swapping necessarily involves interacting, and almost all participants were working, if in ‘gentle’ or ‘quiet’ ways, to encourage others to follow suit. In this conversation, Louise and Hayley, who work together at a community garden debate the trade-off between awareness raising and more ‘productive’ action:

Louise: I think, what we always say is, don’t sit on Facebook, posting links to things that need to be changed, just get on and do it?

Hayley: Find a solution…

Louise: Yeah. And that’s, we see all these people posting all this stuff, and we’re like, well we’re just actually doing it?

Hayley: Well it, you see, it’s good to raise awareness, isn’t it? But, unless you can offer a...

Louise: Do that in the evenings, not when you should be out doing something.

Hayley: Yeah. But if you can’t offer a model that supersedes the old one, then you’re not giving an option? For evolution? You’re just bitching.

Louise: Yeah…

Hayley: Which isn’t very productive. (Louise and Hayley, interview#1, 09/05/2013)

The practical actions performed by Louise and Hayley - saving seed and running a community garden that engages a diverse pool of volunteers and beneficiaries - is demarcated from ineffectual political activity which they dismiss as ‘posting links to things that need to be changed’. Whilst they concede raising awareness is important alongside the practical work of growing, creating and managing the garden, adversarial styles of ‘being political’ (Isin 2002) are framed here as ‘just bitching’. Tellingly, this is depicted as not ‘productive’ and as entailing passively ‘sitting on Facebook’, something that should be done ‘in the evening’, after the real work of doing and offering exemplary alternatives that ‘supersede’ old models.

A similar sentiment is expressed by retired allotment holder and swap organiser Barbara, in response to my question of whether gardening in itself can be considered a form of activism:
Barbara: Oh… that’s a difficult one. I’d love to think that it is. [long pause] Actually I do think it is. I think it’s, it’s times and contexts, you know. When I was young, and… and marches were the thing to do, and I had that kind of energy, and I wanted that kind of excitement, and that kind of confrontation, and all that. Now, I think I’m still contributing by gardening, and especially by allotment gardening, because it’s holding, there’s something about holding a way of being, just being it. You know? [...] Not going out there and shouting about it, but being it. Erm, so for instance, like the trust and the cooperation and the sharing that goes on on allotments is a way of being that you don’t come across in many areas now… erm… and I think it really is important that people hold that [...] And if an occasion comes to sort of, say something about it, like writing a letter, or emailing the commissioners, or… whatever it is…

Laura: Or trying to!

Barbara: Yeah, yeah, then you’re coming from a rooted place, you’re coming from a solid ground of, you know, awareness, really. (Barbara, interview#2, 20/06/2013)

Like Louise, Hayley and others, engagement in more traditional political channels is important but not sufficient for Barbara. Again, she contrasts the attention seeking acts of marching and ‘shouting about it’ with a more existential ‘being it’.

Barbara’s narrative is not a rationalised evaluation of the efficacy of different methods for creating change, but rather is located in the felt, affective, experiential and interpersonal dimensions of doing activism, whether in a confrontational protest, or in the continuation of sharing practices between allotment neighbours. Practical, embodied action provides the basis, the ‘rooted place’ and ‘solid ground’ from which to engage politically, through letter writing and raising awareness. Significantly, however, Barbara sees herself as contributing to making changes, or more accurately preserving and ‘holding’ desired ways of living, in the here and now. She talks about ‘awareness’ and knowledge as something that must be rooted, fixed in place and held with firm conviction, which comes from a hands on earth, ‘dirt under the fingernails’ (Barbara, interview#1, 29/01/2013) empirical certainty. Yet, Barbara seems not entirely convinced that her gardening is activism. Like Becky earlier, there is a sense she could do more. She returned to my question in a later interview and said she had been thinking about it, and was concerned that as she had got older she had retreated to her garden (Barbara, interview, 15/08/2013).
This raises questions of the relationship between the empirical and embodied epistemologies of gardening with wider efforts to act on complex issues, and of whether this rooted relationship might conflict with acting beyond the garden. While Barbara’s discussion here depicts embodied relationships with the land and with allotments as entailing putting down roots, both physically and metaphorically, others understood their growing practices more directly as a way to disengage (e.g. Tom, interview#1, 16/08/2013). Greg (interview, 28/01/2013), for example, described growing food and seed as ‘a way of saying, look, if I choose to I can turn my back on society’. Community garden organisers Brian and Jack, also view their practice as ‘alien’, oppositional and going ‘against the grain’ of societal norms:

Laura: Do you think that gardening, growing food in itself is a type of activism?

Brian: Only when you look back at it. Not as a motivating factor, but you can look back and see it that way, for me. You go, oh, bloody hell, I’ve been quite radical! Gone against the grain, and done something quite… untypical. But not activist. […] Active.

Jack: I think the political, er, I think for me it’s, the contrast between what I’m doing, and what messages I hear… being handed down, like from top down to people, and sort of, the gulf between the two, makes it hard to sort of…

Brian: Makes you an alien, really doesn’t it? (Brian and Jack, interview#2, 04/07/2013)

Again conferring spatial and scalar attributes to dominant political ideologies travelling ‘top down’ to people, Brian’s comment here indicates the separation he feels due to the clash between these messages and his everyday cultivation practices. Whilst Brian, like other participants rejects the ‘activist’ descriptor, notable here is Brian’s statement that the atypicality of his practice is only realised retrospectively. An appreciation of the radical nature of their everyday activities carried out for many years - growing food, saving seed, providing a space for individuals to escape and connect with nature - has arisen through practice rather than acting as a motivator for action.

Tending and nurturing seeds as plants within the landscape of the allotment or garden requires ‘being there’ and entails an element of being tied to the land. Gardeners sometimes felt daunted by the task of maintaining their patch, and emphasised the levels of commitment required:
It does take a long-term commitment. Most people haven’t got that, they’ve got this weird idea you go out there, plant stuff, it grows. And you can eat it somehow. But they forget the whole preparation thing, the whole bringing on the seeds… Watering them, fertilising them, harvesting them. The number of allotment plots where people avidly go out and dig everything up, turn it all over, nice soil, and plant stuff out, and then just let it go to weed… (Stewart, interview, 21/02/2013)

Responsibilities to seeds, plants and soils meant some participants felt less mobile, unable to go on holiday during growing season (Barbara, fieldnotes, 20/06/2013; David and Claire, fieldnotes, 12/07/2013) or to move house because that would mean losing the garden they had worked hard to tend (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013; Nina, fieldnotes, 21/06/2013). Commitments to seeds, plants and soils therefore acted at times to restrict and limit seed-savers, binding and tying them to place, and engendered feelings of guilt and remorse at neglecting these responsibilities.

Evident in seed-savers thoughts about ‘activism’ were feelings of lacking time and energy to simultaneously tend a productive garden and to campaign, fight, or march, which required time away from the plot. Jean, for example, says she no longer has the energy for protests and marches:

I’m too tired for that. Really, I mean eighty five, there’s only so much you can do. And also I’ve never been very good at writing things, you know. Writing for the paper and that kind of thing. Never been good. Much more practical. […] And I mean, I can do it out the back of my head. Some of the things, you know. (Jean, interview#3, 01/10/2013)

Jean prefers engaging in areas like seed-saving where she has practical and embodied competency, as she says: ‘I can do it out the back of my head’. Barbara echoed these sentiments in a discussion about nuclear energy:

I feel as if I don’t know enough of the real detail, to engage in the arguments. And I don’t know how to choose between the different sets of figures for example. And the different scientific arguments. I don’t know how you make a judgement on things. So that sends me back to my local, you know, area where I have some competence. (Barbara, interview#3, 15/08/2013)

Barbara explained she wanted to actively campaign on what she felt were pressing environmental issues, yet struggled to identify which intellectual argument to back. Thwarted by the competing perspectives and scientific arguments, Barbara’s energies and desire to do something are diverted back into tangible, practical acts in the ‘local’
spaces of the garden. Barbara also talked about a radio programme she’d heard with
various public figures debating GM food, again recounting how the complexity of
debates caused her to return to practical action where she felt competent: ‘it just made
me think how on earth can you decide these matters? I just …. I go back to digging my
potatoes!’ (Barbara, interview#3, 15/08/2013)

A discussion about EU seed legislation with Erik, whose work is dedicated to
campaigning for open-pollinated seeds, picked up on this concern:

Erik: The politics of it all is very complicated, you know, and you could spend a lot of
energy. And so maybe people are making up their minds, well where do I want to put
energy? I’m going to play with my own seeds, and that’s where I’m at.

Laura: Mm, I’d rather be in my garden!

Both: (laughter) (Erik, interview, 01/05/2013)

Erik describes how ‘energies’ and activist intentions might be directed into ‘playing’ with
seeds. In using the term ‘play’ he hints that these encounters are not only enjoyable and
recreational, but perhaps viewed as trivial when compared with the serious matters of
complicated environmental issues. My response and our laughter reveals a shared
recognition that both Erik and I would probably fall into this category of gardeners who
prefer playing with seeds to lobbying European Commissioners.

Like Barbara (interview#3, 15/08/2013), who hasn’t entirely made up her mind that
practicing seed-saving is the best way to act on her concerns, this extract from my
conversation with Erik also displays a degree of reflexive uncertainty. Carolan (2007a,
p.1266) suggests ‘individuals often have a difficult time “seeing” how their behaviors can
have an impact on the bigger picture’. Using the example of ‘dumping animal manure in a
stream and seeing, feeling and smelling a stream full of animal waste’ he argues that ‘the
linkages involved in global climate change are nowhere near as direct to our senses’
which ‘makes them far more open to interpretation, potential manipulation, and
contestation.’ Gardening and seed-saving returns a sense of confidence and certainty in
the face of complexity and confusion. Yet whilst encounters in tactile space might raise
awareness and develop commitments (Carolan 2007a), counter to these deeper
understandings runs the potential for disengagement or withdrawal from areas of
debate where felt, empirical, ‘hands on’ (Faye, interview, 23/02/2013) knowledge is
lacking.
Conclusion

This chapter considered the social interactions and sensorial, embodied engagements of seed-saving, which some suggest might begin to blur boundaries between self and other, and to overcome the distance of ‘difference’ (Puig de la Bellacasa 2010). In their exploration of ‘human plant dealings’ and environmental ethics, Hitchings and Jones (2004, p.3) draw on Leopold’s (1949) suggestion that ‘we can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love or otherwise have faith in’ and note the importance of attending to how ‘ethical standpoints must be accommodated within the hustle and bustle of daily activity’. This chapter builds on existing understandings by demonstrating how the close-up, repeated, hands on experiences of seed-saving inform participants’ ethical dispositions and their understandings of agency within wider collectives. The findings reinforce that rather than acting as prerequisites for ethical action (Barnett et al. 2011), cognitive understandings are interrelated with embodied practices and encounters.

This chapter first looked at how individuals engage all the senses in gardening, considering how tactile practices of seed-saving challenge dominant understandings of gardens which place a primacy on seeing (Tilley 2006). Though engagement of all five senses is integral to gardening in general, I argued the manual, delicate and close-up interactions required to save seeds entail intensive sensorial relationships and reflexivities amongst seed-savers (Carolan 2007a). Whilst the previous chapter considered moments of (real and imagined) connection in exchanging seed, here I looked at the physical, embodied, interpersonal and emotional dimensions of doing seed cultivation and saving collectively. Looking more closely at seed-savers’ understandings of self-sufficiency troubles assertions of alternative food as individualising responsibility and narrowing ethico-political practice into individuated, atomised acts of choice (e.g. Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Maniates 2001). By considering social and collective seed-saving, these findings further existing debates around the political potentiality and relational responsibilities (Massey 2004) developed in embodied encounters with plants and seeds (Puig de la Bellacasa 2010; Carolan 2007a; Turner 2011) by elucidating the interrelated processes of distinction and redrawing boundaries that are part of ethical negotiation (Paddock 2015; DuPuis and Gillon 2009; Johnston et al. 2011).

Building on discussions in Chapters 4 and 5 that examined the everyday growing and sharing practices of gardeners, and the more exceptional, self-consciously alternative
context of a seed swap (respectively), this chapter explored connections, tensions and imaginings connecting everyday practice to ideas about collective impact. Though previous studies have tended either to focus on self-identified ‘ethical consumers’ (e.g. Shaw 2007; Papaoikonomou et al. 2012; Szmigin et al. 2009) or the ordinary and everyday (e.g. Hall 2011; Adams and Raisborough 2010), what my findings show is that the lived reality of people’s lives is more complex and heterogeneous than implied by this delineation of the spectacular and mundane. Seed-savers and their practices emerge as simultaneously ordinary and connected, mundane and self-consciously activist, and engaged in constant processes of alterity creation and othering to negotiate these porous categories and dispositions.

In questioning whether seed-savers recognised themselves as politically active, I found most participants rejected or qualified this description, preferring to emphasise ‘quiet’ (Smith and Jehlička 2013; Smith et al. 2015; Askins 2014, 2015; Hackney 2015) productive acts of ‘getting on’ and ‘doing’ over an activist identity (Bobel 2007; Chatterton and Pickerill 2010). I concluded by considering consequences of seed-savers’ emphases on practical ethics for political engagement beyond the garden, which extends current understandings of embodiment and relational responsibility. Nurturing and caring for plants entails being rooted to place, which can come into conflict with ideas about being ‘activist’. Seed-savers’ depictions of ‘strident’ (Roy, interview, 28/02/2013) activism relate to mobility, marching, shouting, confrontational discourse and placard waving. This seems at odds with the slow, quiet, rooted nature of gardening and nurturing where embodied skills and competencies can be felt and experienced, and impacts, albeit small and subtle, noticed. Though the increased sense of efficacy and connection developed through practical acts might have important galvanising effects, emphasis on embodied ‘doing’ can also entail a retreat from complexity to the known, local, rooted and touchable.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

Notions of alternative and ethical food have gained popularity within academic analyses and popular political debate, yet seed, the fundamental building block for all food systems, has been largely overlooked within this picture. This research highlights the potentials and limitations for seed-saving to stimulate diverse economies built around the circulation of seeds. The findings bring into view the diversity of economic forms existing in everyday exchanges of garden produce (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006; Ellen and Platten 2011). This extends existing understandings by exposing the complexities, ambiguities and reciprocities of sharing and gifting practices, and by divulging their alignment with ordinary and at times self-interested practices of generosity and sociability (Barnett and Land 2007). Theorising the multi-dimensionality of practices of sharing, swapping, gifting of seeds, plants and food is crucial not only for recognising the prevalence of diverse economic forms that already exist, but identifying how ‘care-ful’ (Milligan and Wiles 2010, p.737) relations and responsibilities for environments might be nurtured and cultivated further. In this concluding chapter, I explore the implications of these findings for the theorisation and practice of diverse economies and alternative food in relation to four interrelated themes: 1) sharing; 2) crafting; 3) seed with feeling; and 4) boundaries and alterity.

Sharing

In exploring the saving and exchanging practices of seed-savers in the UK, the findings demonstrate the centrality of non-monetary ‘sharing’ exchanges within everyday gardening activity. By foregrounding what seed-savers do, this study expands current understandings of diverse economies (Gibson-Graham 2008; Leyshon et al. 2003; Hillebrand and Zademach 2013; St. Martin et al. 2015), by demonstrating the variety of exchanges that exist within both mundane practice and self-consciously alternative, organised economic spaces like seed swaps. As well as elucidating the intrinsic heterogeneity of seed exchanges, looking at processes of cultivation and distribution exposes a raft of diverse economic practices related to food provisioning, including, for
example, volunteering, recycling, foraging, and socialising in gardens. Ordinary ethical negotiations around these diverse economic practices (sharing, gifting and barter) are shown to exist not in discrete moments of exchange, but as complexly interwoven with everyday ethical negotiations, interpersonal dimensions and concerns (Belk 2010).

The examination of sharing in seed-savers’ gardening and exchanging practices identifies that sharing, swapping and gifting seed is laden with complex reciprocities and rewards. For example, swapping and gifting excess produce helps individuals overcome concerns with hoarding and waste, by avoiding the practical and emotional discomfort associated with decaying food or the squandered potentiality of seeds and young plants. Though under-explored in the existing literature (e.g. Nazarea 2005; Campbell 2012; Carolan 2007b), the presence of a large volume of excess commercially produced seeds at organised swap events indicates these ordinary ethical concerns (Hall 2011) around thrift, generosity (Barnett and Land 2007) and waste are equally significant in motivating action as grander claims about preserving biodiversity or resisting corporate control.

Exploring these reciprocities develops existing understandings of how food cultivation is made meaningful to individuals (Smith et al 2015; Smith and Jehlička 2013; Turner 2011) by revealing the social and interpersonal dimensions of sharing implicated in diverse economic practices. The spaces in which I practiced seed-saving with participants ranged from private backyards, allotments and community gardens, to kitchens, market stalls and organised seed swap events. Sharing was a significant social practice that forged bonds between individuals in all of these spaces, and whilst conducting fieldwork I was drawn into complex and temporally extended relationships of sharing with participants. What became clear is that sharing is a multidimensional practice relating to more than the exchange of produce but extending to the reassurance, advice, and labour distributed between growers as part of their ordinary gardening activity (Ellen and Platten 2011).

Seed-savers sought out opportunities to take part in non-monetary exchanges, to practice and perform gifting and generosity (Barnett and Land 2007). Feeling altruistic, or that they had helped meet a desire in other people contributed to growers’ sensing they were part of a generous community of like-minded gardeners, exchanging with one another in economies built around trust. By examining how participants imagined the impacts of their actions with seeds, the findings therefore problematise theoretical arguments depicting consumption-centred activity as necessarily individualising and
depoliticising (Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Maniates 2001) by exposing the temporally and geographically extended networks of sharing relations in which seed-savers located their practice.

Shared seeds and plants are drawn upon in processes of remembering (Nazarea 2005; Phillips 2013), and their exchange confers only a partial transfer of ownership (Chevalier 2014). Furthermore, saving, tending, and gifting are imagined as taking place together with others and as extending gardeners’ individual practices over time and space. Swapped plant material is instrumental therefore in circulating shared, cultural and collective memory (Smart 2007), divulged in the stories told about plants, the imagined geographies of seeds’ journeys, and ideas of legacy and lineage in which growers are bound up. Though often not articulated explicitly by seed-savers but observed in practice, these interpersonal, reciprocal and imaginative dimensions are hugely significant motivations for participation in ethical, sustainable and activist practice around seed and food.

Crafting

A unique contribution of this thesis is conceptualising seed-saving in terms of crafting. Craft is a polyvalent term that hinges around embodied, material engagements and skilled repertoires; affective and tangible dimensions of making; shifting identities and alienabilities of commodities and crafted products; and the overlapping dimensions of work and passion (Campbell 2005; Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011; Price 2015; Shove and Watson 2008; Thurnell Read 2014). I argue that conceptualising seed-saving as a form of craft is useful for theorising the mundane ‘doings’ (Puig de la Bellacasa 2010) of making, exchanging and ‘self-provisioning’ (Smith and Jehlička 2013; Smith et al. 2015) seed and food that have as yet received less attention in studies of AFNs and ethical consumption. In elaborating the crafting practices of seed-savers, this study addresses critiques of the persistent separation of production and consumption in academic and popular approaches (Goodman et al. 2010). As well as extending the ‘reconnection agenda’ (Morris and Kirwan 2010, p.132) by considering seed and food produced and consumed by the same person, unpicking the diverse practices recruited in crafting seeds avoids reifying ‘ethical consumption’ as a discrete social formation exercised in the rational choices of cognisant consumers (Low and Davenport 2007). Instead, it
refocuses attention onto everyday encounters with food, plants and seed that are both productive and consumptive.

When conducting fieldwork I often found myself in suburban gardens brimming with vast collections of fruit, vegetables and herbs, as well as tins, filing cabinets and suitcases crammed with seeds. Seed-savers’ collections were described in metaphors of addiction and passionate accumulation, and searches for new acquisitions sometimes involved illegal transfer of plant material across borders, or complex sharing arrangements that maximised access to diverse seeds (Belk 1995). Participants demonstrated the effort and skill required in cultivating seeds, crafting collections and divesting of excess produce, and often contrasted these practices with ideas about ‘passive’ consumption of mass-produced seed and food. These findings align with and build on discussions around ‘craft consumption’ (Campbell 2005; Watson and Shove 2008) which suggest consuming well can in itself be an invested and passionate form of work (Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011).

Seed-saving entails seasonally clustered, repetitive, and sometimes fiddly tasks which can demand innovative strategies that use the body in creative ways. This research draws out the alternative pleasures (Soper 2007) and ‘sensory indiscipline[s]’ (Jones 2012, p.647) arising from encounters with weeds, manure, mud, and the sometimes painful monotony of caring for seeds and plants. These embodied engagements both motivate and are recognised by savers in the products of their labours, such as the jar of processed seed that demonstrated Becky’s hard work and care, for example (Becky, interview#1, 29/01/2013). Tactile encounters are crucial to how seed-savers feel and register their impacts on and engagements with others, and as several theorists suggest, entail something of a blurring between self and other through which relational responsibilities are developed (Carolan 2007a; Puig de la Bellacasa 2010).

In questioning what seed-savers do, how they are motivated, and how ideas about communal or non-commodified seed and food inform their practice, the findings identify desires amongst many participants to increase their capacities for making and creating. Normative ideals of self-sufficiency are apparent in seed-savers’ explanations and practices, though often incompletely realised. Having excess of some things in order to share was cited as more important that attaining subsistent production. However, the significance of crafting and making extends beyond the ability to provision food, and has wider implications for how seed-savers imagine the impacts of their labours with seeds. I argue the tangible (Thurnell Read 2014), ‘hands-on’ (Faye, interview, 23/02/2013)
practices of seed-saving enable participants to overcome apathy and disillusionment in the face of complex challenges. As well as providing opportunities to experience fresh air, healthy food, and ‘headspace’ (Brian, interview #2, 04/07/2013), doing gardening allowed individuals to align practical action in the form of making, creating, growing, and cultivating with environmental ideals (Turner 2011).

The tangibilities and empirical certainties of gardening seem to have a galvanising effect, deepening participants’ search for understanding in response to materials in an iterative process (Thurnell Read 2014). The ordinary aspects of sharing with others, avoiding waste, and learning how to craft and make seed and food are aligned with self-interested rationales of taste and distinction in acquiring diverse and unusual plants, seeking feelings of community and recognition from others. I argue rather than undermining the moral imperatives and lofty aspirations motivating seed-saving practice, ‘generosity’ is established here as simultaneously altruistic and self-interested, suggesting that duty and enjoyment co-evolve in an iterative, interrelated process (Barnett and Land 2007). Tangible, ethical ‘doings’ with seeds rarely arose from feelings of obligation, but emerged in the pleasurable affects derived in ‘getting a response’ from plants and environmental others (Michael, interview, 27/08/2013). Within seed-savers’ motivations and understandings of their impacts there is neither a linear relationship of causality either from knowledge to action, or vice versa, but rather thinking and doing that are interrelated and better conceived in terms of the ‘minded body’ others have suggested (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010, p.1277; Carolan 2008).

Though the findings presented in this thesis bolster existing theorisations foregrounding the interrelationship between embodied practice, cognitive rationalisation and moral action, attending to the craft of seed cultivation also adds a qualification to celebrations of the potential for ‘tactile’ and sensory immersion to stimulate ethical acts (Carolan 2007a; Hayden and Buck 2011; Puig de la Bellacasa 2010; Hayes Conroy 2010). Though participants frequently celebrated doing over talking, the findings reveal gardening can be a way to disengage, and the material requirements of saving seed might hold the potential to divert energies away from other forms of action.
Seed with feeling

By uncovering how participants cultivated ‘seed with feeling’ the findings outlined in this study contribute to fleshing out the as yet underexplored “‘warm” relation of intimacy and care’ (Müller 2014b, p.40) formed by individuals in relation to seeds and plant material. This notion of feeling encompasses the sensory, embodied, and particularly tactile relationships between people and plants that inform seed-saving practice (Carolan 2007a). Significantly, it also hints at the limit of participants’ abilities to explain why they saved seed. Their motivations, attachments, idiosyncratic enthusiasms and anthropomorphisms (Phillips 2013), were often couched in terms of ‘feeling’ differently about seeds. These findings therefore develop understandings of the emotional and affective qualities of not only crafting and provisioning food, but of embodying diverse economic practices - sharing, swapping, barter, and gifting - which have relevance to wider sharing economies beyond seeds and garden produce. Furthermore, they contribute to debates around the utility of discursive methodologies for pursuing these dimensions of practice (Wetherell 2012; Burrell 2014). I argue that attending to what seed-savers do as well as what they say is essential for understanding the ‘ir-rational’ (Nightingale 2011) rationales for seed-saving and wider relations of caring for people and environments, but maintain that discursive and interview based methodologies can form a crucial and insightful strategy to unpick individuals’ meaning-making practice (Hitchings 2012).

In caring and tending for collections of living material, growers practiced ‘selective anthropomorphism’ (Phillips 2013), at times felt worry, disappointment or guilt, or watched plants with careful vigilance and anticipation. Seed-savers’ relationships with plants acknowledged their continual evolution, instability and agency, yet they derived pleasure from noticing the ways plants were shaped by their human interaction in a ‘conversational’ relationship (Power 2005). As already stated, the interpersonal dimensions of saving and sharing seeds are extremely significant. Gardeners orchestrate sharing opportunities as a way of perpetuating and creating bonds with other growers (Belk 2010). Unusual seeds, cuttings and food products, particularly those difficult to source commercially are passed on as a way of prompting and encouraging others to cultivate. In collecting and sourcing seeds, those with ‘feeling’ – associated with stories, biographies and human warmth – are the most desirable. Retelling seeds’ stories, feeling ‘connected’ (Barbara, interview#1, 29/01/2013) and imagining the others involved in perpetuating this cultural exchange of plant material are entwined with
anthropomorphisms, emotional labours and responsibilities to care for seeds and plants (Cameron 2012; Langellier and Peterson 2011; Carolan 2007b).

The ordinary relations of caring, nurturing, tending and playing a role in the lineage of material things in the garden is important as a way of performing relationships and connections, both through the practical act of exchanging with others, but also in tending shared plants which act as reminders of people or events. Activist practices and commitments beyond the garden can therefore be performed and materially evidenced in garden spaces (Brook 2003). As relationally constructed places (Massey 2004; Malpass et al. 2007b; Darling 2009), garden landscapes provide opportunities for enacting, living and cultivating practical acts to further these commitments. Linking to the previous discussion of crafting seeds, it is these practical and tangible (Thurnell Read 2014) dimensions of gardening, crafting and cultivating plants – which are shaped by human interactions but also unpredictable and agentive (Power 2005) – that enable individuals to overcome feelings of apathy when daunted in the face of vast, seemingly insurmountable challenges.

As underlined in the literature review, questions have been raised around normative assumptions that knowledge is the prerequisite for responsible action, and that consumers must be intoned to act more ethically (Barnett et al. 2011; Barnett and Land 2007; Eden et al. 2008). The empirical findings relating to seeds’ ‘feeling’ further destabilise these assumptions by depicting the overlap and interrelation of self-interest, moral argument and everyday ethical negotiation that are jointly articulated in seed-savers’ practice. At times participants explained they felt a ‘duty’ to ‘step up’ (Louise, interview#1, 09/05/2013) and take action on pressing issues. Some articulated explicitly moral justifications, such as preserving biodiversity, encouraging organic methods, or resisting corporate control by avoiding purchases from large companies. However, this research looked beyond the rationales seed-savers verbalised, unpicking their statements and addressing what they did. It therefore reveals the everyday ethical (Hall 2011), interpersonal dimensions of cultivation and exchange are equally, if not more significant in shaping and stimulating gardeners’ practices of caring for environments and others (Barnett et al. 2011; Smith and Jehlička).
Boundaries and alterity

By problematising boundaries and alterity (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010; Johnston et al. 2011; DuPuis and Gillon 2009; Holloway et al. 2010; Jonas 2010;) within seed-savers’ practice, the findings identify not distinctly alternative spaces or moments of exchange, but rather point to the prevalence of practices of alterity creation within everyday ethical negotiations around food. I argue therefore that notions of alterity have more purchase when deployed in relation to the transgression or preservation of borders, and the creation of slippery categories, which are asserted in continual processes of making food meaningful. By attending to these practices of alterity, the findings presented provide a textured account that discloses something of the elusive, necessarily ambiguous (Bridge and Smith 2003) affective and emotional qualities of doing seed and food self-provisioning.

As writers on the subject of human-plant interactions in particular have noted, gardening and caring for plants implies relational responsibility (Massey 2004) and holds the potential to transcend self/other dichotomies that might overcome the distance of difference (Tronto 1994). The empirical findings elaborate on these interactions and responsibilities existing within relations between humans, seeds, plants, soils, and the diverse wildlife sharing growing spaces (Phillips 2013; Puig de la Bellacasa 2010; Carolan 2007a). Attending to border transgressions in participants’ practice is significant therefore in identifying moments of extended relations in which care for plants and the environment become implicated in practices of self-care (Singh 2011). Significantly, however, I argue attending to boundaries and alterity also means paying attention to instances where borders are redrawn to maintain the alterity of practices, spaces, or relations via exclusions characterised by class dimensions and distinctions (Paddock 2015; Johnston et al. 2011; DuPuis and Gillon 2009; Jordan 2007). Practicing seed-saving might act to motivate action and ethical negotiation as a result of educating embodied dispositions, and by initiating intimate and caring relations between things and people. However, the findings presented here qualify exuberance around these ‘fuzzy boundaries’ (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010, p.1279) by drawing attention to practices of alterity and exclusion through which seed-savers asserted certain ways of relating as superior.

By questioning how seeds are constructed as communal (as opposed to privately owned, commodified) resources, the findings uncover the multiple processes through
which seeds are demarcated as distinct from commodities. Disentangling these aspects sheds further light on how saved and swapped seeds acquire the ‘feeling’ touched on in discussions above. As I have elaborated thus far, sharing and gifting of garden produce is widespread, and entails complex, interpersonal, emotional and more-than-material reciprocities. The maintained social connections and transfer of ownership supposedly absent in prototypical commodity exchange (Belk 2010; Gregory 1982) is very present in gardeners’ exchanges of plant material. Due to their propagative abilities, seeds are not depleted by sharing widely. Sharing and ‘outing’ seeds in non-monetary exchanges into the ‘many hands’ of a loosely connected network of gardeners has the practical benefit of overcoming the risk and narrowed genetic diversity associated with commercial control of seed production (Deibel 2013; Pautasso et al. 2013). I argue it also has significant emotional, affective and interpersonal impacts for seed-savers.

The findings illustrate how individuals sought to preserve the non-commodity status of seeds and garden produce and highlight their disavowal of economic motivations. This was evident in the discomfort, distaste and disgust expressed at selling garden produce, such as Jean’s (interview#1, 26/11/2013) furious visceral reaction to another gardener profiting from ‘her’ Crimson Flowered broad bean seeds. Tactics deployed to negate the commodity status (Wilson 2012; Bridge and Smith 2003; Kopytoff 2014) of seeds and garden produce include the preference for unequal, temporally delayed exchanges that maintain connections between individuals (Belk 2010, Chevalier 2014); participants’ frequent citation of the positive aspects of sharing; the reframing of cash transactions for seeds as ‘donations’; and the elaborate rituals in place at seed swap events – putting commercially packeted seeds into handwritten brown envelopes, and contextualising the exchange as ‘notional giving’ (Daniel, interview, 28/01/2013), for example. The findings therefore develop existing understandings of the shifting status and transmutation of commodities (Chevalier 2014; Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011; Gregson and Beale 2004). They build on engagements with theories of commodity fetishism in the literature on AFNs and ethical consumption, by showing how diverse economic practices such as sharing, gifting and swapping are enrolled in the refetishisation of commodities (Carrier 2010; Morris and Kirwan 2010; Coles and Crang 2011).

The findings therefore expose seed swaps not as distinctly alternative economic spaces, but as exhibiting a ready coexistence of the homemade and the mass-produced. The commodity status of seeds is manipulated, open to contestation, and subject to continual processes of redefinition and alterity creation. Furthermore, commodities are
appropriated into diverse economic relations of sharing and gifting, through crafted collections and associations with the handmade (Chevalier 2014; Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011; Belk 1995). Seeds are not straightforwardly ‘defetishised’ as a result of reconnected production and consumption (Morris and Kirwan 2010). Attending to processes of refetishisation exposes the potential for co-optation of the ‘feeling’ of saved seed towards less progressive ends, as well as the appropriation of mass-produced commodities into alternative, diverse economic forms. (Ferguson 2009; McClintock 2014; Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008, Mansfield 2007a, 2007b).

In summary, seed-savers’ motivations, lived experiences of diverse economies and activist practices around seeds are diverse and individual, best understood not as stimulated by moral concerns or desires to do environmentally beneficial acts but as interlinked and evolving with practice (Warde 2005; Barnett et al. 2011). Ethical rationalisations play a significant part in this, but converge around the alignment of ordinary concerns with waste, thrift, creativity and enthusiasm, and the interpersonal, emotional dynamics of sharing and feeling connected. Organisations such as HSL or seed swap events contextualise and make legible seed-saving practices in wider political registers. However, most seed-savers’ practices are only sporadically and seasonally located within these organised formations. The findings of this thesis therefore contribute to theorising the environmental, social and political action within everyday activity that might ordinarily go unnoticed.

**Making seed meaningful and cultivating change**

The key contribution of this study is the identification that sharing, gifting and non-monetary exchanges are prevalent, highly significant, if overlooked (Belk 2010) dimensions of seed and food provisioning, which involve complex interpersonal and more-than-material reciprocities. The practices and socialities of sharing, their extension and organisation are strongly influenced by the materialities of the produce shared. Diverse economies performed around seeds and garden produce are heterogeneous, at times contradictory and thus better understood as located within ordinary practices (that include the mundane, the exceptional and the imagined). Furthermore, they are continually reworked and contested through practices of alterity creation (Holloway et al. 2010), rather than existing in distinct communities, spaces or
projects. In spite of numerous salient critiques, thinking in terms of ‘alternatives’ therefore still has validity, but what I have argued is the importance of paying closer attention to where boundaries are overcome, and where they are recreated or disputed within everyday ethical negotiations.

By unpicking the textured and multidimensional practices of seed-saving, the findings presented here provide further cause to question models of responsible action as motivated by rational decision making and moral persuasion (Barnett et al. 2011). The ordinary, interpersonal and joyful aspects of practice are shown to be more significant in developing, reflecting on and performing ethical commitments and dispositions. It is worth noting a caution voiced by Carolan (2007a) that the positive impacts of deepened awareness and relational responsibility, for example, are only opened to those who choose to engage in ‘tactile space’. The individuals I encountered were those already interested in gardening, with existing ‘cultural repertoires’ (Johnston et al. 2011; Paddock 2015) that meant they were ‘open to self-conversion to begin with’ (Carolan 2007a, p.1273). Though a limitation of the arguments put forward here therefore is that of ‘preaching to the converted’, I argue that practices of caring for environments and others might be nurtured, encouraged and advanced by identifying practical, tangible opportunities for action that chime with individuals’ existing enthusiasms and sociabilities (Barnett et al. 2011; Barnett and Land 2007).

Implications of these findings include the need to pay closer attention to the affective and material dimensions of ordinary and activist practice, in order to better understand the spaces carved by individuals for moments of ‘being political’ (Isin 2002) in everyday life. Food studies premised on distinct consumers and producers (Goodman et al. 2010) have tended to depict productive cultivation practices as economically driven and structured, resulting in a lack of understanding of the emotional, affective and embodied dimensions (Jayne et al. 2010) of crafting, making and provisioning. What this study of seed-saving firmly establishes is that individuals are concerned about much more than simply producing things for sale.

This study has drawn attention to the ways in which specific materialities influence the mutabilities of seed and food products (Kopytoff 2014; Bridge and Smith 2003), and therefore the types of diverse exchanges they facilitate. Furthermore, I demonstrated that the embodied demands of gardening can both open and close down avenues for action, and developing attachments and commitments can at times leave individuals
‘stuck’, and rooted to place (Ahmed 2004). This has wider application for interrogating how some social formations ‘grab’ people (Wetherell 2012) and with what type of grip, and how the material dimensions of activist practices influence their articulation. Alternative food initiatives, experiments in alternative living, and social movements are frequently criticised for either failing to scale-up, or conversely, of being co-opted into the ‘mainstream’ (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010; Mount 2012; McCarthy 2006). The impact and efficacy of projects of this nature are also often measured instrumentally in terms of outcomes for wellbeing, health, or social exclusion, for example (Sempik 2005). Correspondingly, elusive yet important aspects have been relatively overlooked. Bringing to light the affective, emotional, life affirming qualities of producing some of your own food, and the interpersonal dimensions of being able to share it helps to balance such critiques and to understand how a diverse range of practices become meaningful. The more ordinary, under-the-radar, less easily accessible affective dimensions of doing seed-saving and exchange, generated in imagining connections beyond local, known spaces, sharing with others and maintaining networks of generosity are significant aspects of living well that apply beyond gardening practices.

In the literature review, I noted a tendency to evaluate the radical (or neoliberal) nature of alternative food initiatives in terms of the commodity status of the food on offer (Wilson 2012; Guthman 2008a, 2008b). In response to the empirical findings of this study, I argue that the commodity status of seeds, plants and food products are far from fixed, but are open to contestation, manipulation, and appropriation (Bridge and Smith 2003). In order to extend existing understandings of ethical consumption and alternative food there is a pressing need, therefore, to attend to the ambiguity and hybridity in exchange relations and commodity circulations, including the ways that diverse economic projects borrow, appropriate and scavenge from the systems they oppose (Ferguson 2009; Mansfield 2007a, 2007b; Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008; McClintock 2014). Such a recognition widens debates about the capacities of individuals to either resist or be governmentalised, by foregrounding how they creatively rework, subvert, and shift the ‘rules of the game’ within mundane and ordinary activity (Barnett et al. 2008).

Identifying that mass-produced items are appropriated into networks of sharing indicates individuals’ desires for the handmade, to experience ethically negotiated relationships around food and to do economic exchange differently. Even if these inclinations are incompletely fulfilled or are not substantively realised there is something
significant in that they exist. The challenge is to nurture these dispositions towards environmentally and socially just goals. As I have stressed in this concluding chapter, revealed by this research are neither pure alternative spaces nor explicitly radical efforts to create a seed commons, but diverse economic practices certainly exist and hold substantial importance for participants. The conflicts and boundary disputes around distributing food and refetishising (Carrier 2010; Coles and Crang 2011) seeds are evidence that alternative economic practices - sharing, swapping, gifting, and bartering - are meaningful and significant to individuals. The desire to share and to do seed and food provisioning beyond capitalist markets is widespread, already existing, and could be cultivated further.
References


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Davies, G. and Dwyer, C. (2007). ‘Qualitative methods: are you enchanted or are you alienated?’ Progress in Human Geography, 31(2), pp.257-266.


ETC Group. (2013). ‘Putting the cartel before the horse… and farm, seeds, soil, peasants, etc: who will control agricultural inputs, 2013?’ *ETC Group Communique*, 111.


Appendix 1  Fieldwork organisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Research activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 1:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 2012–Jan 2013</td>
<td>8 weeks</td>
<td>- Desk based research, contacting potential organisations and ‘gatekeepers’.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Attended local organic gardening groups in Manchester</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Conducted 2 pilot interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 2013–Feb 2013</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
<td><strong>Phase 2:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Attended committee planning meetings for ‘Seedy Sunday’, Brighton</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Attended, volunteered and swapped seeds at ‘Seedy Sunday’</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Attended and swapped seeds local seed swaps</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Initial interviews with volunteers and committee members, snowballing to identify other participants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 2013</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
<td><strong>Phase 2:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- returned to Manchester</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- reviewed data gathered</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- arranged further interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- built findings into interview questions and strategy for next phase of research</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- contacted local seed swaps by post with seeds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb–Mar 2013</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td><strong>Phase 2:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Conducted second phase of initial interviews in Brighton and surrounding area with participants suggested in initial round of interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Attended local seed swaps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar–April 2013</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td><strong>Phase 2:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Returned to Manchester and reviewed findings from second set of initial interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>- Built findings into next set of interview questions.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- Contacted HSL to identify ‘seed guardians’ - potential participants who were significantly involved in seed-saving, in close proximity to either Brighton or Manchester.</td>
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<tr>
<td>April–June 2013</td>
<td>5 weeks</td>
<td><strong>Phase 3:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Arranged and conducted interviews and participant observation with seed guardians</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Reviewed findings, and built into subsequent interviews.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Identified 13 ‘core’ participants identified in fieldwork phases 1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June–Dec 2013</td>
<td>22 weeks</td>
<td><strong>Phase 3:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Repeat interviews and observations with core participants (Brighton, Manchester, Nottingham)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Photo methods with core participants</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Interviews with key informants</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Participant observation at Heritage Seed Library (1 week)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 2013–Feb 2014</td>
<td>8 weeks</td>
<td><strong>Phase 4:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- transcribed interviews and field notes,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- attended ‘Seedy Sunday’, Brighton</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- sent all core participants a thank you card and two packets of seed from my allotment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2  Participant consent form

University of Manchester  
School of Environment and Development

PhD title: Ethical consumption and alternative food networks: the case of seed saving in the UK

Researcher: Ms Laura Pottinger, PhD student

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

If you are happy to participate in the research please read the consent form and initial it:

1. I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above project and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

3. I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded and give my consent.

4. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes.

5. I give my consent to be contacted in the future about further participation in the study (repeat interviews or observation).

Name: …………………………………  Name of person taking consent: ………………………

Date: ………/………/………..  Date: ………/………/………..

Signature: …………………………….  Signature: ………………………..
Appendix 3 Description of research spaces and activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of space</th>
<th>Number of hours spent participating/observing</th>
<th>Description of activities undertaken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seed swap event</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>I attended five separate seed swap events. These varied in size, from Seedy Sunday which had over 3000 attendees, to a small swap at a farmers’ market in its first year which had 120 attendees. At smaller swaps I attended as a ‘punter’, I brought seeds to swap and took some away with me; I spoke to organisers running the stall and other ‘punters’; observed the interactions taking place around the seed swap tables and recorded observations about the wider context, setting and so on. At two of the larger swaps I volunteered for the day. This involved arriving before the event began to help organisers set up; decorating the venue; staffing the seed swap table, entry table, information table and ‘seed cleaning’ table at various points in the day; eating with other volunteers; speaking to members of the public and stall holders; packing up at the end of the day. Again, I made notes on the interactions taking place and the wider context and setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seed swap committee meeting</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>I attended five committee meetings with volunteers who organised the large ‘Seedy Sunday’ seed swap event over the course of the year. These took place in the homes of committee members, usually around dining tables, and involved discussing the allocation of tasks for organising the upcoming swap; decision making around who to offer stalls to, how money should be spent, how the event should be promoted and so on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allotment</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>I spent time with five core participants and one non-core participant in their allotments. Interactions in allotment spaces involved working alongside individuals on tasks such as weeding; harvesting crops such as gooseberries and peas; tying in tomatoes and collecting windfall apples. These interactions usually involved an element of walking around the individual allotment plot, with the participant demonstrating and pointing out the different things growing in the space. Most allotment visits also involved taking a walk around the whole allotment site, which entailed participants demonstrating</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
features of the wider landscape and stopping to talk to other pot holders, for example. On one occasion I
accompanied a seed circle meeting of five plot holders and walked with them from plot to plot.
As well as working and walking with participants, visits to allotments sometimes involved stopping for a tea
break, particularly if the visit had involved gardening ‘work’. Some allotments were set up with gas stoves for
making tea, and on other occasions water was heated on an open fire.

| Community garden | 38 | There were three community gardens that I visited during the research as part of participant observation
interactions with three core participants and two non-core participants. Community gardens varied in size.
One took up a small section of the carpark of a community centre, and comprised of three raised beds, a
small lawn and picnic bench. Another was a medium sized plot nestled between the semi-detached houses
of a residential estate, and had about ten large vegetable beds, a polytunnel, two greenhouses, several sheds,
a wood fired pizza oven and a community hut. The third was a large site that took up several allotment plots
on the edge of a steeply terraced allotment site on the outskirts of Brighton, and which consisted of several
large sections divided into wide terraced beds; communal huts; an area for chickens and several polytunnels.

On my visits to community gardens I joined in with other volunteers working in the space. The tasks
undertaken here included, for example: weeding; planting onion sets; sowing leek seeds; turning compost;
harvesting dry bean seeds; processing kale seeds; painting a shed; picking rose petals to make rose infused
honey; digging; watering and so on. Like the interactions in allotments, visits to community gardens often
involved an element of walking and being given a tour of the site by organisers, and eating and drinking tea
with volunteers during breaks. |

| Back garden | 24 | I spent time in the gardens of six core and nine non-core participants. Participants were usually less keen to
let me undertake ‘work’ in their back gardens, preferring to walk in the space, demonstrate plants, or sit
outside whilst we spoke if the weather permitted. I did manage to persuade David and Claire to let me help
with tasks in the garden (weeding, watering, tying in tomatoes and cucumbers) and helped Nina gather herbs
and leaves from her garden for a salad that we ate together. |

| Inside | 36 | Most of the interactions that took place inside participants’ homes were semi structured interviews. I was |
almost always offered tea, sometimes cake or lunch, so part of the encounter usually involved eating and drinking together.

In addition to conducting interviews, I also participated in seed saving tasks with participants in their kitchens and dining rooms, including removing tomato seeds; separating beans from husks and lettuce seed from chaff; packaging seeds for swap events and so on.

There were also numerous occasions where participants demonstrated collections relating to seeds whilst in their homes – seed tins and storage units bursting with brown envelopes and glass jars full of seed; small libraries of gardening books and seed catalogues, for example.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Café</th>
<th>16</th>
<th>I met twelve participants at local cafes or pubs for the purpose of conducting interviews. Like the encounters in people's homes, these interactions also usually involved eating and drinking together with participants.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Seed library | 25 | I spent four days volunteering at a seed library, in which I worked alongside volunteers and library staff and was able to observe and take part in a large number of tasks and interactions related to the practices of saving seed. I interviewed two volunteers in the gardens of the library, and had lengthy discussions with other volunteers and staff whilst working together in the garden, seed cleaning room and polytunnels.

Tasks undertaken as part of this element of the research included: processing beetroot seed by hand and using a seed cleaning machine; measuring and recording information about different varieties of runner bean and tomato; hand pollinating runner beans and squashes; cleaning and separating onions and shallots; preparing climbing beans for germination tests; digging; weeding; deseeding tomatoes, melons and cucumbers. |
<p>| Participants’ workplace | 7 | I interviewed one core and six non-core participants at their place of work. These included one interview at a hospital; one in the offices of a historic building and visitor attraction; two interviews at a seed bank; one at a seed library; one at the business premises and growing fields of an independent seed company; and one in the offices of a charity. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>I attended three meetings of a local seed circle and one of a local organic gardening group in Manchester, as part of the process of identifying participants as well as conducting participant observation.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>I also took part in three online seed circles; sent packets of seed to small seed swaps around the country and had email communication with thirteen individuals who picked up my seed packets at these events.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Whilst conducting the research I also spent many hours cultivating my own allotment, planting and tending seeds I had been given in the course of the research, and packaging and preparing seeds for exchange.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 4 List of project participants*

*This section of the thesis has been removed in order to anonymise information.