Banal Utopia:
urban gardening as a practice for materialising utopic city spaces.

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For the late Dr Pius Alois Okelo

And it seemed to be when I first went there I thought it was this kind of utopia…

- Ben, allotmenteer

DECLARATION

No part of this thesis has been accepted or is currently being submitted for any degree, diploma or certificate or other qualification in this university or elsewhere.

In accordance with the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography guidelines, this thesis does not exceed 100,000 words.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores urban gardening as a banal practice that underpins the manifestation of utopian spaces within cities. Growing in Oxford on allotments and guerrilla gardening sites has increased both in practice and significance. This is due to the convergence of food provenance issues, environmental concerns, and the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. This thesis combines the concepts of banal nationalism (a term proposed by Michael Billig (1995) which speaks to everyday practices through which humans build a shared sense of national identity) and utopia to propose the idea 'banal utopia' revealing the manner in which materialising a utopia is both quotidian and continual. Utopia is not a destination at which to arrive but is in a constant state of production and renewal that carries echoes of the gardening calendar.

The link between places where gardening is performed and utopia is not new. What this study illuminates are the ways in which urban gardeners, through their practices, complicate traditional Euro-American imaginings of utopia. These complications are routinely paradoxical, beginning with the materiality of the gardening places that challenge the 'no place' meaning of the word 'Utopia' as coined by Thomas More (2012[1516]). Furthermore, this thesis brings into conversation two urban gardening practices – namely allotmenteering and guerrilla gardening that are usually considered separately in the literature. What has emerged is the identification of a politics of boundary recognition and negotiation as urban gardeners carry out their self-regulated practices, *alone, together*. Urban gardening places are sites of super diversity (Vertovec 2007) where gardeners imagine, invent, and produce a better future within a city. In this way urban gardening spaces are places of hope. This thesis also analyses the difficulties inherent in creating utopic

worlds. Research for this study builds on 36 months of fieldwork from October 2018 – October 2021 on various allotment sites and guerrilla gardened streets across the city of Oxford. The ethnographic research is grounded in participant observation on four sites where I cultivated allotment plots. Data was collected using a wide range of qualitative methods. This included carrying out in-depth interviews with fellow urban gardeners and research in the archives of one of the allotment sites. Archaeological and archival ethnography were also used. This thesis illuminates the strategies urban gardeners deploy to save and maintain their growing places, in the context of the agency of citizens to co-create the cities in which they live.

PREFACE

On 7 October 2018, I was jogging past an allotment site I had not noticed before when I saw an A4 poster stapled to a tree which read, 'Allotment plots are available for rent on this site'. I had become accustomed to looking out for urban gardening sites on my runs. As well as coming across allotment sites, I would also see patches of seemingly unused land where over time I came to understand people had grown plants without the council's expressed permission. One of the times I was alerted to this was seeing an elderly lady (with her back to me) on a side street carefully pressing bulbs along exposed bits of soil. She was one of the first guerrilla gardeners I would spot carrying out their activities. The two were linked in my mind because they were at the times they took place both unusual sights. I stopped my run to read the poster, 'For further details please contact Charity 01865 xxxxxx David davidxxx@gmail.com'. The person who had made the poster had taken trouble over it. The words were enclosed in a beautiful border, and following the contact details were images of apples, grapes and pears. I took a photograph of the poster spontaneously, finished my run, and cautiously called Charity's number. It was a Sunday, and I was not expecting an answer. I did not want to get too excited. Although I was on the cusp of beginning my doctoral studies in Anthropology researching urban gardening and was proposing to spend my fieldwork carrying out participant observation on allotment sites, I had still not secured a plot on any site on which to grow. I was on the waiting list for the two sites within walking distance of my home and did not yet know that in 2018 the city of Oxford did not have a city-wide waiting list. What this meant was that if you were prepared to travel some distance from your home (depending on where you lived) you could find a plot to rent. The site I had jogged past was a 20-minute drive from where I lived.

I was expecting the phone to continue ringing with no response when Charity answered and swiftly asked if I wanted to meet at the site straightaway. It turned out that Charity lived across the road from the site and, before I knew it, a short, robust white woman in her late 60s was showing me around the site. Initially, I felt I was right not to get excited. I did not yet know how to read allotment sites, and post-harvest, on a grey early autumn afternoon, the first step into an allotment site did not fit my imagination of walking into a beautiful place. While writing my thesis I came to realise that I encountered all of the themes that emerged during the course of my fieldwork in that afternoon: I just did not know it.

Charity spent over an hour with me talking about the site and showing me several plots that were available. Close to the gate we walked past raised beds that I later found out had been specifically installed for a disabled allotmenteer. Next was what could be described as a traditionally beautiful allotment plot – rows of tidy vegetables bounded by seasonal flowers (though past their best). It had a shed at the back which had an Irish flag on it. Across the spacious internal allotment road was a plot that startled me. The front third was bounded by an electric fence with a sign that was meant to reassure humans that the fence was not for them, but the badgers. We carried on walking and came to a plot half full of healthy maize. 'He's from Zimbabwe,' Charity said with her eyes glowing, 'they're proper farmers.' Maize is a crop that I associate with my own heritage and recognising it somehow made me feel welcome on the allotment site. I found myself thinking that if maize could be grown here, what else could I grow? I began to feel as though I had been transported to another place, not a five-minute walk away from a busy Oxford thoroughfare. I listened as Charity explained that the traditional ten-pole sized plot which was designed to feed a family of four proved to be too big for many people these days, 'what with the pressures of work', and that I might want to consider a plot half that

size – which was a more recent offer. Although I had told her from the outset that I was a doctoral researcher and made clear my reasons for wanting a plot, unlike people in the surrounding city who would ask more about my studies, she barely seemed to register it. She was mainly concerned with what sort of commitment I felt I could make to cultivating the plot and what my level of experience with gardening was, given I'd never had an allotment plot.

Once we had returned to the allotment gates, she asked me which one of the plots she had shown me I was most interested in taking on. Every plot we had seen was covered in couch grass and weeds; none of them was going to be easy to get ready for the following growing season. When I told her that I didn't envisage cultivating all of whatever sized plot I ended up with immediately, she replied that she thought this was sensible. Having seen the amount of work that lay ahead of me I said that I would take it in chunks and work up the plot in sections, growing season after growing season. I then asked her advice as to which plot she thought I should take on. 'I couldn't possibly tell you that,' she replied, 'it's completely up to you.' However, she did take her time to remind me which plots had been vacated by people who had been using pesticides. When I remarked that I would prefer a pesticide-free plot she smiled to herself and said that's what she presumed I would like. I also said that I would prefer a half-sized plot, which is how I came to cultivate plot 68b, the back half of what was originally plot 68. It's next door to the plot with the shed with the Irish flag. I didn't have any money on me, so we arranged to meet the next day, when I exchanged £7 rent for the plot as half a year's rent and £20 as a deposit for a key to the allotment site gates.

Chapter 1: 'For me utopia is working towards, as much as getting, as much as arriving'

An introduction

This thesis is about ordinary people carrying out a commonplace activity that generates an extraordinary effect. It describes the practices of urban gardeners as they cultivate both themselves and the city to create spaces that are recognised both by themselves and others as being utopic. My goal is to explore their practices and the impacts that they have on the city, to offer an alternative to the understanding of cities as dystopic places where human beings are separate from nature. This work is urgent both in the past context of anthropological work that has sought to theorise the relationship between nature and culture, and especially in the current sense of despair at environmental challenges. To be clear, the urban gardeners in my study did not specifically set out to solve the world's environmental problems (though some indeed practice for ecological reasons). What is instead critical is that the by-products of their practices appear to be hopeful ones, providing agency and offering the possibility of good ways in which to live in the city. This study is interested in probing what can be gleaned from the everyday that allows human beings to live a good life in cities but is not an overarching grand project; instead, it is one that is within a citizen's reach.

The idea of the 'good city' increasingly encompasses notions of sustainability both for people and the environment (Tappert et al. 2018). Simultaneously, the pressures of housing and servicing growing urban populations means that green spaces within cities are progressively regulated by the state with the perennial threat of their being co-opted for other purposes. However, city residents are not passive in their interaction with the state through the green spaces they engage with and create.

In England, this is most commonly through the practice of urban gardening which is a mixture of more formal arrangements such as allotments. Allotments are a state sanctioned provision. There are also practices such as guerrilla gardening which are not state sanctioned and as such are a 'disconnected-from-the-state' practice (El Ouardi and Montambeault 2023). These are city resident-led initiatives.. This thesis considers both together because of their common historical roots (by way of The Diggers movement), concurrent ethnographic presence in the city of Oxford (many of the urban gardeners I engaged with were *both* allotmenteers and guerrilla gardeners) and because they are practices that converge and diverge in their methods of materialising a hopeful potentiality within cities. In this thesis I will trace the social history of allotmenteering and guerrilla gardening to show how what was once a rebellious action by The Diggers became formalised through allotments. Even so this acceptance, recognition and support by authorities of urban gardening does not fully meet the need of city residents to shape their cities through the use of green spaces (Brinks et al. 2020). Notorious allotment waiting lists show that state sanctioned provision does not meet citizens' needs and are challenged by guerrilla gardeners who grow on urban land (and in the city of Oxford) some even when they already have an allotment plot.

Agamben has written extensively about, 'a zone in which possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality, become indistinguishable' (Agamben and Hardt 1993: 55). While Agamben's argument is theoretically seductive, what this thesis demonstrates is what it *practically* means for human beings to work within the blurring of these boundaries and categories to co-create spaces of hope in cities. These are not spaces without challenges or indeed the potential for despair but instead spaces that thrive alongside difficulties encountered in the city itself. This thesis argues that if as Agamben proposes there is life after the 'last day' (Agamben

and Hardt 1993: 6), it will not just be human. Stretching his proposition beyond the abstract, I argue it will be human life that recognises and collaborates with the more-than-humans in the spaces where both go on to make their place.

This introduction opens with an outline of the chapters in the thesis. It then delves into the conceptual tools and frameworks with which the thesis engages. Giving an overview of the anthropological debates about nature and culture to which the thesis responds, this chapter then moves on to introduce the people, places, and practice of allotmenteering and guerrilla gardening. Finally, it closes with the research questions with which I entered the field, alongside those that arose during my fieldwork.

Chapter overviews

This thesis comprises eight main body chapters and a conclusion, each of which successively explores first the materialisation of urban gardening spaces in Oxford, and then the themes that arose from the ground in these spaces. In addition to the chapters which are outlined below, there are short interludes which are analogous to soil in an urban gardening space. They provide a bedding of fieldnotes, reflections and in-depth descriptions of particular facets of urban gardening spaces to illuminate the chapters. A key aim of this study is to use ethnography to foreground the voices of urban gardeners which have historically been missing. As such, the main titles of the chapters of this thesis are taken from words or phrases used by urban gardeners.

The introductory chapter entitled ‘For me utopia is working towards as much as getting as much as arriving’ lays out the working concepts that this thesis proposes as emerging from the ethnographic fieldwork:

- banal utopia
- *alone, together*

It sets the concepts within the theoretical framework of wider anthropological debates on nature and culture which informs the thesis.

The second chapter is called 'so now we have time to grow' and covers methodology. It opens with the rationale for carrying out ethnographic work on allotments. It lays out methodological considerations of working with legally recognised (allotments) and ambiguous (guerrilla gardening) urban gardening spaces across the city of Oxford.

The opening brace of chapters are followed by an interlude called, 'a constellation of gardeners' which expands on the definition of urban gardeners. Although this thesis foregrounds human urban gardeners by way of allotmenteers and guerrilla gardeners, it also refers to more-than-human gardeners as referenced in the literature and ethnographically. Whereas human urban gardeners did not refer to plants, the soil, insects, the weather and so on by the term more-than-human gardeners, they did routinely acknowledge them as helping or hindering the gardening that they were trying to carry out. Human gardeners do not practice in isolation but instead as a part of a constellation of human, more-than-human and non-human actors.

The third chapter is entitled, '"Magical places": tracing visible and invisible relations on sites where urban gardeners grow'. It analyses the histories and geographies involved in materialising allotment and guerrilla gardening sites. It contextualises guerrilla gardening and allotmenteering through their social history and practice. It tracks their common ancestry and how the practices have diverged and converged over time. Using ethnographic examples, this chapter unpacks the term used by allotmenteers 'magical places' to describe their sites. This chapter

works with the idea of 'magic' as a process of transformation. For allotmenteers, this is a set of visible and invisible relations through which the contribution of more-than-human gardeners to allotmenteers' growing is acknowledged, relations which shape allotmenteers' practice of experimentation, underpin their humility with regard to the nature they interact with and ground their practice in the ordinary and everyday. Paradoxically, it is the constant repetition of this everyday practice – repetitive to the point of banality – that contains within it the seed of magical possibility. For guerrilla gardeners, the transformation occurs through working with marginal geographical landscapes and turning them into sites of collaboration and care.

This chapter also explains the reasoning behind the choice of the utopic framing as opposed to other possible choices such as third places or heterotopia, a key ethnographic reason being the presence of hope in the practice of urban gardening. It then expounds on some of the paradoxes inherent within the concept of banal utopia by engaging with the routine (and potential drudgery) of the practice of urban gardening while challenging previous preconceptions of allotment use. The chapter closes having demonstrated the different layers of meaning encapsulated within urban gardening sites, allowing Chapter Four to continue with the materialisation of the sites both legally and practically.

Entitled '"A perfect set-up": practical and legal materialisations of urban gardening sites', Chapter Four examines the coming together of allotment sites and 'their folk' (Opperman 2004), as well as guerrilla gardeners and their spaces. Delving into both legalities and practicalities, it is concerned with what works and what is overlooked in order for urban gardeners to declare their places as perfect. It brings into conversation utopian discourse and practice. It scrutinises how urban gardening sites are materialised in the light of the policies that were developed to create a

particular imagination of the city. It highlights the ways in which urban gardeners' practices actively challenge the ideals set out in law by legislators.

Urban gardening practitioners experience the perfection of their sites as a balance between various tensions: competition and collaboration, and independence and interdependence. This chapter uses ethnographic case studies to engage with the structures on allotment sites that facilitate an *alone, together* way of practising. The two case studies are competitive vegetable shows in contrast to moments of collectively looking after the site and individual plots vis-à-vis maintenance of communal areas. These tensions are balanced through a negotiation of literal and figurative boundaries.

Having made the link between gardening and writing in the methodology chapter of this thesis, the interlude that follows examines the poem, 'Mending Walls' by Robert Frost. The poem speaks to the consistent renewal required to maintain good relations much like the continual engagement required with the process of utopia in order for it to be developed and endure.

The fifth chapter of this thesis is entitled '"I was having conversations through the fence": Allotment fencing and associated relational boundaries'; it examines the idea of the boundaries required to navigate the *alone, together* mode of practice on urban gardening sites. Focusing on allotment fences as a site for sociality, this chapter engages with proverbs, poems, participant observation and semi-structured interviews to discuss the iterative process of the ways in which visible and invisible boundaries on the allotment create and maintain various sets of relations across allotment sites.

Having examined boundaries in the previous chapter, the sixth chapter entitled 'A place where no one tells me what to do' probes the value of freedom in urban gardening practices and engages with the potentially opposite value of

freedom. This chapter is part of the growing response to James Laidlaw's contention that 'freedom is a concept about which anthropology has had strikingly little to say' (Laidlaw 2002: 311). It turns out that urban gardening sites are a useful location in which to think about matters of freedom. Guerrilla gardening sites are neither physically unbounded nor contained. Allotment sites are plural places which involve people who have different gardening practices growing alongside each other. In this setting, freedom is greatly valued. There exists a tension between the imaginary perfect allotment site and what has to be done in order to maintain it practically. It appears that a sort of double morality is practised on some sites which allows for 'one [to] subscribe to a code in a manner that allows for it to be broken' (Heywood 2015: 200). This is most clearly demonstrated by the way in which pesticide use is navigated.

The value of freedom is also problematised with the ethnographic demonstration that there are in fact varying degrees of freedom within allotment sites. The quote from which the chapter title is drawn comes from an 'old boy' who actively recognises the freedom which his longstanding practice (and advancing years) has made possible for him. 'Old boy' is a term used by allotmenteers and city residents alike to describe the (often) older white working-class men who are seen as stereotypical allotmenteers through their longstanding association with allotments on the ground and in the public imagination.

These degrees of freedom are formed as individual allotmenteers find ways to create their own freedoms by creatively working with the widely appreciated value. This value of freedom is crucial in the understanding of allotment sites as utopic spaces, and Chapter Seven examines what occurs when the gates of utopia are opened, letting wider city citizens in.

The penultimate chapter of this thesis entitled, 'Fresh local produce…available in exchange for donations' provides a detailed ethnographic account of an Open Day on an allotment site. It describes the Open Day from opening to closing along with a commentary and analysis of the interactions that take place during the day. The utopias that are allotment sites sit in tension with the surrounding city, on which they are also reliant. Some of the legal and moral codes that allow them to function are in direct contrast to the way the city operates, for example in the use of money to purchase goods. By experiencing an allotment Open Day, it is possible to gain an understanding of the strategies that allotmenteers deploy to keep the 'magic' in their places going. Chapter Seven concludes with the recognition that because allotment sites sit balanced precariously between imaginary and materialised worlds, they are not destinations. They are utopias that require continual reproduction and renewal.

Picking up where Chapter Seven leaves off with the concept of continual reproduction, Chapter Eight entitled '"Re-rooting": super-diversity and the reproduction of urban gardening sites through time' looks at the reproduction of urban gardening sites, specifically allotments, over time. Working with an ethnographic case study of the 'old boys', the stereotypical white working-class male plot holders who have been cultivating on allotments sites in a more or less unbroken chain since the First World War, Chapter Eight also problematises the question of belonging on allotment sites. Despite allotment sites being seen as a quintessential piece of English material cultural heritage, they have both in human and more-than-human gardeners been more diverse than the rest of the UK for over half a century. Human gardeners with origins in different parts of the world talk about a process of 're-rooting' through which allotment sites offer a possibility for them simultaneously

to express the cultural identities of their heritage as well as participate in British cultural identities.

This chapter illustrates how in effect there is a paradoxical truth. The 'old boys' endure because of the super-diversity on allotment sites, not in spite of it. Each individual plot holder can only be independent because allotment sites in order to exist require interdependence. Simply put, councils will provide allotments only if people from six different households demand it. Yet it is also the legacy of 'the old boys' that has historically kept sites going through the variations of demand for plots over the years. They were the main allotmenteers present when demand was low and the respected allotmenteers when there have been long waiting lists for a plot. The balance between independence and interdependence is key to understanding how the recognised 'old boys' coupled with the less acknowledged super-diversity of allotment sites come together to reproduce these sites over time.

Finally, the conclusion entitled, 'On the whole…the community rubs along quite well together' returns to what is distinctive about urban gardening as a practice and the hope that is embedded within a practice that can be collectively imagined and yet individually practised. It argues that it is indeed possible to materialise good places in the present, and also to point to a better future, as long as city spaces are engaged with dynamically. In this way, utopia becomes a method, rather than a destination. It revisits the examples from the thesis that illustrate how it is possible for super-diversity to be simultaneously present and yet unacknowledged, and the manner in which this supports the balance that is present on urban gardening sites. It reflects on how guerrilla gardening has productively worked with what care *ought to* look like in a city to change city council practice, even though it is a marginal activity that sits in a legal grey area. It also exposes the myth of guerrilla gardeners as complete outsiders by showing it is their privileged knowledge (and experience) of

how cities work that allows them to carry out their activities. Finally, it emphasises that urban gardening practices are a familiar and everyday engagement and the 'magic' that is produced on urban gardening sites comes about because of its relative banality.

Figure 1: A photo of a prepared urban allotment with a pile of covered compost

Urban Nature – working within a fruitful paradox

Cities and gardens have a long and entangled history. 'We know that many early cities had elaborate gardens and other complex reconstructions of idealised nature' (Gandy and Jasper 2019: 6). Guerrilla gardening and allotment sites as gardens are

part of this history, and yet for an inordinate amount of time 'largely escaped the historian's archival spadework, receiving only occasional and sporadic examination' (Archer 1997: 21). Although this is thankfully changing, particularly as allotment sites have 'developed from being a significant cultural heritage into an increasingly complex and dynamic part of contemporary life' (Crouch 2003: 1), tensions inherent in the 'inextricable entanglements of what Donna Haraway calls naturecultures' (Demos 2019: 155; Haraway 2016) mean that there is still a large amount of research and analysis to do. This is even more the case for guerrilla gardening which has an even less well documented history because of the legal grey area in which it sits. Literature on guerrilla gardening is still 'emerging' (Adams and Hardman 2014: 1103). Until relatively recently the focus on guerrilla gardening has been on examining its explicit politics of not seeking permission to grow and yet claiming the right to the city (Brace 2011 ; Reynolds 2009 ; Lefebvre 1968). In this literature guerrilla gardening is viewed largely through power relations with the state and less as an everyday practice. During my fieldwork I found that guerrilla gardening (like allotmenteering) also exists as an everyday practice. Guerrilla gardeners in Oxford do not necessarily see themselves as part of a sub-culture even as they carry out acts of resistance. By paying attention to guerrilla gardening as an everyday practice, this thesis offers readings about the relationship both types of urban gardening have with the state as well as with to nature by looking at the two as practised alongside each other in the city – often by the same people.

Allotment and guerrilla gardening sites are both examples of and counterpoints to the cities in which they are located. For example, they are sites of nature in what are otherwise considered to be cultural places. Within allotments specifically, many of the practices that occur (such as grafting, irrigation and seed saving technologies) are illustrations of cultural practices in and with nature.

However, even the terms nature and culture as a coupled binary remain contentious in current anthropological debate. Anthropologists such as Tim Ingold have called for this binary to be transcended: a binary in which 'natures [is] subsumed under culture' (Ingold 1991: 364), allowing for a historical separation in the Euro-American context where

> Othering nature represented an epistemological device for defining culture, which factored out relatedness and interdependence characterising all systems of environmental knowledge. (Van Aken 2016: 98)

Bruno Latour has directly challenged this split of nature and culture as a modernist project (Latour 1993). Both allotments and guerrilla gardening sites are useful places for examining the imaginations the imaginations of nature and culture precisely because by their existence they already blur the boundaries of what is purely 'natural' or cultural. Particularly in this time of environmental crisis, it is critical to understand what allotmenteers and guerrilla gardeners conceive, imagine, and go on to materialise when they cultivate on their sites within cities. This is because

> Negotiating nature and culture - drawing boundaries that define the natural versus the non-natural - defines and justifies certain actions. Humans do something to the world when they draw boundaries between nature and culture, between the natural and the non-natural, and between acceptable and unacceptable human interference in natural systems. Any understanding of nature involves an understanding of society, and of certain social choices. In this sense, nature also fulfils political functions, telling us how to live our lives. (Ylva 2010: 81)

These actions can have profound ecological and political significance. This thesis therefore works to transcend the split of subject and object in the relationship that urban gardeners have with the land that they cultivate. Instead, it offers a 'relational' view, one in which the urban gardening landscape,

> at once constitute and are constituted by the relationships between [the natural] physical objects and social structures. (e.g., cultural) (Hale et al. 2011: 2)

It does so by using various approaches (which resist the duality of the nature culture split) to gain an understanding of the practice of urban gardening in the round.

> To reach this holistic appreciation, these approaches pay special attention to associations, processes, and transactions between subjects and objects such as people and place. (Hale et al. 2011: 2; Duff 2011)

Gardening on urban sites is being touted as a solution to problems as various as increasing food sovereignty, biodiversity and improving mental health in cities (Edmondson et al. 2020 ; Vinkenoog et al. 2020 ; Dobson et al. 2020). This is in the wider context of a world where there is simultaneously increasing urgency being placed on maintaining biodiversity while finding ways to make cities of the future sustainable and able to feed themselves (Girardet 2015). What is critical is to take a step back and unpick and question the assumptions on which these promising claims are being made. If human beings are seen as located outside nature, their actions on (as opposed to with) nature get categorised in ways that can have major consequences. Latour (whose work has influenced anthropologists such as (Tsing 2015) and (Haraway 2003) proposes that humans are in (an entangled) relationship with, rather than separate from, what gets termed nature. This thesis adopts this approach which makes it is possible to see the ways in which these supposedly fixed binaries of nature and culture are actually fluid in the way that they are imagined by allotmenteers and guerrilla gardeners (Latour 2005). If cities are going to be able to be made increasingly liveable, the challenging sticking points are more likely to be illuminated through a renewed understanding of what is guiding urban gardeners and their negotiations of nature and culture. It is by unpicking what may seem like banal activities that I am responding to the call by the anthropologist Thomas Hyland Eriksen to address large issues from small places (Eriksen 2010).

Transcending nature culture binaries to transform city spaces

In recognising the questions raised by the engagement that citizens have with nature in cities, to materialise allotment and guerrilla gardening sites, it is critical to understand the meaning that is ascribed to these sites by practitioners of urban gardening. How do they view and experience these sites? What terms do they use to describe what it is they are doing? Why do they grow in cities? There are many studies that reference the hope that is embedded within the act of gardening in general. Some urban gardening projects, such as one at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, even set out with the explicit intention to 'Plant some plants, plant some hope, plant some future' (Einzenberger and Hochmuth 2015: 95). In the UK, the creative writing lecturer and author Clare Allan has written about the specific opportunity that allotments afford, stating in an article in *The Guardian* newspaper online, 'give us a garden and we can cultivate our own hope' (Allan 2014). The practice of gardening appears particularly potent at a time when human are being stretched in their capacity to believe in a better world. It begs the question, however, that if the practice of urban gardening is hopeful, then what is the effect on the city of the spaces that are physically altered by these practices?

Urban gardening sites as utopic spaces

Allotmenteers and guerrilla gardeners in Oxford are people who transform city spaces into utopic places. Utopia in this sense does not refer to 'totalizing expressions of what an ideal self-sufficient life could be'; instead the utopic places cultivated by urban gardeners 'are more akin to hot spots of innovative practice' (Cooper 2014: 9). By growing alongside each other, urban gardeners create sites of super-diversity

(Vertovec 2007) with communities that travel through time and encompass different peoples and species. The link between gardens and utopia is both longstanding (Burrell and Dale 2002) and contested (Johnson 2012). When Thomas More coined the term 'utopia' in his book of the same name, it was a play on words from the Greek eutopos/outopos meaning good place and no place respectively. More was using this pun to express interest in the question of whether or not it was possible to materialise a perfect world. For many thinkers, the answer to the question has been no; they have preferred instead to give different names to 'different' places, some of which may have utopic intentions but which are both mythical and material in their manifestation, such as Foucault's heterotopia (Foucault 1967). For practitioners, there have been many responses to the question of materialisation of utopic places that promote the answer 'yes', such as intentional communities. My thesis limits itself to responses to this question in the context of urban gardens.

Urban gardeners enter into the same playful ambiguity as More through their practice of making good places. Allotmenteers see their allotment sites as good places, quite often indeed as perfect places – a word that frequently arose unprompted during the course of my fieldwork, with allotmenteers using it to describe their plots and sites. Guerrilla gardeners respond to this question by actively working to transform what they see as uncared for places within the city into good places through the cultivation of plants. Both types of gardeners are in conversation with the city around them, albeit differently. Allotmenteers' conversation with the city is a quiet and state sanctioned embodiment of a different way of being through a cultivated relationship with city soil. Guerrilla gardeners' conversation is an open and legal critique of what they see as city councils' neglect of certain spaces within the city. Allotmenteering has been noted in the literature for its characteristic sociality (Burn 2017); however, it is rarely considered with its counterpoint of

guerrilla gardening. Furthermore, because the potential health benefits of allotmenteering both for physical and mental health tend to be foregrounded (Berg et al. 2010), the nuances of the type of sociality (*alone, together*) that occur on allotment sites has not yet been proposed in the literature.

The link between garden spaces and utopia is not novel; indeed Burrell and Dale quoted below have noted the garden 'as a [useful] reference point' (Burrell and Dale 2002: 106).

> Utopian thinking, in a broad sense is more than More. It encompasses our capacity as humans for the free-floating imagination of how things could be different and better. As such, its history surely must be as old as humanity. (Kumar 1987: 19-20)

Work in the social sciences on allotments has tended to focus on the grounded elements (pun intended) of allotmenteering practice, be it measuring 'patterns of allotment holding' (McNicol 2007) or 'social change performed through the act of allotment gardening' (Whittaker 2017). There are also studies that have looked at the aspects of knowledge production on allotments (Sandover 2013), particularly as areas of alternative food provision (Kwartnik-Pruc and Droj 2023). However, the anthropological exploration of allotment sites (an iconic emblem of English cultural heritage) as spaces where everyday utopias are materialised is still under-theorised. This is because everyday utopias are impossible spaces in relation to 'other practices and institutions within their sector' (Cooper 2014: 6). Allotment sites as spaces of urban gardening do not fall into the usual classifications of gardening or agriculture. The prefix urban suggests both a qualification and a displacement, and even though allotment sites are seen as part of a wider economy, the food that is grown on them has legal restrictions on its sale. These are only a couple of the many tensions that allotment sites hold which I argue have obscured researchers from recognising urban gardening sites such as allotments as utopias, even though allotmenteers experience

them as such. Geographically, allotment sites are also held in tension in terms of their visibility, 'for supposedly public sites, allotments are often curiously hidden away, classically glimpsed in passing only from train windows, visible only fleetingly from the corner of one's eye' (Moore et al. 2014: 332). Allotments are at once physical locations but also individually and communally imagined spaces (Nilsen 2014 ; Willes 2014). In this way, allotments could be seen to be paradoxical spaces, as described by Robyn Longhurst with her use of Gillian Rose's work, where paradoxical is 'a space that is imbued with contradictions and allows for the simultaneous occupation of dualist categories' (Longhurst 2006: 581; Rose 1993). This thesis is adding to and expanding ethnographic work, where thankfully paradoxical spaces are acknowledged and seen as fruitful sites for theoretical engagement. Ethnographic work on allotment sites in the UK such as Moore et al.'s study of a lesbian and bisexual women's allotment in Manchester has led them to follow Donna Haraway's lead (when researching nature and culture) in the development of neologisms to straddle these contradictions by terming allotment sites places of 'intimate privatepublics' (Moore et al. 2014 ; Haraway 2003) and recognising allotments as everyday utopias.

However, this work still needs development, as anthropology has a history of both engaging with and dismissing utopias. 'Utopia is often associated with either naïve idealism or hegemonic metaprojects such as nationalism, state-based socialism, and global neoliberalism' (Lockyer and Veteto 2013: 20).. Yet simultaneously 'Some of anthropology's most productive scholarship has focused on utopian endeavours' (Ibid). Early examples include Richard Fox's study of Gandhian utopianism in India, which led him to conclude that 'an effective cultural resistance, such as Gandhian utopia, can arise from confrontations with an existing cultural hegemony, even though the resistance never fully escapes that hegemony' (Fox 1989:

7). More recent anthropological work on utopia has focused on proposing solutions for environmental challenges such as in the edited volume entitled *Environmental Anthropology Engaging Ecotopia: Bioregionalism, Permaculture and Ecovillages* (Lockyer and Veteto 2013). This volume was produced partly in response to a call by Escobar, who contended that,

> anthropology… can contribute to re-state the critique of current hegemonies as a question of the utopian imagination: Can the world be reconceived and reconstructed from the perspective of the multiplicity of place-based practices of culture, nature and economy? (Escobar 2001: 170)

And while the essays in this volume go some way to exploring and tackling this contention, they do so by looking at intentional communities and philosophical agricultural movements in places in North and South America and Europe. My research on urban gardening in Oxford, as described in this thesis, is a response to Escobar's question and answers that it is indeed possible.

Even though the introduction to the volume argues, 'that Western economic rationality was both a main cause of growing social and environmental problems and the dominant discourse being used to frame their potential solutions' (Lockyer and Veteto 2013: 20; Rappaport 1993), none of the studies included engage with allotment sites which are so-called Western places that have been impacted by this rationality. Allotment sites are unique in that they are utopic places that exist and function despite their inherent tensions. They have politically charged origins (described in the following chapter on methodology) and yet they have become a legal entity and a part of the vernacular English landscape. Even though they are part of English material cultural heritage, preconceived ideas about them in the national imagination are often revealed by historical and contemporary research to be more complex than first considered. One such example is through the value of beauty. Gardening in England has a long association with this value, so much so that the

architectural critic Nikolaus Pevsner said that English landscape gardens were 'Britain's greatest contribution to the visual arts' (Richardson 2007: 13). In Pevsner's context (and also today) gardens are generally imagined to be beautiful places – places where people's interaction with nature is through a craft, the result being an art that even today is visited to be enjoyed as such. Allotments, however, are a very different type of garden space, and one in which allotmenteers may actively choose different values from those of conventional beauty. Michael Leapman is an example of this type of allotmenteer, and as he described in The Telegraph newspaper online, one who prefers

> a distinctive allotment culture, far removed from the manicured lawns and borders that surround such stately homes as Hughenden Manor, Osterley Park and Blickling Hall. The idea of the potager, the decorative vegetable plot that looks like a flower bed, has not yet reached allotments: at least, it has not yet reached ours. If you look out of the window of the train next time you go past a site, you will see the familiar and comforting tumbledown sheds, wonky beanpoles, strips of ragged carpet to stifle the weeds and chains of old DVDs flapping in the breeze in a vain attempt to deter pigeons. Ours is a culture of inspired disorder, of make-do-and-mend, and we want to keep it that way (Leapman 2019).

It is in this 'inspired disorder' that the specific type of allotment utopia is realised. All four sites on which I cultivated an allotment plot have areas that reflect this aesthetic, such as a pile (or two depending on the size of the site) where people place odds and ends to be taken and repurposed by someone else. It is the type of repurposing that Denise, a white middle-aged, retired woman and keen allotmenteer describes when she talks about the practice of allotmenteering as being 'something in my bones'. What is also in her bones is working with the process of transformation which the vast majority of allotmenteers do through composting and the harnessing of energy for growth from things that are breaking down. Both Michael Leapman and Denise recognise it as a quality allotmenteers share or inculcate, or to quote Denise,

‘Anything I can salvage and use I’m that sort of person – reuse it. Just in my bones. It’s in my bones not to waste. Yes, that’s me.’

This thesis argues that this ability to turn something that may otherwise not be used into something productive (and in its own unique way beautiful) is a hallmark of what makes urban gardening sites utopic. For allotmenteers this takes many layers on their individual plots as well as the wider site. For guerrilla gardeners it is unused land itself. This capacity which I experienced and fellow allotmenteers described to me ethnographically is starting to gain traction in the literature. Robert Biel carried out an exercise in ‘backcasting’ where he examined specifically whether or not there were already in existence ‘real utopias of existing practice’ (Biel 2014: 183) where the soil was worked with positively, food was produced and there was a change in societal relations that took place on the land where the gardening was being practised. He concluded that a practice of real utopia-making was occurring on urban allotments. It is important to note that these are utopic spaces in which,

> utopia as an imperfect contingent ... [where] value and ordinary ethics can be a productive framework to study the pathways between hope, utopianism, and space (Sliwinski 2016: 430).

It appears that there is a growing case (pun intended), both ethnographically and in the literature, for urban gardening sites to be recognised as utopias. They are also sites where urban gardeners work with what it means to be part of the ‘imagined community’ of the nation state during the practice of banal or everyday activities (Billig 1995).

This argument is further heightened and complicated when guerrilla gardening sites are considered alongside allotments as urban gardening utopic space sites. Research so far has focused on the radical nature of urban gardeners (Sackey 2022). The ways in which they respond to government neglect and reshape the city are also explored (Iveson 2013).Their impulse has been recognised as utopic but because it is

considered separately to allotmenteering what is missed is the nuance gleaned by recognising that both types of gardening often get carried out by the same people. Guerrilla gardeners across the UK are not a homogenous demographic. In Oxford they are routinely retired professionals, people who understand how the state works and are therefore able to negotiate it in ways that do not make them vulnerable despite the legal grey area in which guerrilla gardening sits. Critically many Oxford guerrilla gardeners are precisely the opposite of people who would usually be seen to be radicals. They are embedded within the establishment. They have usually worked within the University of Oxford or other formal institutions within the city and are themselves not marginalised with regards to their demographic status. This thesis shares case studies of Oxford guerrilla gardeners who shape the city as part of their day-to-day existence and also because they can.

Allotmenteering & guerrilla gardening: the people, their places and practice

Before describing allotmenteers and guerrilla gardeners, it is important to note the difference between allotmenteering and community gardening. During the course of my fieldwork, and when delivering public presentations about my work, I was routinely asked whether or not allotment sites were community gardens. Although colloquially there can be routine slippage between the use of the terms allotments and community gardens (particularly among those who have had experience of neither), there are distinctions. While acknowledging the challenges of achieving universal agreement on precise definitions, this thesis works with the definitions as laid out by David Iaquinta and Axel Drescher in their comparative review of allotment and community gardens, namely:

> *Allotment gardens* are individual parcels of land allocated to individuals or households for personal use; while contiguous, the parcels are worked independently by each household and the land is made available through either government action or private entities. The participating individual households are organized into a self-governing association.
> *Community gardens* are maintained by a group of individuals or households who produce agricultural goods collectively on a piece of land primarily for their own consumption (Drescher et al. 2006: 317)

There are also (and have been throughout their history) different types of allotment sites. There are different ways in which these sites can be characterised, but one of the most common methods (as expounded on by Arthur W Ashby, who carried out a survey of allotments in Oxfordshire in 1913/14 for the Institute for Research in Agricultural Economics) is by who is letting the land. This included: Private Owners, the Clergy, Institutions, Mutual Aid Societies, Allotment Societies, Charities, Councils and Agents for the Crown (Ashby 1917). I cultivated on allotment sites that were let by the council and managed by allotment associations and also on a charity site. I also carried out interviews with people growing on allotments rented from private owners.

Ethnographically, on Oxford allotments people in the main not only cultivate on their own plots (rather than communal plots), but there is also a marked difference in sociality. There are numerous community garden projects across England, and people who grow on them often cite joining the project as a means to meet others and get involved in their local community (Manchester 2017). Although many allotmenteers readily talk about the sense of community they feel on a site, the primary reason for being on an allotment site is to cultivate their own plot.

Given that allotmenteering as a practice is at least a few centuries old, the word allotmenteer is relatively new. I decided (perhaps controversially) to use this term to refer to people who grow on allotment sites. The main reason for this is because it is both a useful shorthand for the phrase 'person

who grows on an allotment site' and increasingly used in allotment literature. Although there are people who grow on allotment sites (myself included) who refer to themselves as allotmenteers, it is not a word that I routinely heard during the course of my fieldwork. This is probably because being an allotmenteer is a site-specific practice. It is only possible to be an allotmenteer by growing on an allotment site. A strong connection is formed with the plots that allotmenteers cultivate.

Cheryl, a middle-aged white allotmenteer who runs her own small business, has been cultivating for 25 years; when I interviewed her, she explained years and whom I interviewed explained, 'Our castle has become our allotment, or our allotment has become our castle', referencing the well-known English proverb about how English people feel about their homes that speaks to the depth of connection that allotmenteers have to the plots that they cultivate on allotment sites. They are places of safety and security or, as Cheryl went on to describe, somewhere (like a home) that she can 'withdraw to'. The identity that allotmenteers develop is both place- and practice-based through their engagement with the land. Being an allotmenteer is an identity based on 'doing and acting within the landscape, rather than observing it from afar' (Hawkes and Acott 2013: 1119). Furthermore, because the identity of allotmenteer is founded on a gardening practice that is linked to land on an allotment site, it is potentially open to anyone. Allotmenteers do not have to be a specific sex, age or come from a particular ethnic or social background. This means, ethnographically, that allotmenteers are a diverse group of people. This diversity has proved fruitful for researchers looking to understand the benefits of this place- and practice-based identity. There are researchers who have examined the different quality of time experienced by allotmenteers who have otherwise busy working lives (Schoneboom 2018), and studies that have focused on particular categories of allotmenteers and what their connection to the land they work with might offer them.

Biglin's work on refugees casts allotments as a therapeutic space (Biglin 2020). Closely aligned with my own work, Moore's study of lesbian and bisexual allotmenteers in Manchester designates the allotment sites on which they cultivate as 'intimate privatepublics' where 'everyday utopias' are materialised (Moore et al. 2014).

This thesis adds to the relatively small yet growing body of ethnographic work that places urban gardeners and their practice at its centre. One of the ways in which it does so is that despite Oxford's relevance to gardening history, there is still a paucity of ethnographic studies carried out on Oxford allotments. Oxford has a long history of engaging with gardens as utopic spaces. It is the location of the first botanic garden in England, and the Oxford District Federation of Allotment Associations, which celebrated its centenary in 2019 (during the course of my fieldwork), is one of the oldest federations in the UK. Oxford is also home to a thriving network of guerrilla gardeners. What my research has found is that despite traditional renderings of Utopia as a destination (More 2012 [1516]), for urban gardeners utopia is a constant state of production and renewal that echoes the gardening calendar. Or to quote Cheryl, who talked about the utopic space in which she felt 'extraordinarily happy' that she co-created with her plants: 'For me utopia is working towards as much as getting, as much as arriving.' As such, my work is an anthropological addition to the recent trend in utopian studies of utopia as a method (Levitas 2013). It develops the notion of exploring possible futures by looking at how urban gardeners work with those imagined futures in the present. Urban gardeners, 'extend the existing collective forms of civil society and choose and make new ones, changing [themselves] in the process' (Levitas 2013: 204).

Like being an allotmenteer, the identity of guerrilla gardening is practice based. Although both involve cultivation (and in the context of this thesis on urban land), a key difference is that guerrilla gardeners are defined by not having expressed permission to cultivate the land on which they grow. Their connection to any particular piece of land (precisely because of this lack of permission) is much more tenuous. Guerrilla gardeners may or may not cultivate the same piece of land. Some guerrilla gardeners plant exclusively flowers and others food crops. Even those who do plant food may or may not return to the same piece of land to harvest what they sow. One middle-aged white man, a researcher called Roy who worked for the University of Oxford, whom I interviewed and who (during the time I carried out my fieldwork) had recently given up being an allotmenteer, described how his urban gardening practice had started out with guerrilla gardening, a 'bit of guerrilla vegetable gardening, putting in courgettes and things like that into their gardens and harvesting them afterwards'. Although the vast majority of guerrilla gardeners practice on what is considered to be public land, there are also those who cultivate on private land that they have access to and is not currently being used for cultivation, as Roy described. They may or may not use the term guerrilla gardener to describe themselves in relation to their practice. This is why the (self) categorisation of guerrilla gardeners as people who cultivate 'without permission' (Reynolds 2009) is useful because it is the only common denominator in the wide-ranging practices that fall under the catch-all term 'guerrilla gardening'. Even if they do not explicitly call themselves guerrilla gardeners, they are all aware that they are growing on land without express permission to cultivate there (Mikadze 2015). Despite this lack of permission, guerrilla gardening is in a legal grey area because it could potentially constitute criminal damage, even though there is a significant lack of arrests and no documented prosecutions (Hardman et al. 2018b).

What an ethnographic study of allotmenteers and guerrilla gardeners, their places and practices allows for is a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which places in cities are materialised. What may seem like a simple act of growing can be billed as a radical act, depending on the land where the growing is taking place. It can also, however, develop relationships and attachments that cut across diverse groups of people as the identity that they develop and share stems from the practice that they carry out.

Theoretical frameworks and working concepts

This section uses ethnographic examples to illuminate the concepts that I worked with in the field in the process of theorising allotment sites as utopic places. It analyses allotmenteers' practices and engages with relevant literature to outline the structures which led to my proposition of urban gardening spaces as banal utopias. It teases out the difference between everyday and banal as it relates to utopia by elucidating the way in which the everyday is not necessarily banal, but there is something of the everyday within the banal, in the daily, weekly, monthly and seasonal gardening calendars which require urban gardeners to engage with their plots routinely – whether physically or imaginatively.

Banal nationalism and the allotment gardening imagination

I was sure that Mike had told me to come by his plot mid-afternoon. I had seen his car parked on the side of the main road that went up the Swardland allotment site in his usual parking space. Seventy-six-year-old Mike is a tall, moustached white working-class man, whom most people on Swardland would ask to identify a caterpillar before deciding what the caterpillar's fate should be. He would be able to tell fellow allotmenteers whether they were beneficial insects, such as a caterpillar of

the cinnabar moth, and therefore should be tolerated, or if it was one that was considered destructive, and they should get rid of it.

Figure 2: A photo of Mike showing the caterpillar of a cinnabar moth

A well-respected and self-taught ecologist, despite his large and verdant double-sized plot, Mike would normally be relatively easy to spot. I was about to turn around and walk away when I heard a ripping sound. Looking further between the plants, I saw Mike on the ground on his hands and knees using a semi-circular motion to pull up clumps of grass. When I asked Mike what he was doing, he told me that he was imitating grazing animals because he wanted to turn that part of his plot into a wildflower meadow. Although I did not vocalise it, I immediately wondered what Mike's late father would have thought of his actions. Mike's father had had a plot on the same site, and therefore the family had been growing on Swardland for around three-quarters of a century.

Mike was practising a type of gardening that was in some ways markedly different from the allotment aesthetic that Christopher Tilley noted in his study when he questioned participants on what they thought about English allotments, 'Rows… rows of things… potatoes, onions, cabbages, peas, broad beans, possibly French beans, beetroot, radish, parsnips, lettuce, but always rows…' (Tilley 2008: 228). This aesthetic is more akin to the type of gardening that Mike's father would have practised. Yet there is something of an idyll in both the wildflower meadow and 'rows

of things'. Or as Mike described it when he reflected on what Swardland was like when his father used to have a plot on it, 'all the allotments and gardens were cared for, people used to take a pride'. I will now review the literature that I worked with in order to make sense of Mike's approach and actions.

It is important first to apprehend the context in which Mike's gardening approach has developed. As Marilyn Strathern has proposed, 'The English have a special emotion for dwelling on tradition,' (Strathern 1992: 12) and as such Mike's engagement with his allotment would have been with a clear understanding of the kinds of allotments his elders would have cultivated and the ways in which his choices were adhering to and departing from them. To return to the ethnographic study carried out by Tilley and from which the 'rows of things' quote stems, this thesis interrogates the work Tilley carried out in order to understand,

> how and in what sense, the garden might be held to be a material expression or objectification of a sense of national identity that heavily influences the manner in which gardeners think through their gardens in relation to largely implicit nationalist sentiments (Tilley 2008: 220).

Tilley's is one of a small but growing number of studies that use empirical research to engage with Michael Billig's concept of 'banal nationalism'. Billig's concept of banal nationalism theorises 'the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced' (Billig 1995: 6). Billig theorised nationalism in this way as a counterpoint to the more extreme forms of nationalism which he felt were preferred in studies leading to an oversight of the banal aspects of nationalism. There is a strong argument to suggest that in Britain in general, gardening is o*ne such habit*. Margaret Willes in her book *The Gardens of the British Working Class* states that 'Gardening is embedded in the British way of life' (Willes 2014: 1). It is perhaps therefore unsurprising to find 'intimate publicprivate' (Moore et al. 2014) spaces like allotments 'are ubiquitous' (Moran 1990: 9), a place where people can reproduce

their Englishness together and simultaneously alone. This thesis argues that the link between gardens and expressions of Englishness has a long history. It is telling, for example, in Anne Helmreich's book *The English Garden & National Identity The Competing Styles of Garden Design 1870-1914*, which details the robust debates that took place contrasting amongst others Gertrude Jekyll's more formalist approach and William Robinson's wild gardens, that the question is not whether or not the garden is a symbol of English national identity but instead *which* of the types of gardens is *more* representative (Helmreich 2002).

I reached a similar conclusion to Helmreich that individual choices in gardening practice occur in exchange with a wider societal conversation (implicit or explicit). I go further to combine this with Strathern's assertion that this acknowledgement of the individual choice within the context of cultural traditions is another facet of English expression (Strathern 1992). The acknowledgement of individual choice as a part of being English facilitates room for a certain amount of plurality. Barbara, a retired white English allotmenteer who grew up in Dorset and moved to Oxford as an adult, noted these seemingly contradictory points when she talked about her experiences of allotmenteering. She used to garden on her allotment regularly with her son until he injured his back and since then had been allotmenteering on her own and had also been involved in the allotment site committee. Barbara was keen to try and get younger people more involved in the allotment (particularly on the committee) but was also aware that, 'It's about letting people find their own little niche'. This recognition of a niche meant that Barbara found ways to welcome people onto the site who were not English. Barbara had devised ways to communicate with an Albanian man who didn't speak English which meant that he could cultivate on the plot for over a decade. When I asked her about this, she didn't question his being unable to do so instead replying that only a couple

of times had she needed to get his daughter (who was not an allotmenteer) to come to the site to translate. She also unprompted made the link between gardening being part of the English national identity 'it's always been a very English thing, isn't it?' before warmly referencing her father who grew raspberries for a local jam factory and her grandfather who grew vegetables in his garden. 'It's just always been' she emphasised. The manner in which Barbara referenced Englishness around allotmenteering while simultaneously practically including an allotmenteer from another part of the world offers the possibility of another reading of what Englishness might mean. It indicates an unacknowledged (perhaps because it may express itself more on an individual level) acceptance of a socio-cultural diversity.

Tilley uses banal nationalism to contrast ethnographically English and Swedish allotments. He explores the ways in which gardening as a place-making activity is both practised and imagined, and touches on the nationalistic ideas tied to engagement with the land. Working with the assertion (that is both mythological and also statistically accurate) that in England,

> the garden idyll is strikingly rural, metaphorically rooted in a mindful vision of a past that has not changed that much over the last one hundred years, providing an imaginary psychological escape route from urbanized modernity: in the country garden we truly find ourselves. The growing multicultural character of both nations and the trend towards ghettoization of ethnic groups is only likely to silently reinforce such an ideal among those who are culturally dominant (Tilley 2008: 245).

To a certain extent, Mike's actions, on his longstanding plot on Swardland were confirming Tilley's predictions of a type of idyll. This thesis moves beyond Tilley's work and unpacks the different ways in which this idyll might manifest itself and suggests that it is not a straightforward line to a glorified past, especially as urban gardeners recognise that they engage in a practice of transformation. Mike was choosing to co-create his wildflower meadow by embodying the practices of more-than-human gardeners, which illuminates a shift in understanding the relationships

between humans and their environments. Cathrine Degnen in her work with gardeners from the north of England has already begun to demonstrate (and this thesis will build on her work) that 'connections between people and plants are not necessarily metaphorical but are instead reciprocal and social' (Degnen 2009: 165). What this thesis goes on to illuminate is the ways in which economic idioms of reciprocity and exchange are not sufficient to describe the processes occurring on urban gardening sites. It also expands on the type of sociality by delving into its nuances in the ways in which people interact with each other on allotment sites.

Mike's choice not simply to replicate his father's gardening aesthetic illuminates a wider zeitgeist to engage in a different set of relations with the place that he is cultivating. It is an aspect of banal practices that it is important to consider as 'a constellation of processes rather than a thing' (Massey 2005: 141), where 'people experience the world as traces through dynamic environments and surroundings' (Sumartojo 2017: 205). Like many allotmenteers, he was keen not just to cultivate food for himself and his family, but he also felt it was important to allow part of his plot to be of benefit to the wider environment, which includes more-than-humans. Nearly all the allotmenteers I spoke with during the course of my fieldwork participated in this to a lesser or greater degree and by using different strategies. For some like Pearl (an allotmenteer and emeritus professor) it is about the choice not to use pesticides, even if it means losing part of her crops to slugs. Others, like Denise who (as an adult) had been growing on Swardland for at least as long as Mike and describes allotmenteering as being in her 'bones', deliberately grew certain flowers for pollinators. It is important to note that these are specific choices that broaden the beneficiaries to more than human beings – at least two-thirds of the food plants commonly grown on allotment sites do not need pollinating by insects, including

(but not limited to) all leafy greens, brassicas, herbs, onions and root vegetables such as potatoes, beets, parsnips and carrots. What can we make of these practices?

There is clearly more occurring than Tilley theorised in his study. Mike's actions were not merely about returning to a type of England that previously existed. Mike is both figuratively and physically entangled with his environment. It allows us the possibility of 'attending to nationhood through the lens of everyday experience [which] opens ways of thinking about it as fluid and emergent that also leaves space for it to prompt diverse political outcomes' (Sumartojo 2017: 212). I concur with Tilley and other authors who recognise that there are at least two gardens that every urban gardener engages with, even when they are working on only one site. In his book, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*, Michael Pollan says that when talking about his garden he is actually speaking about 'two, one more or less imaginary…. dreamed of outdoor utopia…' and 'the other insistently real… an actual place' (Pollan 1991: 1). Pollan's two gardens echo the words of Tim Ingold in his essay 'Walking with Dragons: An Anthropological Excursion on the Wild Side'. Ingold argues that there is a loss in cutting our material lives adrift from our imaginations of it (largely through advances in what is framed as the scientific quest for the truth). In an era where truth resides in science that is based on material evidence, 'the imagination is [seen] as an escape from real life rather than its impulse' (Ingold 2014: 37). And yet on the allotment site this rupture is breached as allotmenteers, 'join *with* the world in performance' (Ingold 2014: 47) to gain a different kind of knowledge, such as the kind of knowledge exemplified by Pearl, who told me that she knows when her soil is happy. Hers is a knowledge that is born of experience coupled with (as opposed to separate from) her compulsion to imagine the world from the soil's point of view. Her engagement with the soil is as visceral (cues include its smell and texture) as it is imaginative. Due to the relationships that allotmenteers like

Pearl form with the more-than-human gardeners (like the soil) on the allotment site, neither she nor Mike escapes the 'moral implications of landscape design' (Pollan 1991: 1). Particularly against a backdrop of climate change, allotmenteers are acutely aware of the potential implications of their actions both on the environment but also on themselves. They are making choices to have what they see as positive engagements with it. Allotments, when first taken on, tend to be overgrown and in a sense are 'raw material' to be made into something. Certainly, as explored in an edited volume on making and growing by Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold the relationship between making and growing (particularly when it involves organisms with their own agency) means that it is impossible to consider one to dominate the other (Hallam and Ingold 2014). As the anthropologist Anne Jepson noted in her own experience of gardening,

> I am involved in an endless process of making, in which growing is merely one aspect. I might be trying to make something beautiful or functional, something that reflects my personality and ideals. In all the activity my mind and body are focused, but my activity is also greatly influenced by the garden around me. The weather, the soil, the plants themselves can change without input from me. A created garden alters continually… What is regarded as 'nature' proceeds and the gardener intervenes with more or less ferocity. (Jepson 2014: 148)

It is at this point that I depart from Tilley's theorising of the past idyll that he posits gardeners are attempting to recreate. My research works to complicate his deductions given the dynamic nature of Oxford's urban gardening sites. While, like Tilley, I found the practice of urban gardening in Oxford to be an everyday activity which is banal in its familiarity, where my work diverges from Tilley's is in the point of the imagination. Tilley's work refers to an imagination that is rooted in a past idyll whereas my fieldwork encountered a vision amongst urban gardeners that (even when it borrowed certain concepts from the past) points to a better future. Mike, Pearl, Denise, and other allotmenteers share a profound concern for the land with

which they are engaged and each in their own way carries out moral practices because of it with the aim of producing a better future, a future aimed at encompassing a diversity of all types of gardeners and practices, even as the tensions that could arise from this were acknowledged: a plurality grounded in the knowledge that gardeners are primarily great experimenters, willing to try out different ways of doing, in which alternative forms of existence can be constructed (Harvey 2011). Mike might have been on his hands and knees mimicking a grazing animal in a bid to recreate an idyll that once existed in the past, but he also planted a wide variety of plants, including yakon, a sweet tuber from Chile, that he had looked up on the internet and thought sounded exciting. He was interested in a past that seemed to him to be more harmonious with nature, but was also open to a broader rather than reductive biodiversity. It is a mode in which time is not frozen in a particular ideal but instead worked with to materialise the 'escape route' from the city that surrounds urban gardening sites. Yet this labour of bringing the 'dreamed of outdoor utopia' into the present from the future is not fantastical but instead forms part of an everyday, banal practice of allotmenteering.

Materialising belonging; cultivating banal nationalism

Despite guerrilla gardening being a relatively solitary pursuit, it is also a practice which can engage with banal nationalism. In this section, I will describe an example of guerrilla gardening in which a practitioner demonstrates his practice that is both a response to and a form of participation in the questions of identity and belonging.

In June 2017, Tayshan Hayden-Smith, a mixed-heritage young man pursuing a professional career in football in mainland Europe, abruptly stopped playing the game that he loved and flew home to London because his community was on fire.

The fire which engulfed the Grenfell Tower block killed 72 people. Grenfell Tower is located in North Kensington, where Hayden-Smith was born and raised and 'was one of the UK's worst modern disasters' (BBC 2019). Grenfell Tower was a social housing block in one of the richest areas of the country and during the inquiry that followed the fire, questions were raised about the ways in which race and social class directly affected those who lost their lives (SKY 2020). During the ongoing (and still unresolved) traumatic events, Hayden-Smith turned to gardening. He saw his community in crisis with 'people I knew just running around and crying clearly very pained by what happened'. In 'a space called Maxilla … under the Westway … in this barren neglected bit of land', Hayden-Smith began to grow plants. It was not long before he was called 'The Grenfell guerrilla gardener'. His guerrilla gardening space over time turned into a community garden, first being called 'Grenfell Garden of Peace' and then eventually 'The Hope Gardens' (Hayden-Smith 2022a).

I will now focus on his guerrilla gardening activities and the ways in which they are intertwined with ideas of belonging and banal nationalism. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, gardening is a longstanding way in which English people (the focus of this study) – and British peoples in general – express themselves through an activity that is at once personal and yet public. Examining urban gardening thus gives the opportunity to make sense of, 'the assumptions, hopes, needs, and longings and interests of ordinary people' (Hobsbawm 1992: 10). Since the Edwardian period, 'the leisure pursuit of gardening … was associated with an ideal of Englishness' (Piggott 2021: 1). Guerrilla gardening as a practice offers a unique possibility to unpack ideas of banal nationalism precisely because guerrilla gardeners are explicit in their aims as they interact with state actors through councils and municipalities.state actors by way of the councils and municipalities. The effect of banal nationalism has been rightly questioned as

> Different symbols of the nation are interpreted in different ways by different people: some in banal and unconscious ways; others in a more conscious and overt manner … All that can be said with confidence is that these are experienced … every day (Jones and Merriman 2009: 165)

What is notable in the case study of Tayshan Hayden-Smith is that he foregrounds the impact of the practice of the banal activity of urban gardening through his experience of belonging in a national context. In common with guerrilla gardeners across England, Hayden-Smith was sending a message with the plants that he was growing. The message was twofold. The first message was one that was in the main speaking to his community who were trying to heal from their terrible experience. Most of the plants he started growing were leftovers from garden centres and nurseries and he saw repurposing them as demonstrating, 'a nice message, to be given a second lease of life'. The second message was a direct challenge to the way in which he felt that his community had been treated in the wake of the Grenfell fire tragedy. Hayden-Smith sees gardening as a form of activism and as his guerrilla gardening turned into a community garden, he felt it was saying, 'Look - we don't need to rely on the authority to organise ourselves as a community … it [felt] quite revolutionary because we're creating our own models and systems' (Hayden-Smith 2022a).

However, his actions did not stop at revolution; Hayden-Smith did not wish to merely sit outside society. He wanted his communities' 'models and systems' to be recognised within a national framework in which he states he belongs. He sees himself and his community as being an important part of the future of England's gardening and horticultural landscape and in contrast to the idea of the rural idyll discussed in the previous section of this introduction, Hayden-Smith is instead looking to transform the perceptions of who a gardener typically has been and asserts, 'I'm here to change that' (Hayden-Smith 2022a). In 2022, Hayden-Smith

materialised his ambitions by showing his first garden at The Chelsea Flower Show. Established in 1862 and run by the Royal Horticultural Society 'the UK's leading gardening charity' (RHS 2022), the internationally renowned show is seen as a hallmark of the British national expression through gardening. Hayden-Smith's garden, which was displayed in the yearbeing shown in the year of the ruling monarch's Platinum Jubilee, placed him squarely within a context of demonstrating the way in which he belonged in Britain through a national pastime. It was an experience he described as 'magical' but also one that he worked to unsettle. He used this opportunity to 'communicate [his] values through a garden' and displayed a sculptural garden that represented the Mangrove Nine, a group of black men and women, 'who stood up against police racism and fought for justice and a more positive future' in England in the 1970s.[1] With his garden he had fulfilled his promise to, 'take guerrilla gardening to Chelsea'. The message he described that the garden carries is one in which he references a different type of future utopic and yet ordinary nationhood:

> It is one in which this garden is a place to celebrate our differences and share our stories, knowledge and history. The hope is that one day we can come together as a community (Hayden-Smith 2022b).

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[1] On 9 August 1970, a group of Black Power activists led 150 people on a march against police harassment of the black community in Notting Hill, London. They called for the 'end of the persecution of the Mangrove Restaurant'. Between January 1969 and July 1970, the police had raided the Mangrove Restaurant 12 times. No evidence of illegal activity was found during these raids. At the 1970 march in defence of the Mangrove, violence broke out between the police and protestors. The following year nine men and women were put on trial at the Old Bailey for causing a riot at the march. Their names were Darcus Howe, Frank Crichlow, Rhodan Gordan, Althea Jones-Lacointe, Barbara Beese, Godfrey Miller, Rupert Glasgow Boyce, Anthony Carlisle Innis and Rothwell Kentish. These men and women became known nationally as the 'Mangrove Nine'. When all nine defendants were acquitted of the most serious charges after a long 55-day trial, it was widely recognised as a moment of victory for black protest. TNA (2022) *MANGROVE NINE PROTEST* [Online]. The National Archives. Available: https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/mangrove-nine-protest/ [Accessed 30th June 2022].

Banal utopia

While Hayden-Smith's Mangrove Nine garden sought to expand what it means to be British, there are still allotments up and down the country that in some way typify the imagination of a typical English allotment with tidy 'rows of things' (Tilley 2008: 228). Rodney's plot on OxLea allotment site is always immaculate. He and his friend Andy (with whom he shares it – they combined their plots to make a double plot) have an idyllic farm-like approach to their allotmenteering. They are both retired white men of Irish heritage. They use a rototiller and grow big sections of monocrops balanced by wildlife-friendly edges and seasonal flowers; they are particularly keen on Pentland potatoes. For a couple of weeks during my first growing season as a new allotmenteer, we were gardening at the same time, and I would watch in my breaks the precision with which they prepared the ground. They had taken time to add compost to the soil and waited patiently until it had sufficiently broken down. They had then carefully worked the compost into the soil – inch by inch until every part of the soil was well fed. After this process, when they deemed the soil to be ready, they had put a small stake at each end of the plot with a length of string carefully stretched out in between to precisely mark out rows. The same level of precision went into the measurements where they created snug fist-sized holes into which they later put their seed potatoes. Watching them it was clear that this was something that they had carried out year in, year out over many growing seasons. Their movements were measured and sparse – every tool being used had been primed for maximum effect and usually minimal effort. The two stakes, for example, had already been prepared the previous season, and so all that was required was for Rodney to stand at one end and for Andy then to walk the length of the plot to insert his stake into the

ground for the perfectly measured string to lie taut between them. They barely spoke as they worked, each knowing exactly what was next required of the other.

Weeks later, an unexpected frost came, and it coincided with my not seeing them for a little while. One day when I arrived at the site, I bumped into Joseph, a working class white Englishman (who knows Rodney better than I do), who pointed out the damage to their potato plants. When I expressed my regrets and said, 'What do you think they will do?' Joseph shrugged it off and replied, 'Stick some more in the ground, you just have to get on with it.' I had listened when Rodney had told me about his and Andy's plans for the potatoes, and I felt that in their imagination the potatoes already existed, certainly the role that they were to fulfil. Yet, Joseph seemed almost cavalier in his response to what I perceived to be a misfortune. In the best of all possible worlds, the unseasonal frost would not have happened, their potato plants would have thrived, and Rodney's plans would have come to fruition. There was, however, something in Joseph's pragmatism, 'a pragmatism oriented to survival and to doing the best one can' (Cooper 2014: 7). It reminded me that Rodney and Andy have been growing for years and would have ways of dealing with it, that their 'everyday folds into the utopian' (Cooper 2014: 7).

I heard Joseph's stoic words about just getting on with it in many different forms during the course of my fieldwork. Robert, a retired white English professional who is both an allotmenteer and guerrilla gardener (and has been for over a third of a century), visits one of his allotment plots every day. When he described his typical year (and he started with 'the traditional harvest in October') he detailed month by month all of the different jobs that there were to do. Like many allotmenteers, this is one of the things that he enjoyed most about allotmenteering – even though some of the individual jobs that had to be done were not fun, or as Robert said about some of

them, they were ‘boring’ – they were still a job which offered a routine and structured engagement with the year. He measured out the three-, six-, nine- and twelve-month periods in which he had to do ‘lots and lots and lots of things’, ‘and then you start again’.

This imposition of a routine and rhythmical structure that was the commitment of having an allotment was not unique to retired allotmenteers. It was equally welcomed by allotmenteers who were not retired and still working, who found all the jobs on the allotment site were a good reason to do something outside their paid work. This echoes findings in Abigail Schoneboom’s ethnographic study of allotmenteers in Newcastle, where allotmenteering made them ‘make time’ to engage in something that was not paid work labour. She noted the ways in which busy professionals lose the ability to simply indulge in unstructured free time (one of her respondents remarked he was no longer able just to while away hours browsing in a bookshop like he had once been able to), and so having another structure into which they could slot their leisure time allowed them to make use of it (Schoneboom 2018: 367). Furthermore, with increasing time pressures, there was the obligation that was required in order to make leisure time happen, weeds to be dealt with, seeds to sow. This is a powerful insight which explains the term banal utopia, which might otherwise seem contradictory. While the idea of utopia may conjure up images of never-ending leisure and a lack of obligation, in practice there is something of the utopic that can be harnessed in the ordinary and by engaging in activity that is ultimately meaningful, even if its constituent parts can be full of drudgery. In this sense banal is something that is everyday and ordinary and, in some cases, possibly even tedious or boring. It is something that may even seem uninteresting to the casual observer but whoever is practising the activity embraces it fully – even the dull and repetitive aspects.

Alone, together

In April 2020, I was working at my desk in my office at home. My computer faces a window through which I can see the black metal spiked fence that bounds my neighbourhood allotment site. All allotment sites in Oxford have this type of defensive architecture, fencing which is designed to be intimidating and deter people from entering the site to steal tools or produce. I was on the phone talking with Kate, an allotmenteer who has a plot on the site and with whom I have spoken many times through the fence which borders her small triangular plot.

Figure 3: A photo of the allotment fence through which I speak with Kate

Even though Kate was sitting in her home several streets away, the fence that I routinely walk past and the relationships that she has fostered around it quickly became a feature of our conversation. We had planned to have the conversation on her plot, but the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that not only was our conversation delayed, but because of social distancing, we also had to have it over the phone. For much of the interview, the conversation stayed close to or circled back to the fence. Our imaginations fixed on a physical point we both knew well and yet could not touch. We were *alone* but we were also *together*, each of us in our own private space but very much focused on the public space that we had previously physically shared and were now sharing in our imagination. In that regard it was no

different from the numerous conversations that I had had with allotmenteers over the course of my fieldwork before the onset of the pandemic. When walking past a plot, one allotmenteer will raise their voice to say hello to another who is working. If, when the allotmenteer who is gardening replies, they do not give a clear physical indication that they would like the conversation to continue, for example by straightening up or putting down their tools, the one who is walking past will take it no further and carry on. However, if the subtle invitation is responded to, the conversation continues. Often the physical distance of even two metres or more between the two people carrying out the conversation is not reduced.

There exists an *alone, together* sociality in the context of urban gardening. Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had already observed and experienced the practice of being *alone, together* both on guerrilla gardening and allotment sites. My neighbourhood in Oxford has active guerrilla gardeners, most of whom are white, middle-class women aged 60 years or older. They plant seasonal, native and pollinator-friendly plants, usually alone (or occasionally in pairs), for a myriad of reasons, including to beautify the area and to increase biodiversity. Despite the solitary nature of their practice, they describe their work as a conversation with the local community. Sometimes this communication is direct, with labels placed on guerrilla gardening sites demarcating them as 'bee cafes' that include accompanying instructions for council workers 'not to spray' [pesticides]. Guerrilla gardeners feel that their work brings the community together, including across species boundaries. I found that their signs 'not to spray' were adhered to, and it was possible to spot local community members enjoying seasonal plant displays and exchanging smiles around guerrilla gardening sites. This was a sociality promoted through the sense of care generated by the guerrilla gardeners that brought people together – even as they worked alone.

It is a type of sociality that has also been recognised in other parts of the British Isles. In his ethnography on Shetlanders on Whalsay, Anthony P. Cohen expounds on what he terms 'the "dialectics" of identity … [that are] present in the relationship of community and individual' (Cohen 1987: 65). He describes a delicate dance between community and individual identities which are mutually reinforcing noting that, 'the collectivity provides its members with the vocabulary they need in order to make their statements of identity.' Guerrilla gardeners embody their collective or together identity *through* their practices and use plants to voice (alone) their concerns to the wider public and indeed the council. In the chapter on freedom in this thesis, I detail the case study of Amanda – a guerrilla gardener who is explicit including her choice of plant in the way that she communicates to the council. Even though she is doing it alone, it is the combination of guerrilla gardeners' voices across the city of Oxford that together work to rewrite parts of the city.

Allotment sites are also places in which people grow *alone, together*. Or as one allotmenteer, Matthew, described it,

> it's a kind of sociality or socialising where you don't have to socialise … So you be digging away, and someone passes at the top of the plot and you say hi and you might pass two sentences but there's no obligation to. But it's nice to have people around, and when people are not here, it feels slightly creepy but, you know, you'll prefer to have people around – yeah, working on their plots, not necessarily talking to them.

This *alone, together* sociality is a critical paradox in the utopic method of urban gardeners. By examining it, my work is a counterpoint to research in utopic studies that presupposes utopias as primarily sites of social cooperation. What brings allotmenteers together is not their relationship with each other, but their individual relationships to the land which they cultivate alongside each other. This leads to a complex interplay between individual practice and collective moments in order to produce a place of collective value. It means balancing working together to maintain

the site, with a type of 'civil inattention' (Goffman 1963: 84) to allow for the co-existence of individual plot holders privacy within the public space of the allotment site, or to reiterate, what Moore has termed an intimate privatepublics (Moore et al. 2014: 327).

The previous focus of utopian studies on the collective, while understandable, has led to the overlooking of places such as allotment sites that city citizens experience as utopic. Within the context of utopian studies, basing utopia on the collective is a reasonable assumption, given that More's utopia depicted a community, a group which shared 'some project, values goal or vision' (Sargent 1994: 15). More's text is split into two books – in book one a conversation is carried out in a real garden in Antwerp. The topic of the conversation is the fictional island of Utopia described in book two (More 2012 [1516]). Anthropology of utopia takes a step towards bridging More's gap between fiction and reality with its call to action to 'unite our aspirations and our realities' (Chodorkoff 2014). Examples of this have been embodied by proponents of anarchist anthropology such as the late David Graeber (Graeber 2004). My work's interest is in spaces where there is room for the individual within the collective. It is a response to the question Graeber asks in his book *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropologist* about voluntary associations, 'What kinds exist? In what environment do they thrive' (Graeber 2004: 73). I propose that urban gardening offers associations that are mediated by a common (in both senses of the word) practice, and they thrive in banal environments. Perhaps in looking for the grand examples of utopia we miss the everyday ordinary examples.

Research questions

To interrogate whether or not it is possible to materialise utopic places within a city, I approached my field site with a set of questions; others arose from my participatory fieldwork:

- In which ways do urban gardeners in Oxford materialise utopic places within a city space?
- How are boundaries critical in this process?
- What values underpin urban gardeners' practice?
- To what extent is urban gardening a utopic method[2] rather than a destination?
- What is the nature of belonging on allotment sites?

This thesis arose from more than two years of ethnographic research carried out on several urban gardening sites across the city of Oxford. My primary methods were participant observation, during which I became an allotmenteer myself, semi-structured interviews which I carried out through the networks I developed during the course of my fieldwork, and public engagement with research; as part of this I recreated an allotment in the style of the year 1918. In this thesis I outline the particular socialities and practices that produce urban gardening sites as utopic places through the use of urban gardening as a utopic practice.

[2] A note on method and process. Urban gardening is a utopic method which encompasses different processes.

Chapter 2: ‘so now we have time to grow’

Oxford: A tale of two cities

Oxford is a city characterised by binaries – town and gown (or university vs the rest), international and local, financially rich and poor, commuter town (for London) and centre of manufacturing. There is a long history of vehicle manufacturing through the Morris Minor/ Mini factory, now the BMW Mini plant. Other vehicle manufacturers include Renault Group and Harley Davidson. Oxford is also home to other global companies such as the healthcare manufacturer, Siemens that specialise in electronics, and the hygiene company Reckitt. I live in East Oxford which is in some ways a middle ground between the wealthier parts of North Oxford (which some locals refer to as inside the ring road) and the less wealthy parts of the city (outside of the ring road). One example in the city is East Oxford where residential streets bear the hallmark of how gentrification can change a city. In a street opposite the allotment where I had conversations with Kate through the fence, a postman lives in a house that neighbours his children on one side but on the other side his grandchildren will no longer be able to afford to live next door to their family. In this way middle- and low-income families witness the involuntary dispersal of their families as subsequent generations are priced out of the area. Instead, younger professional families (increasingly from other parts the country or even the world) have bought houses whose monetary value outstrips what locals can afford faster than anywhere in the UK apart from London (Clayton 2022). The families who have moved in from further afield have brought with them their food, founded businesses and shops to sell them in as well as their cultures and customs. They have helped to co-create a multicultural setting that is both the same and different to the one at both universities (Oktem 2013). At the University of Oxford – the vast majority of

undergraduates are British and at post graduate level the vast majority are international students. This also overlaps with university staff who come to work in Oxford from all over the world. The university echoes the city in its binaries – people mainly living well alongside each other but not always engaging with each other. I found this when I started my studies, my home life was completely different to my university life (and that of my fellow students) – our geographies, where we went and what we did. Two overlapping but distinct worlds. The ring road is seen as an important marker of socio-economic difference. Financially less well-off areas such as Blackbird Leys and Littlemore are firmly outside of the ring road and far less engaged with by members of the university unless they areas are part of their research.

Even before I began my DPhil, I had already been researching Oxford. For my Masters in Social Anthropology, I carried out an ethnography of a street in North Oxford. I found more unexpected binaries. Most retired people on the street had moved *into* Oxford on retirement. They had lived in surrounding nearby villages like Islip when their children were growing up but as they grew older, they wanted the benefits of a city where 'there is so much going on' but was still rich in green spaces. I also carried out research for the Museum of Oxford, tracing the histories of various communities and their 'Journeys to Oxford' (TORCH 2019). Welsh people who had literally walked from Wales during the interwar periods when mining collapsed, and they were facing starvation. Oxford's thriving car manufacturing provided them initially with jobs and later homes. Pakistani communities that had come in waves since Partition, often arriving in other British cities like Bradford first before settling in Oxford where significant opportunities were to be found. Peoples from various Caribbean islands, African countries, Eastern European and Middle Eastern nations have also made Oxford their home. What had struck me as I spoke with them,

collected their stories (and objects) for the museum and interviewed them was Oxford's ability as a city to be many things to many people. It also had aspects that were hidden in plain sight. One of the women from Trinidad whom I interviewed told me that her father was the model for one of the world-famous gargoyles on an Oxford building. When she took me to see it – I watched as tourists posed for photos knowing that they would not expect the gargoyle she was pointing at, to have been based on a man from the Caribbean. What I learned was that my DPhil research would necessitate some of these methods – spending time talking with people about their relationship to the city. Oxford is easy to read (it is a university town) and yet also to misread (it has been a centre for manufacturing which has left an enduring legacy on the city through its social make up and some of the communities that were established such as Welsh communities in Florence Park). I prepared to spend hours talking with but mainly listening to people. I knew the process would be iterative as I slowly gained trust but that it would yield fruitful results. This would particularly be the case with guerrilla gardening because of the legal grey area in which it sits. The work I had carried out for the Museum of Oxford resulted in a curated exhibition which is on permanent display there called 'Journeys to Oxford'. In one case – a piece of the writer Philip Pullman's shed sits opposite another case with a prayer mat that was used by Muslim taxi drivers from Royal Cars, a local family-run firm. This is one of many juxtapositions reflected in how Susan Brown, the leader of Oxford City Council, describes the city, 'Oxford has always been a city of two halves' (OCC 2019). All this work enabled me to realise that as I researched urban gardening in Oxford it would be wise to look and then look again, or in the words of the poet Terrance Hayes I would have to be careful to, 'Never mistake what it is for what it looks like' (Hayes 2015: 3).

To close this section with what I opened with, I will summarise conceptions and misconceptions of Oxford. The dominant narrative about Oxford tends to focus on the University of Oxford. It is located squarely inside the ring road and obscures the other important aspects of the city. The University and its colleges are major employers but there is also another university – Oxford Brookes on the way to the ring road in Headington that is also a big employer and offers an education that is in some critical ways more embedded within the wider city. Many Oxford Brookes courses encourage students to get experience within the other key sectors in the city. Outside the ring road to the southeast of the city is Blackbird Leys. It is a council estate that has a higher population than many of the historic market towns in Oxfordshire and was initially built in the 1950s to ease a housing crisis. It accommodated people who were moved from inside the ring road. Many of its residents would have worked in the car manufacturing that grew rapidly in Oxford in the post-war era. Now it ranks in the top 20% most deprived areas in the country. If, as tourists routinely do, one were only to visit inside the ring road of Oxford, one would miss entirely what Susan Brown, the Oxford City Council Leader, knows to be true when she says, 'Oxford is an exciting, dynamic and booming city, but it has always been a city of two halves - of haves and have-nots'(Grubb 2019).

Methodology: approaches & considerations

So far ethnographic work on urban allotments has been carried out in Birmingham, Manchester, Kent, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, and London. The city of Oxford is a notable exception (notable because excluding London, Oxford is one of the largest allotment authorities in England (Moran 1990: 43)). Researching allotments primarily ethnographically rather than quantitatively is preferable because perceived

threats to plot holders mean that they have historically been resistant to exclusively quantifiable studies. This was the case when David Crouch (a well-respected researcher of allotments) conducted a quantitative study on behalf of the government between 2005 and 2006 that led him to conclude,

> We estimate that questionnaires were received on less than half of allotment sites in England which casts doubt on whether the findings presented in the report relating to sites are valid (Crouch 2011: 1).

Furthermore, he noted that,

> Allotment sites, facilities, security, land prices and development pressures, accessible populations, management delivery and local council policy are all very varied. Therefore, generally aggregated evidence on allotments does not significantly reveal the dynamics of their operation in significant detail. (Crouch 2011: 6)

There are three main threats that mean allotment holders are less likely to engage with a primarily quantitative study. First is the perceived threat of structural changes to the allotment site such as increase in rents, 'plot holders often resist even modest increases in rents'[3] (Wiltshire 2009: 12). Second is the physical threat to individual plots and the potential to lose them, as described by Mr Weston, a plot holder in Cheltenham threatened with eviction from his site after over 20 years who said, 'Now there's this sudden demand for allotments, the pressure on the land has increased' (Cockcroft 2009) and, finally, the underlying threat of the land use in cities. What is more commonly thought of is the threat by developers, as allotment provision is legally based on demand and use. This can result in a wariness among plot holders in relation to engaging with studies they feel might be assessing the quantifiable aspects of the site pertaining to plot uptake and/or use. This explains why allotment

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[3] It is worth noting that allotment rents are low and recognised by councils as unsustainable e.g. in Oxford rents range from £20–£30 a year for a plot.

committees are keen to show that sites are full or nearly full, well used, and allotment plots tended. On Swardland, for example, I was told early on in my research that the committee had recently claimed that there were only two vacant plots. The allotmenteer who told me this did so questioningly, as even a cursory look around the site suggested there were several plots that had clearly not been tended for at the very least a couple of growing seasons.

Anthropology at home – community contributions

Jenny Hockey has argued that carrying out anthropology 'at home' introduces extra demands (Hockey 2002). Carrying out research in Oxford where I live raised a certain number of methodological challenges and opportunities that those researching elsewhere do not have to face. I had to consider the ways in which to '"make strange" the familiar' (Hockey 2002: 210) but I also had an established network on which I could draw. I also brought my previous professional experience to bear on my research. For nearly two decades before I returned to university I practised as an Osteopath both in the NHS and private practice. This means I am used to asking people questions to elicit useful information in the space of 45 minutes to an hour. As my practice was community centred, I was accustomed to reviewing patterns from my patient notes to discuss with local GPs and other health professionals, trends we recognised to support our patients' health. It also means I listen for what people say but also *what they do not say*.

The outcome was that my fieldwork ended up being 36 months long. I am active in overlapping communities in East Oxford where people help and support each other. As soon as I told people that I was researching urban gardening in

Oxford, I was flooded with information about who to speak to. People offered me a chance to visit their allotment plots and guerrilla gardeners spoke openly with me about their practice. Although all the allotment sites in my immediate neighbourhood were full, people gave me phone numbers of the relevant secretaries to get my name on waiting lists allowing me to experience an important part of the process of becoming an allotmenteer – getting to the top of the list and being offered a plot. What I took note of was that even though I was routinely invited onto allotment sites as I worked towards securing my first one, no one invited me to cultivate alongside them on their plot. By the end of my research, I had visited (or cultivated on) a third of the allotment sites in Oxford. I had been given 'tours' of 37 individual plots, carried out semi-structured interviews with 33 allotmenteers amongst whom 10 were also guerrilla gardeners. I had been invited to carry out a project with the Children's Allotment which I was unable to participate in. I had volunteered at an allotment shop on one of the sites. Allotmenteers were making big efforts to help me find ways to collect data but their plots which as Cheryl said and I referenced in the introduction to this thesis were their 'castle'. If I volunteered to work on their plots as part of my research – it would be akin to entering into their homes. Furthermore, because allotments are visible and public without the markers that domestic architecture has – it is easier to make a faux pas as to where one should and should not go on an allotment plot. For example – one might invite an acquaintance into their living room, but that acquaintance would not then take themselves into a bedroom uninvited. To return to the line from the Terrance Hayes poem in the previous section, 'Never mistake what it is for what it looks like' (Hayes 2015: 3). It is easy to mistake an allotment as a place that could be unproblematically accessed but unless you know the allotmenteer very well – that is not necessarily the case.

Jackson has written, 'The main distinctive characteristic of anthropology as a discipline is that fieldworkers go and live with the people under investigation' (Jackson 1987: 13). However, when carrying out anthropology at home – one has an added layer of information about the effect that this has on participants in the study and this raises ethical questions. Questions I believe that the discipline should continue to consider deeply whether or not anthropology is carried out at home. Being the subject of a research study is not without effect and researchers should seek to minimise this effect where possible. 'Ethnography can be a deeply challenging form of research in which the researcher has to navigate the boundaries of acceptable observation and avoid the pitfalls of intrusion' (Ryder 2021: 300).This effect is justifiable when the research also has a benefit to the wider public which is one of the reasons that I practice public engagement with research. To turn to speaking specifically about allotment research, in previous studies, researchers volunteered to help allotmenteers on their plots in order to gain a greater understanding of their practice (Burn 2017). Practically, it makes sense particularly in cities where there are lengthy waiting lists. It means the researcher does not have to wait a long time to carry out their work. However, I had time and also wanted to participate in what is a standard experience for allotmenteers across the UK. It gave me an opportunity to gather more data. Second, there is the question of the effect on allotmenteers of having a researcher work alongside them on their plot. Participant observation is a balance and while participation is increasingly lauded within anthropology, the question of *how* to do the doing is equally important. If an anthropologist were to have researched my practice, with the consent of my patients I would have allowed them to observe treatment sessions. I would not have, however, allowed them to physically treat any of my patients unless they were qualified osteopaths. Working on someone else's plot may allow for particular kinds of observations but why should

less weight be placed on the interactions and relationships that people form with their plants? Why should I not consider what would be lost by intruding on it? Also, which kind of 'doing' should be privileged? Donna Haraway has written compellingly about our fractal identities as human beings and the ways in which binaries break down between self and other (Haraway 1987 ; Abraham 1993). I was entering the field conscious of human and more-than-human relationships. How could I then not be sensitive to the labour that I would carry out on other people's plots would necessarily have an effect on the relationships that already existed on the plot?

Furthermore, by becoming an allotmenteer without ever having been one before meant my fellow allotmenteers witnessed me becoming one – this is a profound type of participation. It meant that I had the experience of the 'old boys' offering me guidance as I saw them do to younger allotmenteers. It is possible it may have taken me longer to carry out more intimate conversations with fellow allotmenteers but, 'Everyday social interaction in the West is often spatially dislocated, time-bounded and characterised by intimacy at a distance' (Hockey 2002: 211). I was on the same site as allotmeneteers some of whom would go on to even invite me to their homes which I argue allowed for a respectful type of data collection. On Swardland, for example, Jane, a middle-aged white allotmenteer, specifically stopped by my plot on five separate occasions, and on the first two times, she opened with, 'you're the one researching allotments' before going on to tell me how she felt her plot literally saved her life. She suffered from severe mental health challenges and the plot, she said emphatically, was part of the cure. On two of the occasions, I asked her if she would be open to being interviewed and both times she said yes. Although we continued to see each other, she never brought up the interviews and our sporadic conversations moved naturally on to other things. Had I been volunteering on Jane's plot she might have said more than she wanted to

because of my perpetual presence. Instead, she was able to contribute to my study in a way that suited her and without her potentially feeling obligated to share more than she would have been comfortable with.

Sharing a plot and public engagement with research

As my plots had become an important part of my life during the lockdowns, it was a tough decision to give them all up when I was due to begin writing up. This decision was made easier knowing that Oxford had a city-wide waiting list following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and I had three plots. The ethical thing to do would be to give the plots up. Around the same time, I was approached by Sam from Fig, a horticulture and art community project based in Oxford. He had two allotment plots on Elder Stubbs that he had been cultivating and wanted to know if I would like to come and cultivate with him on one of his plots. I jumped at the chance because it allowed me to do several things that I had not done in my previous two years of fieldwork. I was going to cultivate alongside seasoned allotmenteers on the same plot (Sam has had allotment plots in Oxford as well as in different parts of the country where he previously lived). Volunteering to cultivate on other people's allotment plots is a well-used method in studies on allotmenteering and as detailed above I had specifically chosen not to do so. I noted that after two years of allotmenteering, word had continued to spread about my research, and I had (as I had implicitly hoped) finally been *invited* to work on someone's else's plot with them.

Due to the nature of Sam's community project, it also meant I could use the plot for public engagement in a way that I had not been able to do on my other plots out of respect for my fellow allotmenteers. Sam's plots were on Elder Stubbs Charity allotments which host community projects so allotmenteers on that site are used to it

being more public and they even host an annual community festival. Finally, it would allow me to travel back in time. Sam had said he wanted to do something new with his plot so was open to ideas about what we could do together. I immediately knew that I wanted to recreate an allotment in the style of the year 1918. It was in part a homage to the 'old boys' I had gotten to know. It was also a response to the pandemic and reflecting the previous 1918–1919 pandemic. As mentioned in the introduction, lots of urban gardening research highlights its importance in health – I wondered if this was a new phenomenon or if it was something that had been recognised in the past.

It also gave me a chance to do something that had been raised in an earlier part of my research. As so many people in my community had gone out of their way to support my research by way of information and connections, it felt important, respectful, and prudent to follow up on their leads. A friend's husband worked at the Museum of English Rural Life and he had taken great pains to introduce me to Jeremy Burchardt – an esteemed allotment historian – just before the first lockdown. Jeremy had generously spent an afternoon with me sharing allotment history which helped to inform my work. I was particularly taken by a description he gave of farm workers allotmenteering by moonlight as they didn't have time to grow their own food in the day. I had seen people squeezing in half an hour of allotmenteering before rushing to work or dragging themselves onto the plot after a busy day – fitting in this form of sustenance around harried lives. I wondered if in some keys ways certain aspects had not changed – allotments providing a nourishing amidst life's challenges.

Digging into the past to understand the present

Recreating the 1918 allotment necessarily meant carrying out some archival work to understand more about the methods and practices of the time. This led to some fortuitous findings that allowed me to reassess my research particularly the gendered question of the 'old boys'. I was struck by how many photographs of women I kept coming across. This is further detailed in Chapter Eight of this thesis, but it allowed me to understand why women's histories on allotments are hidden. Pulling together the information from the archives of MERL, the Garden Museum and the Imperial War Museum informed the reading of an Oxford allotment archive I was given (unbidden) to use.

Unlike most guerrilla gardening studies, because I live in my field site, I had the opportunity to speak with both guerrilla gardeners but also the people who lived on guerrilla gardened streets. This meant that I avoided some of the pitfalls that have been raised about guerrilla gardening studies that tend to romanticise it as a practice (Adams and Hardman 2014). In talking with those both doing the guerrilla gardening but also those who experienced it by living in the same place – I was able to form a more rounded view which I expound on in this thesis. I was however also cautious. Early on in my fieldwork I emailed law professors across Oxford to ask if someone would be willing to speak with me about land law. Professor Susan Bright was the only one who responded and invited me to spend a term at the Socio-legal centre at the University of Oxford – talking with her, attending seminars and meeting people. She explained the legal grey area that guerrilla gardening sits in and made me acutely aware that even though no one has been prosecuted for it yet, it could still happen in the future. One of the talks I went to on the 12th of November 2018 was given by Insa Koch an anthropologist who had also researched in Oxford

although our exact field site areas were different. Her talk was entitled 'The Paradox of Punishment: Bringing anthropology to the law'. The area she researched had seen the closure of three allotment sites in the last ten years and I did not spend much time there during the course of my fieldwork[4]. Koch had been careful in protecting the identities of the people she researched. She embargoed part of her thesis and during her talk never once mentioned the real name of the place where she carried out her research. After the talk, a few people reflected on it, and they were keen to confirm to each other that they had worked out exactly where in Oxford Koch was talking about. Their conversations influenced my approach to researching guerrilla gardening. It made we aware that I was going to be 'thinking with' a potential illegality and coupled with carrying out anthropology at home, I would have to be careful in the details I shared about the people I was researching. Although I do share detailed case studies in my thesis of Robert, Dawn and Amanda, three guerrilla gardeners and allotmenteers who are relatively open about their practice, many of the conversations I had with guerrilla gardeners occurred as part of my spending time walking around the city in my neighbourhood, spontaneous conversations that arose in social situations when people asked 'what I did' and also because I allotmenteered alongside guerrilla gardeners.

Guerrilla gardeners taught me how to read the city landscape so that I could become adept at recognising their work. In parallel, their work (and I go on to describe this in the thesis) was changing some of the ways that the city of Oxford was managing green spaces. Again, here I refer to the balance between participation and observation and useful inferences that can be drawn from the way in which people

[4] For more on Koch's work see KOCH, I. (2016). Bread-and-butter politics: Democratic disenchantment and everyday politics on an English council estate. *American Ethnologist,* 43**:** 282-294. And KOCH, I. L. (2019). *Personalizing the state : the anthropology of law, politics, and welfare in austerity Britain.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

operate. As Hastrup and Hervik have positively argued, 'ethnographic material is composed of so much more than words' (Hastrup and Hervik 1994: 5). I knew that there was a limitation by not spending hours of fieldwork actively carrying out guerrilla gardening. However, however because I was fully immersed in my field site, like Diana Bocarejo who researched illegal activities in Colombia, I was still able to glean a lot from the people I engaged with. She described how being immersed in the daily routines of the people she researched (even though she was not carrying out certain specific activities they did) still enabled her to, 'seriously engage with and explore the relations, terms, idioms, and ways in which peasants talk, think, and theorize about and with (il)legality and corruption' (Bocarejo 2018: 49).

Guerrilla gardeners routinely chose to practice *alone* but they clearly state (as Amanda does and I detail later in this thesis) that their practice is carried out *together* with the city. It is this alone, together way of being that is echoed across the urban gardening practices whether allotmenteering or guerrilla gardening I went on to theorise.

Becoming an allotmenteer

As I received the ethical clearance for my study in November 2018, in December 2018 I began a pilot study where I started preparatory work on the plots of three different allotment sites in Oxford; namely OxLea, Swardland, and City Gorse.[5] Entering the field early held several advantages. Allotment sites are usually in a poor state and need a lot of work when first taken over, and this gave me time to prepare the sites sufficiently and fully engage in the aspect of participant observation of allotmenteering. This is critical, because a fair amount of allotmenteering takes place

[5] I have changed the names of the allotment sites to protect participant anonymity

both in one’s own mind, but also off-site, be it buying seeds and tools, starting seed germination at home, searching online for gardening advice, reading gardening magazines, and listening to radio gardening programmes, among other activities. These are some of the topics that allowed me to freely converse with fellow allotmenteers.

Figure 4: Seedlings on my window ledge at home

On the issue of conversing, entering the field early also allowed me to gain the confidence and trust of fellow allotmenteers, which I believe deepened the quality of my research. Overcoming individuals’ initial reserve was an important challenge in terms of fieldwork for as Moore et al. have noted allotment spaces are ‘intimate privatepublics’ (Moore et al. 2014: 327). In order to obtain rich data, I wanted to do more than simply carry out interviews or hand out questionnaires; I felt it was critical to let relationships develop as naturally as possible. I told each allotmenteer at the outset of meeting them that I was there as a researcher and invited them to ask me any questions about my research that they might have. I have found that my approach yielded dividends. Over time, individual allotmenteers offered to spend more than a few courteous minutes showing me around their plots and discussing their practices. They began to offer me advice, share gardening materials, invite me to their homes and generally treat me as one of the regulars. Due to the unexpected

onset of the COVID-19 pandemic I also had fortunately already carried out a full gardening season of allotmenteering before changes on allotment sites took place in response to it. On a practical level, because I had never had an allotment plot before, entering the field early allowed me to make a personal calendar of the allotment year with its seasonal variations that informed when I was able to carry out different types of data collection.

Qualitative research allowed me to collect data that resulted in a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of the world of allotmenteering. This description is not only critical for context but will also add to the growing body of literature that actively seeks to redress the historical lack of gardeners' voices in the research (Nilsen 2014). By way of example, the subsequent chapter headings are the verbatim words of urban gardeners who took part in my research. The recording of gardeners' voices necessarily includes my own as allotmenteer as I have been practising a type of 'observant participation' as proposed by Barbara Tedlock (Tedlock 1991). As the performance ethnographer D. Soyini Madison notes,

> Something happens differently when your body must move and adjust to the rhythms, structures, rules, dangers, joys and secrets of a unique location. Ethnography is about as much, or more, about bodily attention – performing in and against a circumscribed space – as it is about what is told to you in an interview. (Madison 2006: 410)

Because of my participation, when Steve (an allotmenteer on OxLea) told me that he views his plot as a 'green gym', I understand his words both mentally and physically. My body knows the amount of sweat that it is possible to raise through the exercise of this work, for example through digging. Participation gave me an insight into the pride that people can take in converting land for use in this way, but also empathy for those who do not have the physical capability to carry out such work. It goes some way to explain the rise in popularity of raised beds from the perspective of saving

energy, but also for the violence that is perceived to result from using traditional methods, which can tear apart earthworms and forcibly cause the soil to submit to the gardener's will, soil that is increasingly understood in ecological terms to be a living and breathing organism in its own right.

Finally, I was also able to 'get out' of the field respectfully, having understood the practical and political aspects of giving up an allotment plot. From the outset of my research, I gave 'getting out' equal ethical weight to 'getting in':

> In ethnography and related qualitative research that relies on naturalistic observation or fieldwork, 'getting in', or accessing a research population or site, receives considerable attention, as do data collection and analysis and writing-up. Yet despite the recent increase in ethnographic publications and methodological sophistication across the globe, scant attention is paid to 'getting out', or leaving the field. (Iversen 2009)

My concern with leaving the field respectfully was based on several reasons. First, I did not wish to simply carry out extractive research. To that end, I also shared information with urban gardeners, including a paper I published during the course of my research. I learned a lot from my fellow allotmenteers, but I also have knowledge that interests them. I represent an 'in' to a certain type of knowledge that many allotmenteers are curious about. Sometimes it is as simple as sharing what it is like to study at an institution like the University of Oxford. With a growing conversation around what it is our research does for those who participate in it, I was interested in a methodology that allowed for possibilities to 'give back' in relatively straightforward ways. A significant minority of the allotmenteers with whom I talked prefixed their observations with, '[unlike you] I am not an educated person', but through listening to them carefully, and answering questions that they might have, we developed a knowledge exchange rather than an extraction, which allowed me to join with, challenge and inform what it is allotmenteers feel that they know, particularly when they were teaching me about allotmenteering. I also happen to

believe that knowledge exchange is the context of the anthropology of the future. When the French novelist and essayist Georges Perec asserted in 1973 that Euro-American researchers should found their own 'endotic anthropology' instead of carrying on with a pillaging of the 'exotic', he was speaking to an anthropology grounded in the everyday banality of Euro-American lives (Perec and Sturrock 2008). As well as ethical concerns, the subaltern writing back (Hirsh and Olsen 1995), globalisation, the internet and open access now mean that academic researchers no longer carry out their research or make their observations in 'ivory tower' isolation. Intersubjectivity is challenging othering, and practices that are deemed exclusive or exclusionary are rightly being called into question. I live in Oxford; Oxford is my home and I have given public talks about my research. While I have not tailored my findings to what I imagine my fellow allotmenteers might find palatable, I remain cognisant of the fact that they have access to what it is I write and are likely to have opinions on it. I saw this as a useful tool for checking not just my accuracy but also my positionality. It also meant that I had to be vigilant about what people were willing to share 'on' and 'off' the record. Second, given the relationships I formed during my research, I wanted to leave on good terms with fellow allotmenteers, whether or not I carry out further research on allotment sites in Oxford. Third, as there is only a small body of ethnographic work on allotment sites across the UK, I was keen to leave a positive trace for researchers who may be carrying out such work in the future.

Practically speaking when most allotment plots become vacant, they are usually in need of a significant amount of preparatory work in order for the plot to become useable. This is because often it means a plot holder is evicted from the site for not tending to their plot appropriately, a previously unused area of the site is cleared, the plot holder may have passed away or given it up after a lengthy process

of making the tough decision to surrender their plot. Allotment committee members feel uncomfortable about the condition of plots that would-be allotmenteers take on if the plot has been untended for a long period of time. One committee member said to me,

> [after a long time of disuse an] allotment [is] now in a lot worse state than what it should have done and I actually feel bad when people are coming to the allotment. And it's in such a bad way that they've got a lot of work to do.

Figure 5: An overgrown allotment plot

I left all of my three plots (including one on Swardland on which I had installed two raised beds) in what the allotment committees would describe as 'good condition' and each of the lettings secretaries on the three sites thanked me for having done so, as it meant that soon-to-be plot holders from the developing waiting lists (triggered by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic) were able to take over the plots easily.

Due to the historic and ongoing tensions within which urban gardening sits, it was not possible to carry out traditional quantitative methods of data collection, including statistical figures on demographics. Guerrilla gardening operates in a legal grey area in which guerrilla gardeners do not have official permission to cultivate the land on which they grow. Although there is municipal provision for allotments, this provision is legally linked to demand. If allotments are seen to be under- or improperly used, they are at risk of being withdrawn to be used for other purposes. Although it is not straightforward to map out exactly where allotments are thriving

onto the socio-economic areas in which they sit, partly because some people drive to allotment sites from other parts of the city. It is worth noting that the allotment sites which were closed were in the financially poorer areas of Oxford. Furthermore, the sites that tend to have waiting lists are in the financially wealthier parts of the city. There are certain factors that make it more likely for an individual site to have a waiting list while others do not:

- Sites that are surrounded by or within walking/ cycling distance of middle-class housing
- Sites that are near other green spaces such as nature reserves
- Sites that are tucked away from main roads or traffic-busy areas

When I began my fieldwork in 2018, Oxford had no city-wide waiting list and three allotment sites had been formally closed by the Oxford and District Federation of Allotment Associations within the previous decade. For this reason, allotmenteers have long been suspicious of being surveyed. Indeed, on one of the sites I cultivated throughout the course of my fieldwork, a committee member questioned in the presence of a number of people on the site whether I was 'a spy'.

I ensured that every urban gardener who I encountered was aware of my status as a researcher and obtained oral consent for inclusion in my study. I also carried out 33 semi-structured interviews with 22 women and 11 men including a brother and sister who share an allotment plot. Among the participants, 13 were retired, 3 were in the process of retiring and 5 were younger gardeners under the age of 30. Eight of the urban gardeners had origins that were outside the UK. I recruited participants through meeting them on allotment sites, word of mouth, introductions from other allotmenteers, and an email that was circulated amongst allotmenteers

during pandemic-related lockdowns. As I was able to cultivate my plots for a full gardening season prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, during lockdown and after lockdown eased, I was able to gain a detailed characterisation of the field sites, including at a time of national crisis. I used transcriptions from recorded interviews to carry out inductive analysis on recurring topics (Thomas 2006). I then used some of the results from the analysis deductively to examine the question of urban gardening as a utopic practice.

I spent the first third of my fieldwork familiarising myself with becoming an allotmenteer and gathering data without any formal analytical considerations. What followed was then an iterative process of data analysis with which I could work in the field and then glean further insights from the data. The participant observation that followed semi-structured interviews strengthened the interpretation of the information. In order to try and counterbalance the possibility of narrowing my research too quickly, for the final third of my fieldwork I once again took part in participant observation and socially distanced interviews (carried out on the telephone) before carrying out any analysis (Bernard 2018 ; Noble and Heale 2019)

Ethnography on guerrilla gardening sites

Conducting ethnography on guerrilla gardening sites was done with a combination of observation, talking with guerrilla gardeners, carrying out case studies with Amanda and Robert and Dawn (which included speaking with people who lived on the street where they practiced. It also required deploying marginal ethnographic techniques of which a key one was archaeological ethnography, which I will describe in greater detail towards the end of this section. One of the reasons for this is because for the untrained eye it can be difficult to spot guerrilla gardening sites in a city. Guerrilla

gardeners work to beautify areas that they see as 'neglected' or 'unloved' by the city council, and so when they are in bloom it might be easy to confuse them for work that the council is doing to beautify the city (Reynolds 2018). Indeed, guerrilla gardeners were part of wider efforts (especially guerrilla gardeners with a stated ecological mission) that have become so effective in Oxford and across the country their strategies are actively changing the ways in which local councils care for public areas such as verges (Mail 2021). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that the mowing of verges was disrupted, giving wildflowers and other species a chance to flourish. Some councils have now started sowing wildflowers in a manner akin to guerrilla gardeners to encourage what is being touted as a climate-friendly initiative. However, when I began my research in 2018, urban gardening in Oxford had been described by a local councillor as being in 'some kind of twilight zone at the Council' (Baker and Skinner Smith 2019: 99). By this the councillor meant that current council structures do not allow for a proper consideration of what it means for citizens to grow within a city. This is reflected in the fact that allotments do not sit tidily within one department in the council. They fall under planning (alongside buildings), but also parks and leisure. Although the councillor was speaking about allotments, it is possible to extrapolate this view to guerrilla gardening if one is to analyse the way in which guerrilla gardening is treated by the council across the city of Oxford. In brief, guerrilla gardening is generally brought to the council's attention by members of the public.

I was entering into a field site that had attracted a certain amount of controversy over this practice. Although heralded as a hero in local guerrilla gardening circles, Malcolm Everton had been threatened with possible legal action by Oxford City Council for tending gardens on council properties in Old Marston from 2003. His work had even seen him win 'Oxford in Bloom' awards, but the council

asserted that they were compelled to follow up on what had been reported by a resident (on the same estate on which he was carrying out his guerrilla gardening) as his 'anti-social behaviour'. It was not until 2006 (after both local and national press coverage in his favour, coupled with a local outcry) that his guerrilla gardening was supported by the council, and he was allowed to carry on his activities as long as he did not tend gardens in front of council properties where tenants had objected to it (Keeling 2006). As a result, guerrilla gardeners in Oxford became more cautious about being easily associated with their 'handiwork'. Most of the guerrilla gardening is either practised individually, by people working in pairs when they are unlikely to be observed, or conversely through local environmental groups working in larger numbers, where their guerrilla gardening is masked by other activities such as litter picking to beautify the area. Other guerrilla gardeners operate by hiding in plain sight, such as a group who received funding from the council in 2017 to carry out guerrilla gardening in Meadow Lane (Mail 2018).[6] What all guerrilla gardeners know is that once the plants start growing, they become their own gardeners, and although they might be removed, flowers will not be arrested. To this end, most guerrilla gardeners choose plants that do not need much maintenance, native plants and those that look like they might have self-seeded. Beautiful plants are also chosen for their affective qualities and the power they hold that would make it unlikely for someone to remove them. This power is widely acknowledged even outside guerrilla gardening circles, as the Oxford Mail article which reported Oxford City Council's final favourable verdict on Malcolm Everton's guerrilla gardening credited his success not to his capabilities but to the flowers he grew (and which grew themselves), declaring 'Flower power wins in the end' (Keeling 2006).

[6] This is still guerrilla gardening because no changes in council policy were effected and the agreement with Malcolm Everton was informal.

I also had to carefully consider the ethics of actively recording people engaging in a legally questionable activity. This meant that I needed to take into account ethnographic practices that would not require me to engage with guerrilla gardeners at the time that they were carrying out their activities. To this end I used walking and visual ethnography and I also carried out archaeological ethnography, which I will describe in the next paragraph. Before it was possible for me to carry out walking or visual ethnography, I had to receive training (and train myself) in urban land law, and also some botanical training, so that I was able to recognise guerrilla gardening sites during long walks by myself across the city of Oxford. In brief, under English law, unless land is privately owned, it belongs to the Crown and is granted for use by the public via a local authority (Bright 2018). This use, be it the pavements that we walk along or the roads we drive our cars on, is so commonplace that it escapes our attention that we do not have any legal ownership over the 'public' land on which we practice our banal existence. It becomes contested only when for example guerrilla gardeners take into their own hands actions to change 'the shape of the city' (Certoma 2011: 985).

I received my botanical training online, from books, and guerrilla gardeners, as well as attending training on Invasive Non-Native Species and Biosecurity with ecology and environmental officers from across Oxfordshire Council. All this training was critical, because it enabled me to recognise guerrilla gardening sites whether there were guerrilla gardeners present on the site or not (such as the one on the following page). Had I not been able to do this, I would have missed a lot of data on the extensiveness of guerrilla gardening that takes place across the city of Oxford. It also gave me indirect access to guerrilla gardeners whom I had not interviewed.

Figure 6: Guerrilla gardening site in the city of Oxford

With this grounding I was able to work with archaeological ethnography to analyse the guerrilla gardening sites I encountered in the city of Oxford. I was acutely aware that while 'the advantage of ethnography based on observing and interviewing is that … there is a better chance of understanding meanings behind behaviour' (HRAF 2021), researchers from anthropology's sister discipline of archaeology also use ethnography to 'listen to [subjects] through the material remains they left behind' (Peregrine 2001: 1) In archaeological ethnography as in guerrilla gardening materiality is key. Archaeological ethnography has been described as,

> a trans-disciplinary and trans-cultural space that enables researchers and diverse publics to engage in various conversations, exchanges, and interventions. Material traces from various times are at the centre of this emerging space. Archaeological ethnography can bring to the fore these alternative engagements without necessarily endorsing their premises, being constantly alert to their political connotations and renderings. The main interconnected facets of archaeological ethnography … are its critical reflexivity, its holistic and multi-sited nature, its multi-temporal … character, its sensuous and sensory engagement with the world…which transcends the boundaries between the researcher and his or her diverse publics. (Hamilakis and Anagnostopoulos 2009: 65)

I had in-depth conversations with guerrilla gardeners who volunteered to speak with me. This meant that I was able to bring the information I gathered from the guerrilla gardeners into the analysis that I carried out using archaeological ethnography on the sites I researched. It was possible to deduce for example from the species of the plants that were sown whether the guerrilla gardener in question was prioritising pollinators, native species or beauty, amongst other things. Some guerrilla gardeners also left behind other material traces such as handwritten notes for council workers or community members with instructions about how the site should be looked after.

Field sites

Allotments in Oxford – general context

There are 36 allotment sites in Oxford with over 2,000 plot holders practising urban gardening (Robinson 2008). I have given the allotment sites on which I cultivated plots pseudonyms as part of the 'balancing act' of managing, 'two competing priorities: maximising protection of participants' identities and maintaining the value and integrity of the data' (Saunders et al. 2015). Unlike in other more sensitive areas of research, most of my participants were happy to be directly quoted and some wished their own names to be specifically used. In only three cases did participants specifically state that they did not want what they had shared to be directly linked to them. Therefore, I used a mix of real names and pseudonyms to respect the privacy of those three participants while recognising those who did wish to be quoted.

Detailed descriptions of the three allotment sites I cultivated on in the first two years of my fieldwork are in the appendices.

Practicalities of becoming an allotmenteer

Choice of plot

Before I chose a plot, I decided to carry out fieldwork on three allotment sites rather than one. The vast majority of research carried out on allotment sites involves a single site. Whilst this is practical, it has meant that some studies have come to conclusions that can lead to errors when applying the results more widely. One such example is Tilley's work where he states that he did not see a single flag on the allotment site where he carried out his study (Tilley 2008). Of the three sites I cultivated on, the site I carried out public engagement with research on and the sites I visited across Oxford (in total I visited about a third of the sites in Oxford) – only one did not have any flags.

While I was somewhat limited in the choice of sites on which there was plot availability, once on OxLea and Swardland I did have some choice about which plot I took on. On both sites I was shown several available plots. I chose the OxLea plot because of its proximity to the sole entrance, which meant I had a good view of everyone coming and going and garnered a reasonable idea of who I might approach to talk with from a natural vantage point. On Swardland I wanted a central location near a communal area, again to offer the possibility of conversation. Swardland also had a water trough right by my plot, which again easily put me in contact with fellow plot holders in an unobtrusive manner. My plot was also near the main allotment building where the 'old boys' would convene around 8am every day before they began work on their plots. In this way I was able, relatively easily, to develop a relationship with them over the course of my fieldwork.

It is worth noting that my plot choice was made as a researcher. It is likely that part of the reason why these plots were available is because they are less popular

with allotmenteers. Two of the most common factors in allotmenteers' choice of plots (should they have one) is privacy and accessibility to water. If a well or water trough is far away on a large site, then caring for one's plot necessitates extra labour.

Figure 7: Niala fetching water

Furthermore, on all sites, during semi-structured interviews and in casual conversations, I asked plot holders who had been on the site for more than a year if they had had another plot on the same site. Without exception, they all had. They moved because they felt that a plot 'was better' than the one they were cultivating despite the number of years of work they might have put into their plot. This demonstrated the importance of the location of a plot on a site, which could supersede even the amount of labour already invested (sometimes over a decade) into a particular plot. It also spoke to the sense of experimentation and freedom of practice that all allotmenteers reported and which I cover in greater detail in Chapter Sixentitled 'a place where no one tells me what to do'.

A daily rhythm

Like fellow allotmenteers, my routine on all three allotment sites was initially dictated by the work that had to be carried out on them, rather than any plans I may have drawn up about how I thought I would carry out my research. Allotmenteers are cognisant of the more-than-human gardeners with whom they work, and actively or passively listen to them and adjust their schedules to suit. If it were not for my

research, I would have probably been a fair-weather gardener – one of the allotmenteers who cultivate only when the weather is clement. However, as soon as all three plots were in a manageable state, I began to rotate the days and times that I spent on each site, so that by the end of my fieldwork I had spent every hour (in various configurations) between 6am and 8pm on all sites.

Clear patterns emerged across all sites. Retired people were the most likely to spend the whole day at the site, though on City Gorse this was gendered. Female gardeners on City Gorse would have to leave the site at some point during the course of the day. In common with allotment sites across England, none of the sites I cultivated on had toilet facilities for general daily use. On OxLea and Swardland, where there were sheds, retired female gardeners (who are an increasing demographic of allotmenteers) had to use a bucket to relieve themselves during the day. This echoes allotment site history and their earlier male-dominated focus, where such considerations were far less salient. The 'old boys' on Swardland would arrive around 8am, one in particular announcing the fact he was there with loud shouts by way of inviting those who wanted to join him in the allotment building for a pre-gardening natter. There were many mornings where over clouds of pipe smoke I would talk with him and other 'old boys' about their Second World War experiences and my allotmenteering failures.

Working allotmenteers usually visited their plots in the evenings. In general, the allotments were busiest in the later afternoon/early evening in part because of people's schedules but also because of plants and the efficacy of watering them at that time. There was a small but consistent minority of working people who 'topped and tailed' the care on their plots, tending to them before and after work. There were also times (particularly in the early morning and on City Gorse) when I was the only person on the whole site, which afforded me the possibility of walking around

unobserved and taking note of its characteristics. These were times I was more likely to encounter different animal species such as muntjac deer.

On writing and gardens

Despite the vast quantities of anthropological work that has been carried out (and books that have been written) about gardens and gardening, certain gaps remain. One of the most consistent of these is the lack of texts that capture the voices of particular types of growers – the 'old boys' who cultivated plots during the wars, and the people from other places who made English allotments places to 're-root'. Because gardens are such compelling spaces, it is also easy to slip into writing about the place and lose sight of the people who made it, something that I have been continually conscious of as I wrote up my work. I made the decision to title each chapter with the words of the urban gardeners I interacted with as a reminder of the opportunity with which I was presented through their willingness to engage with me, a chance to capture in a very specific historical context through my participation with a particular practice, 'the things of the social world, and as far as possible to tell them the way they are' (Bourdieu and Nice 2000: 5).

Wherever I have quoted research participants directly (most notably in the interlude entitled 'Soil and Slugs', I have not altered the way participants spoke. I closely followed their patterns of speech even where it diverts from standard English because of the way in which people interrupt themselves or use incomplete sentences. This was a deliberate choice in order to ground the thesis in the voice of participants as well as to give a direct experience of the people being engaged during the course of this study.

Public engagement with research

Figure 8: Niala carrying out public engagement with research

The production and dissemination of knowledge is not neutral (Descarries 2014). Here, I am purposefully responding to the methodology suggested by Pierre Bourdieu at the end of the previous section, when Bourdieu states that we should be objective as much as we are able. While it is commendable, researchers need routine reminders of the values and judgements that they bring into their work (Demerath 1996). Where we wish to go with our research is affected by where we are coming from, 'scientific objectivity is an ideal rather than a reality' (Muntaner et al. 2012). Unlike the Weberian proposition of detachment, I chose to embrace my attachment to the city of Oxford and consciously work with it (Weber and Parsons 1965). By bringing attention to my relationship with Oxford it allowed me to consider the effects that might have on my research and to be explicit about how I chose to navigate them. Furthermore,

> the key on the academics' side is to manage knowledge (output) in such a way as to make it disseminatable, whoever the users are. Clarity of purpose in dissemination is the first step towards accountability. Dissemination orients the scientific enterprise as an outgoing one: the communicable act moves into prominence relations with others, 'stakeholders' of diverse kinds, those 'for whom' the research is being done, and in the case of other disciplines 'with whom. (Strathern 2004: 552)

From the outset, I was keen to pay attention to the ethics of my research with regards to the stakeholders with whom I was engaging. This is especially important because of the ongoing critique of the 'extractivist nature of ethnography' (Burman 2018: 48). Particularly for anthropologists who carry out research in communities where they do not live, research in communities with which they do not live, or with whom they are directly associated, the question of imbalances in the research process are even more urgent. Unlike the vast majority of anthropologists, I was not travelling to a different place to research people whom I would then not have the possibility of routinely meeting again. Although I was going to be meeting people I did not know in the city where I lived, there was a strong possibility that I would meet with them again after I had carried out my fieldwork. There was also (and indeed it came to pass) the chance that I would have friends in common with some of the people I was researching. With all of these ethical considerations in mind, I took Marilyn Strathern's starting point of clarity in dissemination. Instead of carrying out my research quietly, I decided to carry it out in public, allowing the interest of the various publics engaging with my work to also inform it. In this way my research was reflexive, reflective, and iterative. I took the questions that stakeholders asked, be they within the academy, urban gardeners, or the general public seriously, and kept them in mind during my work.

Public engagement with research training

I received public engagement with research training from The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH) during the summer of 2018 before I began my DPhil studies. I did so because various studies have shown that although research councils, universities, and government bodies are increasingly encouraging

researchers to work in this way, many researchers state they lack the necessary skills, funding or time to do so (NCCPE 2022). To return to Strathern, I was keen for my 'laudable aims' not to result in 'problematic consequences'.

Urban gardening overlaps with food and health which are seen as highly relevant by the public with regards to their engaging with research. I was able to affirm that my choice of participant research (becoming an allotmenteer) was critical for building trust and legitimising the work I was carrying out in the light of the urban gardening publics I aimed to engage. Unlike, for example, highly technological research which can be harder for public to engage with – the growing of plants operates on a sliding scale of knowledge which gives stakeholders an 'in' into the research that is being carried out. I was fortunate to receive funding from TORCH which supported the PER activities I carried out. A key point learnt was the right amount of time to expect engagement from the wider public. There is a delicate balance between enough time for the participants to feel they have received benefit from the experience but without it being too much of a stretch. As part of the PER summer school, I received training on various PER methods including writing blogs, public speaking, making podcasts and carrying out participatory activities safely, as well as how to collect and analyse data from participants on their experiences of the PER activity.

Compounding methodology

I am like many 'anthropologists [who] generally share government desires for their work to have a societal effect' (Stein 2018: 10) and PER was a tool that allowed me to do so as well as consider what the effect might be. One of the challenges of using PER as a methodology is that it adds an extra layer methodological layer. Another

challenge is developing clarity on the objective of the PER. I was keen to find out two things:

1. What was the perception that non-urban gardeners had of urban gardening – I wanted to bring this into conversation with my research findings.
2. What did urban gardeners think about the themes that were emerging from my research?

I decided early on that I would not carry out PER activities on the three main allotment sites where I was cultivating in case my fellow allotmenteers felt pressured to participate. In the end, the forms of PER I used were:

- Blog posts
- Podcasts
- Public talks
- Two short creative videos about my research findings
- After the first two years of my fieldwork, I collaborated with a local community project to recreate an allotment in the style of the year 1918 which became a participatory project. As part of this project, I also worked with the archives of the Imperial War Museum, The Garden Museum, and The Museum of English Rural Life researching allotment history with a focus on practicalities of growing in the year 1918. This project was awarded the Social History Society's Public History Prize in 2022.
- A publication about the 1918 allotment project.

The 1918 allotment project allowed me to have focused conversations with allotmenteers on the site where they were able to share their views in a more natural context without the formality of an interview. Because they actively chose to engage

with the plot, it facilitated relaxed and yet probing discussions about themes in my research.

Having presented my field site, methodologies and the concepts I used to think with in my work, I now turn to the intentional and legal practicalities involved in manifesting allotments and guerrilla gardening places. In the following chapter I will unpack what urban gardeners have described as ‘a perfect set up’, examining what is both included and what is necessarily overlooked in order for these utopic places materially to come into being and to continue to exist.

INTERLUDE:

Self and other

Although this study primarily focuses on human actors, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the more-than-human actors present on urban gardening sites. This is because, 'human life is constituted through a riot of non-human forces' (Noorani and Brigstocke 2018: 10). This interlude focuses on soil and slugs. Soil and slugs were both topics that came up unprompted during the course of my fieldwork but also when I carried out semi-structured interviews. Mike on Swardland for example who had extensive ecological knowledge and gardened organically quietly admitted that the only thing he did use to protect his crops was slug pellets because everything else he tried had failed. During the semi-structured interviews I carried out with 33 allotmenteers, 5 specifically brought up slugs and 17 of them unprompted talked about soil. It is important to note that out of the 17 allotmenteers, 3 were also guerrilla gardeners but did not talk about the soil or slugs in relation to their guerrilla gardening practice. It is for this reason this interlude features only allotmenteers. A point that differentiates allotmenteers from guerrilla gardeners in my study was the relationship to soil and more-than-human presences, such as slugs. While allotmenteers over time develop a close and intimate relationship to their plot and to the soil, plants (both planted and spontaneously emerging), insects and slugs, guerrilla gardeners develop a close relationship to a particular spot in relation to its surroundings, but did not seem to cultivate the same attention to the materialities of the soil and the more-than-human presences in that soil. Guerrilla gardeners see a space for planting, which sits in relation to other spaces around it, like roads or parking lots for example, and that emerges as a space available for planting. They

tend not be looking at it in terms of the properties of the soil. So flowers can be planted because they will add a splash of colour in a concrete landscape, rather than because the particular properties of the soil or absence of slugs means that sunflowers will thrive. On allotments, allotmenteers, maybe because of their longer or more enduring relations actually get to know the soil and perhaps also make planting choices in relation to what they would like to grow as well as what might thrive in a particular soil/location. Temporality is therefore salient to allotmenteers. To develop relations takes time, as Gill a female middle-aged white allotmenteer told me, 'I've had the same plot for 37 years and so I know the soil really well'.

Guerrilla gardeners do not usually have this sort of extended relationship with the same piece of land and/ or cultivate *with* the soil in the same way as allotmenteers. At the book launch of my '1918 Allotment' project' a guerrilla gardener in the audience confirmed this. She spoke about planting trees and leaving them to nature, never going back to check on them and see how they were doing. Even acknowledging that some of the trees she planted would not survive. People who practice both engaged with the soil differently inside and outside the allotment gates. These interludes are a necessary node which highlight that this thesis situates itself within the growing body of anthropological research paradigms that recognise the agency of non-human and more-than-human actors present in any area of fieldwork and that are not merely 'passive objects of the research practice' (Noorani and Brigstocke 2018: 10). This interlude is therefore presented as an ethical choice to surface the various gardeners alongside human gardeners who are present on urban gardening sites.

Soil

Indeed, relation is a key word – allotmenteers talked about their relationship to the soil as part of the way they engaged with their allotment. I interviewed a white

female student called Sonia who was in her mid-twenties and had been evicted from OxLea. She had shared a plot with other students and admitted that perhaps they didn't care for the plot as well as they might have done. A committee member had also described this eviction to me from their perspective. The committee member noted that the students just weren't on the site very much and the neglect showed on their plot. The students had been hoping for another chance which they were not given. It was not until Sonia got a plot on another allotment and had 'properly developed a relationship with it' that she fully understood why they had been evicted. Her allotment plot went from being 'something to do' to becoming something 'to be with'. It is this animation of more-than-human gardeners that allows for a meaningful exchange between them and their human counterparts. Urban gardeners are acutely aware that they do not garden alone and yet the togetherness that they experience with more-than-human gardeners is of the *alone, together* quality as it works across species and even sentience.

Pearl, a retired female allotmenteer and emeritus professor, spoke a little shyly about the time that she spent getting to know her allotment,

> I thought well just get to know my allotment and try and feel. Okay, they are that's fine. There are patches and they for growing things but but I don't even know what the character of this piece of land. So I spent a lot of time now it feels so happy. I feel like I somehow I mean, I couldn't tell this probably too many people. But I felt like I finally I first free the apple tree from all the brambles and the stuff around blossoming and got hundreds of apples. And that made an amazing space. Yeah, each bit of space had a character. I love it.[7]

She was together with her plot but also recognised the space and gap between them. It was an *alone, together* way of being.

[7] Unaltered direct quote.

When I didn't look surprised by the suggestion that she could experience the soil's happiness, Pearl went on in some detail to describe how this came to be,

> the process to all the soil I can feel is happy when it feels like it's got a vitality. I mean on a purely physical material level, it's not so heavy and clay and I've done a lot of work. So say instead of also I decided a friend of mine was a biodynamic farmer and he came up and he said, Oh, the soil so heavy that no light and it's got no it's can't breathe. And I thought, well, what can I do? So for two or three years, there are a number of I tried out lots of different people's suggestions. Put some seaweed in one and I got worm castings. And with others have just been turning stuff in. And then somebody came and said, Oh, you shouldn't be digging, because you're destroying all the microorganisms and everything. So I kept, also, each time someone tells me something, I realise how little I know. But then I started thinking, Well, I'm I'm actually an artist, and sculptor and I do know about the qualities of things. So let me try and see if I can sense myself have a soul is. And obviously, you see it from how things grow.[8]

Ultimately, this completely transformed the relationship that Pearl had with the soil, the soil was alive and teeming with more-than-humans she could engage with. Interestingly they had been together all this time even when she thought she was allotmenteering alone, 'And I had never really I knew soil was there and worms were there. But I'd never had the sense of how much activity is in this land.' I will return to the skill of digging later in this interlude but it is noteworthy how much animation is placed into the soil. Pearl's friend talked about the soil breathing. There are other descriptions of soil with this quality – airy being one – but it was not chosen. The soil, in this case, is seen as an animate more-than-human. It is important to note

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[8] Unaltered direct quote.
Its important to note that all the people who were advising Pearl were not fellow allotmenteers but instead people who visited Pearl some from other growing practices. Allotmenteers rarely offer advice to each other unless it is explicitly sought. This is explained in greater detail in Chapter Six 'a place where no one tells me what to do.'

here that the question of animacy is specific to Pearl's relation with the soil and was surmised following long discussions with her on her particular views, rather than to be generalised to all allotmenteers.

Other allotmenteers also described the dynamic nature of the relationship that they developed with their allotment plots. It is a relationship that engages all the senses.Beth a white allotmenteer who works in healthcare and is in her 70s said of her engagement with the soil on her plot, 'actual soil itself turns over really nicely and it smells nice too. Yeah like the smell of it like the smell of it all'. Olivia, a white female allotmenteer in her 30s who only grew cut flowers to give away to people, noted how her practice kept her tuned into seasonal dynamics,

> And it kind of ties you in as well, with the cycles of the year. Pay more attention to what's going on and the light and the light levels and the cold and the frost and the moon as they you know, just pay more attention, because you're trying to grow things. You want them to grow.

This hyper-local knowledge which is then applied to the land productively is similar to farmers in the Sahel where the interaction with the land is based on experience and the priorities for the land rather than a measurement of the qualities of the soil (Krogh and Paarup-Laursen 1997). The only allotmenteer who spoke of actually reading about how to understand the soil was Anabelle who said, 'basically have been reading about the kind of microbiology of soil with or without tilling. And it's just much better, I think, to have all the roots there.' I will return to Annabelle later on in this interlude and she is also featured in Chapter Four where she describes starting an allotment site from scratch. Most allotmenteers were like May and Ben, a white male creative in his late 30s and with a young family. When Ben talked about the tactility of the relationship he had with more-than-human gardeners on this allotment plot,

> there's the the physicality of the space, I think it's Earth and I really mean like soil and Yes, I think green. And then I think it's almost sort of, you know, these layers that it's air, yes, by some rain. And I think, temporality and seasonality, you know, it's very important were like to say, it's, it's never the same. Because any one day as a different, you know, whether there's a different point in the season.[9]

Touch is increasiungly being recognised as an important modality in interrelational acts of care, as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa asks whenshe discusses the power of touch to 'problematize abstractions and disengagements' for the purposes of this research project, the question is when one is gardening, 'can we touch without being touched?' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017: 97).

This is not a passive touching as allotmenteers ascribed an agency to soil. We have already seen from Pearl's description that the soil is seen as something that can breathe. Soil is not just something that one does things with even though as Roy, a white middle-aged University of Oxford researcher who had recently just given up allotmenteering, said that, 'it took working the soil and making an effort to have things happen or not happen'. Allotmenteers talked about the attention that they had to pay to the soil, 'using the soil to work for you rather than against you' as Barbara (the retired allotmenteer who had grown up in Dorset) put it. And to bring further more-than-humans into this complex allotment picture was the question of the plants. Dawn, who is both an allotmenteer and guerrilla gardener, was, when I interviewed her, deeply concerned with both soil health and infection. She referenced the soil and plants as one would a human, 'plants can have quite individual requirements that are quite demanding. And, you know, you have to look after your soil is what it comes to. And soil takes a long time to build up fertility.' This was also echoed differently by Robert who is also a guerrilla gardener and allotmenteer when

[9] Unaltered direct quote.

he remarked upon diversity in soil and how not all soils are the same, 'Because different different soils are good for different, different things. So you can't assume that anything will be succ anything you sow or plant will be successful'.[10] This understanding and respect for diversity of soils also extended to some of the ways in which allotmenteers' practice was recognised. I interviewed Nathan who was a committee member for the allotment site he cultivated on. A middle-aged white man who lived in a flat with his partner, he was passionate about allotments being access to nature not just for himself but for the community at large. He took time to explain to allotmenteers on the site who were more 'traditional' growers that for example permaculture was a valid practice. He explained how he told 'traditional' allotmenteers, 'Trust me and their soil will be brilliant for it. It just doesn't look like your plot'. He was able to convince the 'traditional' allotmenteers that the permaculture plots which were not characterised by the orderly rows of vegetables of 'traditional' allotmenteers were also good plots because their soils were healthy. It is remarkable that plot aesthetics were able to be reduced to a secondary concern because the health of the soil was seen as primary.

Latour in his work with pedologists has highlighted the way in which soil as a critical zone is 'amazingly heterogenous' (Thorsen and Vandso 2017: 147). Latour's interest in soil stemmed from the fact that, 'nature is too big' (Thorsen and Vandso 2017: 144). It is true that we talk about nature in sweeping terms, access to nature, engaging with nature but just like Latour found in his engagement with the soil through his work with soil scientists, allotmenteers' relationship with the soil is an intimate reflection of their, 'join[ing] *with* the world in performance' (Ingold 2014: 47) to gain a different kind of knowledge, such as the kind of knowledge exemplified

[10] Unaltered direct quote.

by Pearl, who told me that she knows when her soil is happy as discussed earlier in this thesis.

In this temporally negotiated relationship, engagement with the soil allows for productive results when the relationship is meaningful, with the love that is being expressed by the human gardener travelling through and with the soil to the plants or as Shaka, an older male South African allotmenteer who has lived in the UK for decades, notes, 'over the last few years I've found the winter lettuces do very well. Yeah, I put the a lot I think they seem to love what we do with our soil'. This relationship with the soil is a treasured reciprocal relationship. It is a relationship that is not dissimilar to the kinship with more-than-humans that Donna Haraway has discussed on her work where the boundaries between human self and more-than-human other are diffused (Haraway 2016). Daniel, a white male office worker in his 20s who cultivated on Swardland, said eagerly during our semi-structured interview what, 'works with the soil works for us as well.' Peggy, a white female and recently retired public sector worker who has cultivated an allotment plot for over 46 years, further equated the status of the soil to other allotmenteers growing on the same site in the care that should be demonstrated with how they are treated, 'you don't do anything that hurts the soil or hurts the other people around you.' Jack, a white male musician in his 40s who cultivated on a private allotment, elaborated on this by talking about what one actively had to do to take care of the soil, 'soil can start to exhaust if you keep cropping it and cropping it and don't put anything on top of it.'

This impetus or necessity to care for the soil is seen as such an important practice that it is one of the few times allotmenteers will interfere and tell allotmenteer what they should (or in the case should not do). Chapter Six in this thesis delves more into the quality of freedom and why it is precious to allotmenteers that one should not tell another what to do. In fact, it is so prized that it is one of the

reasons that Jack cultivates on a private allotment where there are, 'literally no rules'. Allotment sites are experienced as egalitarian spaces by allotmenteers and a key part of being together and yet alone is not commenting on others gardening practices – except for when it comes to soil.

Karen, who has grown on Swardland for three decades, would otherwise never dream of telling a fellow allotmenteer where they might be going wrong will intervene if she can see they are going to affect their soil health (which she also directly links to their human health).

> I believe you should never ever step on the soil where you're going to grow vegetables. Okay, so if you look at my allotment, yeah, it's not at all traditional, traditional people clear the land, and they have all these things going in lines, and crunching all the air out of our soil, and ruining all the structure of their soil by keep walking on it. So I never walk on soil I've dug. So mine has grass paths between every bed. Yes, I never step on the soil…if I can see they're gonna make a huge mistake for them to have to deal with later. Yeah, I might say You know what? Never make heaps of anything. Don't make heaps. You've got to move that. Yeah, in the year or twos time. Just don't make heaps don't dig too deep. People go into the sub soil. They ruin structure. Stop the soil. Just just, you know, just stick like this. I've had to show Lots of people how to dig they've got no idea how to dig.'

The skill of digging and how it affects the relationship with the soil is due to the acknowledgement of the soil both being and harbouring living more-than-humans as Anabelle, a middle-aged white woman who worked in education and started an allotment site from scratch and who we will meet again in Chapter Four, explained to me during our semi-structured interview,

> I've added manure and not dug anything, the weeds that come to a much easier to remove the whole of the soil levels raised up. And also there's a stick that if you just list away the surface, there's a lot of mycelium. There's loads of microbial fungal

growth, growth. And it's ultimately made the whole sort of soil structure much more stable. And I'm, I basically have been reading about the kind of microbiology of soil with or without tilling. And it's just much better, I think, to have all the roots there. If you do have read to just chop off the top of the roof, there's still to help permeate through the soil. And worms amazing. So I've basically got a whole perfect ecosystem. And then anything I've learned from that is just going to be much easier to grow, and the flooding has gone down. So in my area, my particular plot just doesn't flood as much as other people. And the people that read like rotating and reading, and then they grow nothing over the winter, they just have a loss of soil that's based on the very claggy and then they start digging it over and I thought I kind of I don't preach about it to them but I just tried to show you don't actually have to dig you need to talk, mulch plants keep doing the same.'

What we have seen in this section on soil is a 'complex set of relationships' (Kirschenmann 2009: 232) that allotmenteers have with the soil that they cultivate on, in and with. Soil is much more than a growing medium. It is experienced by allotmenteers as a living and 'breathing' organism that needs to be attended to in order for it to become productive. Most allotmenteers don't go out to systematically test their soil but instead develop a local knowledge through their routine, ordinary banal interactions. Still, these are interactions that hold such a transformatory potential that allotmenteers state that soils can receive and transmit love onto the plants that are being grown in it. This significance is gaining wider recognition and is ultimately beginning to affect the way in which soil science is being practised. Previously 'some [soil scientists] tend[ed] to overlook that social and cultural dimensions affect how people use soils and knowledge about them develops' (Teuber et al. 2022: 752). There is an increasing understanding that the cultural ways in which people engage with soils is critical for soil health and as such anthropological studies have a role to play in the care and management of soils (Lal 2016). The use of

the word soil health is deliberate because it is the term that arose ethnographically. The arguably more scientific term of quality was less commonly used. Quality is a term that does not animate soil in the way that health does. Quality keeps soil at a distance from the human while health brings it closer – allowing the possibility of a joined together interaction and relationship.

Slugs

If soils offer the possibility of kin making with more-than-humans through the links of love and health previously discussed, then slugs could be seen as the opposite. A powerful reminder of the other, the competition for food and the intolerable for the damage that they cause to productivity. It is without question that slugs alter allotmenteers' behaviour. Barbara who grew up in Dorset and loves cabbages stopped growing them because, 'they're full of slugs'. I spoke with a couple of middle-aged white women who shared an allotment plot whose sweetcorn, 'was immediately eaten by slugs, which was disappointing'. There are a few permaculture practising allotmenteers who term these 'sacrificial plants' specifically planting them to divert the slugs from the crops they hope to harvest. Shaka from South Africa observed the slugs' behaviour and felt they were most likely to be 'attracted' to his crops during drier weather. Most allotmenteers do not take this generous approach. As previously discussed, Mike, who otherwise does not use any form of pesticide, confessed to me that he used slug pellets. By the end of my fieldwork, I was not sure if anyone else on the site knew or if they turned a blind and understanding eye to his use of them as he was still known and respected as an organic allotmenteer. 'Killing an animal is rarely simply a matter of animal death. It is surrounded by a host of attitudes, ideas, assumptions and perceptions' (Baker et al. 2006: 4)

Dawn (allotmenteer and guerrilla gardener) who also otherwise grew organically said to me in the privacy of her own home, 'I have to say I do resort to them' [slug pellets] when she had unprompted brought up the issue of slugs. She then went on for several minutes describing what she had previously tried before explaining the great lengths she took to minimise their use when she did, 'So the actual window of when slug pelleting for me is very small.' So there is it seems a complex or 'sticky' relationship that allotmenteers have to slugs on their plots. As Franklin Ginn has described in his work growers are by turns curious and then disgusted. I would add to that anger and frustration that leads to a very specific type of violence. In describing human slug relations, although an otherwise enlightening paper, I felt that Ginn's 'Sticky Lives: slugs, detachment and more-than-human ethics in the garden' did not delve deeply enough into the direct competition that gardeners are in with slugs (Ginn 2014b). This is perhaps because Ginn's work engaged with domestic gardens where productive crop growing is less highlighted as a primary concern. It is one thing to kill a slug because it is eating your food and quite another if it is ruining your garden aesthetics. I witnessed the intensity of the competition over crops between humans and slugs in the most explosive argument I saw on an allotment site.

I was volunteering in an allotment shop early on a Sunday morning when Pearl walked in – clearly rattled. She had spotted an allotmenteer on the site using pesticides. Josie, who was manning the shop for the day and was also on the allotment site committee, is a white middle-aged woman who used to be a market gardener. Pearl wanted to know why pesticide use was being tolerated on the site. Josie, who is softly spoken, replied that minimal pesticide use was 'realistic'. Having interviewed Pearl only a few days before this encounter, the thoughts that she had

shared with me were fresh in my mind. Pearl had been talking about snails and slugs with compassion and understanding,

> It's just somehow the snails have also good, right, and the slugs and they do a job actually. And the birds eat them. And if it's also for me about how can I practice the connected seeing that I teach people about and talk about? And then I get in my allotment and disconnect and think I want to grow beautiful cabbages, so I'm gonna, so it's, yeah. And I see it as a space, not a physical space necessarily… It's how what do we have to Due to feel the pain of snails I, I also know I don't, particularly when snails crawling on me they have been slimy, but they, they probably frightened, they're like humans very much.

Josie listened to Pearl's concerns about pesticides. I should point out that Pearl initially focused on the health of the allotment site as a whole before zoning in on the effect on slugs in particular. It was not long before Josie became agitated that Pearl seemed to be suggesting that she should tell another allotmenteer what to do. Pearl was at first intimating and then clearly stating the committee should be involved in telling people not to use pesticides. (There is more on pesticide use in Chapter Six). As I was very early on in my fieldwork, I had no idea how inflammatory the notion of interfering with another's practice. Much faster than I could have anticipated the argument flared. Pearl was insisting that she was calling for dialogue and Josie countered that she was trying to be reasonable. It was only when Pearl referred to the use of slug pellets as 'genocide' that there was no turning back for either of them. With what I know now about allotmenteering – I can see both of their sides. Pearl with her practice of being with the more-than-humans in her plot appreciated what their perceptions might me. Pearl had also never had to survive on the crops from her plot. As Latour highlighted – the critical zone of soil is one where many different encounters take place. The soil and even the slugs were sites of

companionship and experimentation for Pearl. Josie on the other hand had tried (and failed) to live by growing. She had described to me how frustrating it had been to be an organic market gardener trying to work with the seasons and grow good food. Customers, she said, had no sense of seasonality and wanted supermarket type uniform vegetables all year round but with the added bonus of being 'wholesome' and bought directly from the grower. Josie could empathise with an allotmenteer simply trying to get the most produce they could from their plot. Later as I left the site, I did take a look at the plot in question and it was immaculate, 'clean as a whistle' as the 'old boys' would call it. Not a weed in sight (or slug) and with abundant healthy growing vegetables. In their row, the only thing that both Josie and Pearl could agree on was never interfering with each other's plots. They did this angrily and as they parted ways.

To return to Pearl's thoughts about slugs, she was acutely aware than in order to kill them she would have to do the same thing that gardeners in Ginn's study did which is to disconnect or detach. I find like Ginn did that most growers are willing to carry out this detaching process in order to be able to productively grow their plants. They remain uneasy about it though and in my work, I found that growers did not as easily admit to the use of slug pellets as in Ginn's. In a sense they were able to do this only because

'[slugs] die quiet, or at least (thankfully)
out of the human ear's range' (Swann 2002: 198)

Swann is referring to a sensory distance that allows people to kill slugs. If we could hear slugs screaming, it raises the question of whether or not it would be as easy to kill them.This distancing from the killing of an animal (whether sensory or spatial) has been noted as a necessary process in order to be able to do it (Mazhary 2021). And yet, death is an intimate part of growing (Ginn 2014a). Gardeners are acutely

aware of the cycle of life and what is needed to die in order for other things to grow. Cheryl, a middle-aged white female allotmenteer who runs her own business and is very active in her community, described allotmenteering (and gardening more widely) as being about 'life and death'. And it is this awareness that makes for the dis-ease around killing more-than-humans.

Pearl, however, saw the action of killing slugs as an extension of fear of the other. I caught up with her after the argument partly to check on how she was and also find out more about her strong feelings on the subject. She said,

> It's like the lack of familiarity or the habits in you know, strangers or I've got friends. I went to visit a few years ago in Germany and they were neighbours. And the mother said to her daughter wanted to go with the neighbours. No, you rather get them to come here. And the daughter was saying when she said well, because they live differently to us. And and then I said, how differently do they live? Who are they interested? Or they Turkish and we don't really want the kids there? And had never actually I mean, these are people and I really well they speaking I thought people but this just this otherness, and I came with spiders and slugs. If we didn't even have dogs or cats. I mean, I know I've lived with a Hindu family once and they really don't want dogs in the house. And so dogs are completely covered. So as far as if it doesn't get as far as ethnic cleansing, and you don't start annihilating and obliterating, but still Yeah, to the black. You know, it feels very hard for human beings to embrace what they find slightly or very unfamiliar or threatening.

While I do feel that equating dealing with slugs on an allotment to genocide is unnecessarily hyperbolic, what Pearl raises is in an important point in bringing understanding to why allotmenteers are able to use slug pellets against more-than-humans who they garden alongside. 'The space in the relation' (Ginn 2014b: 542) between human and slugs or an *alone, togetherness* means allotmenteers can

leverage the slugs-as-other to carry out the killing they have to do. But it does not come easily to most allotmenteers. Barbara might have scrunched her nose up indicating disgust when she talked about the cabbages being 'full of slugs' but she still preferred not to kill them. To the extent that Barbara stopped growing cabbages altogether rather than have to face dealing with slugs. Dawn made sure she killed them strategically. Even other allotmenteers acknowledged the intention not to kill slugs (particularly with harsh pesticides) as Mike remained respected for his otherwise organic gardening.

Chapter 3: 'Magical places'

Tracing visible and invisible relations on sites where urban gardeners grow

Introduction

On the grey autumn afternoon (described in the preface to this thesis) when Charity was showing me around OxLea, I asked to see her plot. I was keen to get a sense of what I might be working towards, given that Charity seemed to be an experienced allotmenteer. I was also curious about the type of gardening she might practise. I asked her what went on to be my staple question: 'How's the growing season for you?' Charity told me that she had had some surprises. When we got to her plot, she bent over gingerly to lift the leaf of a plant that was covering another. Underneath were perfectly shaped bright red tomatoes. Unconsciously, I took in a sharp intake of breath.

'I know,' said Charity.

'But it's the first week of October,' I replied.

Tomatoes need sunshine and light to ripen and those that do most of their growing in September usually do not turn red – instead staying green. The tomatoes I had just seen collapsed time and, on an otherwise gloomy afternoon, I had just been treated to a flash of summer. By the time Charity stood upright again, she had a broad smile on her face. She knew that DPhil research notwithstanding, I was now hooked by the idea that I too could have the possibility of experiencing these sorts of surprises were I to take on an allotment plot.

This chapter looks at the 'magical moments' and 'places' as described by urban gardeners and the events and processes that occur which acknowledge the contribution of more-than-human gardeners to the practice of urban gardening. Or

as Olivia, a white female allotmenteer in her 30s who focuses on growing flowers, said,

> with gardening, you can't really tell a plant to grow faster. It kind of just does what it has to do. And I suppose I like that. I don't know, I find it quite magical, planting a seed and then just waiting for it to come up. And then seeing it. It's, it always surprises me actually, every, every time.

This is not a supernatural or terrible kind of magic, but instead one that is grounded in the relations between the human and more-than-human gardeners growing with and alongside each other. In unpacking the word 'magic', one that is often used by allotmenteers, this chapter argues that it refers to processes of transformation which involve more-than-human gardeners over which the allotmenteers have no direct control. It allows allotmenteers to experience an enchantment on their plots, which is a utopic counterpart to an otherwise disenchanting surrounding city. This chapter begins with the histories of urban gardening sites and how they came to be. In tracing the development of their existence, this chapter argues that they are a materialised utopia as opposed to different types of place within the city such as heterotopias or third spaces.

Urban allotments and guerrilla gardening in the UK – a brief history

This section gives an overview of the histories of allotmenteering and guerrilla gardening in the urban context. It provides the context required to understand urban gardening sites in Oxford. It is outside the scope of this thesis to give a more detailed analysis of the long and complex history of allotmenteering in the UK.

Common roots

Growing in cities, whether on an allotment or as a guerrilla gardener, has a common root in the form of a charismatic urban migrant (from Wigan to London) and textile

trader called Gerrard Winstanley (1609–1676). Leader of The Diggers, a group of Protestants who emphasised a return to the land and egalitarianism, he believed that 'The earth was made to be a common treasury for all', and by extension argued for equality of access to land for growing for all, as well as equality for men and women (Perry 2017 ; Festival 2019 ; Johnson 2013). The Diggers' activities included occupying unused land on which they grew crops.[11] In the UK, Winstanley's strongest legacy remains that of challenging the appropriation of common land by financially wealthy or politically connected individuals – still a contentious issue today. Where allotmenteers' and guerrilla gardeners' histories bifurcate is the manner in which access to urban land for growing has been negotiated. Guerrilla gardeners currently see themselves as involved in a 'war' against 'neglect' and availability of land on which to grow in the city, whereas allotmenteers have taken a legalistic approach to this overlapping aim they share with guerrilla gardeners (Reynolds 2018 ; Clayden and Garner 2002).

Despite their common history, urban gardening literature tends to follow the same division, focusing either on guerrilla gardening or allotmenteering, and this thesis aims to work within this gap in the literature by bringing them into conversation. This is not only because of their shared history; it is also because in Oxford, where I carried out my research, a notable number of allotmenteers are also guerrilla gardeners, and the two movements have intersecting aspirations and concerns even as their practices can differ.

[11] Although their efforts were largely thwarted, his ecological views continue to inspire movements around the world, from English squatters to the Brazilian Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) Landless Workers Movement.

Allotment history

This thesis refers specifically to English[12] urban allotments, which, although they have a far longer history, saw a major shift in law in 1908 with the Small Holdings and Allotment Act. It is an act which underwent further strengthening until the 1925 Allotments Act, 'which established statutory allotments which local authorities could not sell off or convert without Ministerial consent, known as Section 8 Orders' (Allotment 2019). Government-commissioned research has found that there have been, 'a surprising number of allotments around large towns, such as Birmingham, Coventry, Nottingham, Sheffield, and Southampton, to name a few from about 1700 onward' (Thorpe 1975). Much like today, these allotments were always under potential threat of building development and the vast majority of these original sites no longer exist (Flavell 2003: 102; Crouch and Ward 1997). In 1829, there were only around 54 urban allotment sites (Burchardt 2002: 36), mainly in the southwest of England, which grew to around 242,542 sites all across the country in just 50 years (Burchardt 2002: 225).

Until recently, the academic discourse (as illustrated by the timeline at the end of this section) was centred on the idea that the history of allotments is inextricably linked to services provided/not provided by the government. Before the welfare state, allotments were a way for financially poor families to feed themselves. During times of war or austerity, such as the measures brought in by the current Conservative government, their popularity increases. Even though the attempts by

[12] Although there are overlaps, each country within the United Kingdom has variations in allotment history hence the specific focus on English allotments as the country where my field site was located.

The Diggers (and others) to, as it were, reclaim the land were largely unsuccessful, by the 1800s, the difficult conditions affecting the landless poor were increasingly being recognised. Riots (most notably the Swing Riots of 1830[13]) and protests were interwoven protests interwove with attempts from parishes and charitable landlords to find ways to make provision for financially impoverished people to grow their own food (Burchardt 2000). The proliferation of allotments in the second half of the 1800s was initially met with such strong political debate that the nationwide council elections were dubbed 'the allotment elections' (Way 2008: 12). By the time of the First World War, food shortages forced the issue leading to a series of legal processes and Acts of Parliament that placed the responsibility for provision in the hands of the local authorities. This aspect of the original acts still remains, but in 1957 the government withdrew all financial support for allotments, which are now largely maintained by other grants such as the Heritage Lottery Fund (Allotments 2019 ; Barclay 2012). In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s there was a sharp decline in the use of allotments, and many fell into disrepute as they were being used to run businesses.Land developers also used the opportunity to increase pressure for the valuable land to be used for building rather than growing. One of the reasons that research has focused on the link between political and economic crises and an increase in growing your own is because it is the most obvious one. The oil crisis of 1974 (coupled with TV programmes such as *The Good Life*) led to a renewed interest in self-sufficiency and an associated rise in allotment use. Most recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a sharp increase in allotment use and uptake nationally. The city of Oxford, which previously did not have a city-wide waiting list,

[13] The Swing Riots were an agricultural protest against mechanisation and harsh working conditions that took place across southern and eastern England.

has seen nearly all of its sites filled and those without a waiting list began to develop them.

The 1970s was a decade in which the rise in allotment use has some clear parallels with current allotment use. The economic conditions of the 1970s and the 2020s are the first parallel. Although there are political differences between the 1970s and the 2020s, analysts have highlighted the stark similarities in the economic climates including rising oil and fuel prices and associated food costs which has led to the wider cost of living crisis (Toynbee 2021). Another parallel which is only recently beginning to receive attention is the increase in environmental awareness which is in part negotiated through media consumption.

> Cult 1970s BBC TV show *The Good Life* examined Tom and Barbara Good's experience of attempting to opt out of the rat race by becoming self-sufficient. They grew vegetables in their back garden, milked a goat, tried to knit their own clothes and collected their animal's waste to create methane to generate electricity. (McCabe 2021)

This show returned to the UK stage in 2021 to find a whole new audience. Allotmenteers, like other city citizens, are aware of the environmental challenges that the world is facing, and they see their practice as part of a possible solution even though they do not in the main foreground it. I had several conversations with (particularly longstanding) allotmenteers who would comment on weather patterns becoming increasingly erratic and how they would be careful about their use of water which they remarked was a precious resource on the site. Their engagement has nuances that are not picked up by the broad strokes of shocking climate headlines. Their concerns with climate are most often articulated in the terms by which they have adjusted their practice – the subtly lengthening growing season and the drier weather which has even made some allotmenteers change their growing practice to styles that require less watering.

Their engagement with media consumption is far from passive. Much like the inspiration the TV programme *The Good Life* gave viewers in the 1970s to try self-sufficiency, allotmenteers are interested in trying out what they see on TV. No dig gardening, for example, as promoted by Charles Dowding, was so popular across Oxford allotment sites in the mid-2010s that the Oxford and District Federation of Allotment Associations arranged for Dowding to deliver a series of (sold-out) talks across the city. Of the allotmenteers who consumed gardening media, all watched *Beechgrove* because they said it was 'down-to-earth' and 'relatable' and for the same reasons had given up on 'shouty half hour' (*Gardeners' World*). They said that they left it to the non-growers who were unable to recognise the numerous mistakes on the programme (hence the shouting) because 'they didn't know any better'. That is not to say that allotmenteers only consume gardening media to learn how to grow – many of them are interested in garden aesthetics.

In the section entitled 'Allotments as more than "magic", more than food', I return to the question of gardening aesthetics.

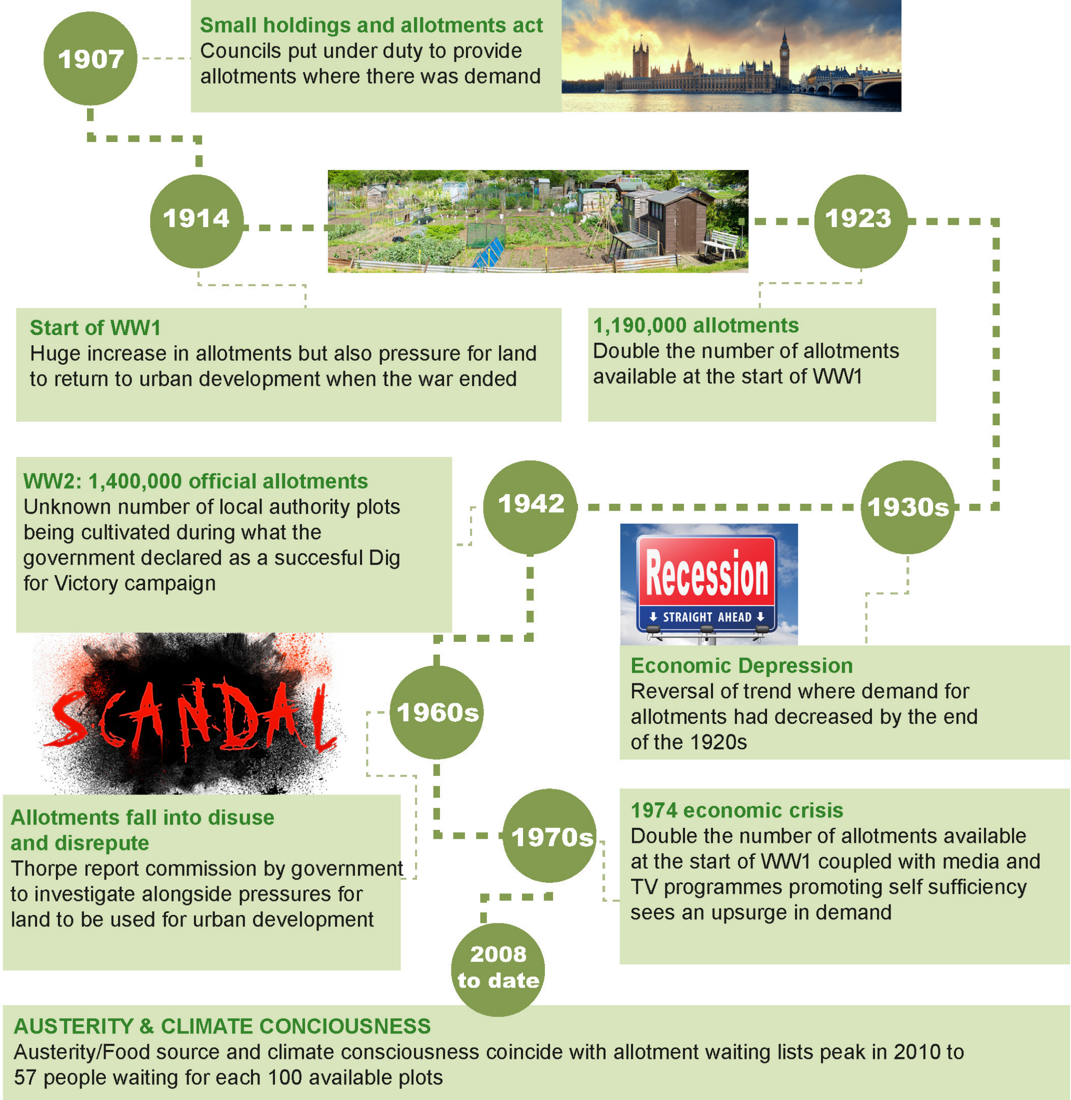

Figure 9: Timeline of a social history of allotments

Sources for the timeline: (Acton 2011 ; Burchardt and Cooper 2010 ; Campbell and Campbell 2013 ; Parliament 2018)

Guerrilla Gardening History

Although I argue that its traceable roots probably start in the 17th century with The Diggers, mapping guerrilla gardening history is particularly challenging. It is

important to note that The Diggers would not have called themselves guerrilla gardeners, but that their activities fall within the modern definition of cultivating land on which one does not have express permission to grow. Although the literature tends to agree that guerrilla gardening has been practised for centuries, the question of their intentions makes it difficult to develop a clear timeline of the diffuse practice of guerrilla gardening (McKay 2013 ; Hardman and J. Larkham 2014). Without clear signs of intent, even tracing the times throughout history when people unofficially grew on 'public' land might not yield an accurate representation of the growers in question. 'Gardening outside the bounds of an enclosed or discrete space is a phenomenon that is largely ignored by gardening historians' (Patman 2015: 273). Guerrilla gardening's contemporary source, and the term itself, stem from the 1970s, when Liz Christy coined it to describe her (and others') practice of growing in public spaces in New York City. In the UK it was not until Richard Reynolds began his website in 2004 that an online community emerged to match the one that was already practising *alone, together* on the ground (Reynolds 2007). As it has grown into the tens of thousands, the literature is beginning to play catch-up in a bid to begin to theorise what appears to be a widespread and probably global practice.

Allotments and guerrilla gardening sites as utopias

> I believe there are also - in every society – utopias that occupy a precise and real place, a place that can be located on a map; utopias that have a determinate time, a time that can be fixed and measured according to a regular calendar. (Foucault 2014)

This thesis is about the materialisation of utopic places in cities, places which Foucault describes (in the foregoing translated quote) as universal but which are arguably challenging to recognise. It describes the manner in which urban gardeners work towards their manifestation and recognition. Both allotment and guerrilla

gardening sites are quotidian spaces within cities. Guerrilla gardening sites are in fact so banal that members of the public routinely walk past them every day and often do not recognise them as such. My use of the word 'recognise' is deliberate, since as well as being visually recognisable, allotment sites are also legally recognised. Guerrilla gardening sites are not. Recognition (or lack of it) allows us to delve into civic processes that illuminate what is gained and lost as growing spaces in cities are materialised. My goal is to explore the relationship between urban gardeners, their growing spaces and the city in order to gain a richer understanding of what it means to sustain, collectively, places where it is possible to cultivate within cities. This is important because cities are characterised as places where access to land is limited, and people live in relative social isolation. This thesis provides an alternative reading of what constitutes a utopic place within a city, offering the possibility that it is through consistent ordinary engagement, that spaces of hope can be co-created. In working with utopia, a concept first detailed in a book, *Utopia* by Thomas More, this thesis combines grounded fieldwork against a backdrop of literary analysis with an emphasis on the use of the imagination to explore the actualisation of creative desires (More 2012 [1516]).

Allotments as sites where magic happens

> I love allotments; they are like children's picture books. Magical places. Those wellies and sheds. I love the atmosphere and even now I walk in sites even when I shouldn't be on them. There are all these people there together and these amazing things but yet every plot is individual. It's incredible because we don't have to grow our food anymore; I guess we don't really need allotments but there they are. All this work and care goes into them. But then you get your own plot and the dreadful work starts.

During the conversation that I was having with Claire (words quoted above), a white 49-year-old urban gardener (who still maintains her home garden but has

failed[14] at least twice at maintaining an allotment plot), her eyes lit up and then glazed over. She entered an almost dream-like state when reflecting on the times that she had been growing on an allotment site, and she was seriously considering trying again. This conversation succinctly raises the key themes of my research, namely *alone, together*, boundaries of care and banal utopia. Like many urban gardeners and members of the general public in Oxford, Claire is quick to refer to the sense of allotments as utopic spaces. Her combination of the words 'magical' and 'dreadful' speak to the concept, which I propose, of banal utopia.

Indeed, there are still those who argue that it is impossible to manifest a utopia. Michael Shermer (Shermer 2015), for example, contends that in the sense that Thomas More meant, combining good place with no place, he was essentially performing a thought experiment in his book *Utopia*. Yet what all scholars can agree on is that More's text is ambiguous (Burrell and Dale 2002), and it is this ambiguity that I work with to offer urban gardening sites as utopic spaces. What scholars also agree on is that gardens are 'other spaces', but I have chosen to work with utopia as opposed to 'third places' or 'heterotopias' for the following reasons:

First, I am locating my study within the wider body of literature in which gardens are recognised as utopias but in which there is limited work recognising allotments as such. I aim to build on work carried out by Moore et al. that conceptualises allotments as 'everyday utopias' (Moore et al. 2014). Second, and most importantly, some allotmenteers I grew alongside used the term utopia to describe their sites, whereas none used the more academic 'third places' or 'heterotopia', despite the fact that in Oxford there are a number of allotmenteers who

[14] Claire has been evicted from at least two allotment sites after receiving warning letters for not cultivating at least the minimum required part of her plots. She felt that the evictions were fair and agreed that she had not been sufficiently caring for the plots that she leased. 'Taking Care' – Chapter 4 of this thesis outlines in greater detail the boundaries of belonging on an allotment site.

are academics and would be familiar with those terms. Third, even though third places as defined by Ray Oldenburg are places where people relax in public such as *cafés* or public libraries (Oldenburg 1999), people do not have an obligation to be there and also usually have no direct investment in them. This is quite opposite to allotment sites where once a plot has been leased, particular types of obligations which shall be explored in this thesis are triggered. Finally, it has to do with the linguistic origins of the word 'heterotopia'. Foucault coined the term initially to analyse words and phrases that undermined language in their contradictoriness. It was only much later applied to space (following a talk he delivered to architects), and has ended up encompassing a broad range of spaces from festivals to cemeteries to prisons (Foucault 1984 ; Foucault 2014). Allotment sites in cities do unsettle the idea of urban to include nature, but they are not described as unsettling by allotmenteers. While Foucault details the specifics of each type of heterotopia, the category includes too many unsettling examples (which are at the core of the term's literary roots) to encompass allotment sites described by many instead as 'calming' and 'perfect'.

As well as the word perfect, the word magic repeatedly arose during the course of my fieldwork when urban gardeners were referring to their spaces and practices. Magic is a troubling word because of the long history of a negative connotation in anthropology (Benussi 2019), and indeed Claire, in this example, talks about '*dread*ful' work. There is, however, the aspect of magic that is associated instead with wonder and awe, which are feelings that gardens also inspire. This is not a magic associated with the supernatural or with magic carried out on a stage but instead is the kind of magic that could be described as poetic – the profoundly moving feeling experienced, for example, on seeing beauty in nature. There is another aspect of magic (which is a magic that is where supernatural belief is an integral part of practical activities carried out to uplift human spirits) found in a much less

referenced classical anthropological text *Coral Gardens and their Magic* in which Malinowski made astute observations but was not necessarily the best interpreter of his own observations (Malinowski 1978). He noted the great agricultural skill of Trobriand Islanders, but I argue that he took his generalisations of the purpose of magic as foundational to culture too far. Magic can also be a shorthand to explain 'the invariable result of man's limited ability to control his environment' (Stern 1936). Many urban gardeners, unbidden, talk about the 'other things' that affect their growing over which they have no control. Some of them are more tangible, like weather patterns, but others are impossible to pin down by way of explanation of what ultimately brings about success. This acknowledgement is the source of a certain type of humility that rests within urban gardeners, who are acutely aware that it is not their efforts alone that lead to the desired results, and that there are more-than-human gardeners with whom they participate and who contribute to the outcome. One of the ways that the intangible ingredient between effort and result in gardening is spoken of is by the use of the term 'magic'.

This intangible ingredient holds within it what Malinowski described as revealing a 'world of mysterious and unexpected possibilities' (Malinowski 1948: 69), much like what I experienced on seeing Charity's perfectly ripe tomato growing in October. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to enter into the discussion of the 'anthropological shibboleth' that is magic (Jones 2017: 399), but it is important to engage with its ethnographic presence. I argue that on allotment sites, magic refers to the set of visible and invisible relations between human and more-than-human gardeners as human gardeners work to materialise their utopias.

Returning to Olivia, the allotmenteer who focuses on growing flowers referred to in the chapter introduction, her description of materialising her plot brings together the banality of some of the activities, the risks involved, how her practice

also cultivates her and the ‘magic’ that makes it all worthwhile. In the growing season of 2019–2020 Olivia set up her car as a greenhouse and used lots of trays in which to grow seedlings. She was simultaneously digging flower beds both on her allotment plot and in her home garden, a ‘labour-intensive’ activity that she also ‘sort of dragged them [her friends] into’ given the amount of work that it entailed. She also enjoys the sociality of growing alongside someone else and eventually ended up sharing her plot with a friend. Her careful practice (as discussed in the interlude on soil and slugs) taught her to ‘pay attention’, particularly to the more-than-human gardeners such as ‘the light and the light levels and the cold and the frost and the moon’. Not all of this effort was rewarded. There were plants she experimented with growing that turned out all to be ‘for nothing’. Chalking these experiments up to experience, she said what worked and what did not would guide subsequent growing seasons. Olivia was being shaped by her allotment plot as much as she was shaping it. This interplay between her and her plot was sometimes invisible – there were not always clear reasons as to why a particular plant failed to grow. When it was visible, she was keen to attribute part of the success to more-than-human gardeners (such as the soil),

> you may have this tiny little seedling; you’re thinking it looks so wimpy. So like, you know, and then, and then you put it in the soil, and suddenly it becomes this huge, amazing plant. It’s just incredible. I find that really, I don’t know, it’s awesome.

The processes that are shared between the various actors that lead to this sense of awe are one of the reasons that people practice urban gardening. It is of note that this is a reason that has escaped much of the literature, which focuses on allotment use primarily as a site for growing food.

This awe can be understood for its particular importance in the context of a world that is in the grip of overwhelming environmental challenges. Weber’s

routinely analysed statement on 'the disenchantment of the world' (Weber et al. 2004: 13) due to a science through which everything is demystified is of relevance. How is it possible to have utopic experiences when living on a planet that this science describes as being on the brink of catastrophe? Urban gardeners' experiences have long held a counterpoint to the tension of being able to experience wonder even in the face of growing evidence of environmental devastation. Gardening researchers Bhatti, Church, Claremont, and Stenner carried out a study in which they analysed gardening narratives from the Mass Observation Archive held at the University of Sussex. What they found was, 'prosaic pleasures and enchanting encounters' (Bhatti et al. 2009: 61) that occurred during the 'everyday mundane' practice of gardening. My work extends their research both by working with allotmenteers (their work focused solely on domestic gardens) but also in terms of practice. What both Bhatti et al. and I recognise is that this enchantment is present despite the banality of the practices that are taking place. My point of departure comes from my use of enchantment as a method to enhance my understanding of the participant observation which I was carrying out on allotment sites (Stainova 2019). This is significant because it takes the experience of enchantment out of a private setting into a public one. It means that there is the opportunity to share this intimate profound experience with others. It expands the moment of enchantment from being one that is largely inaccessible to others, to one that is a practice of hope which can be expanded to include others. I will illuminate this assertion with two examples: the first with which I close this section was my own experience of enchantment, and the second the subsequent section entitled 'Allotments as more than "magic", more than food', which details the actions of flower-growing allotmenteers.

The allotment plot that Charity first showed me when I first visited OxLea was badly overgrown so I was under no illusions about the amount of work that was

going to be required to cultivate it. Still, when I was visiting Charity's plot and she bent over to reveal her tomato, I allowed myself to be moved by what I saw. On an otherwise grey afternoon, Charity captured my imagination and drew me into a sense of wonder. This enabled me to 'step outside of [my] own sensory dispositions' (Stainova 2019: 225). It meant that I was able to experience the allotment site as a site of possibility. I immediately began to imagine what it was I could do with my own plot. In this way, I followed the lead of Yana Stainova who points out that, 'the co-existence of enchantment together with our interlocutors as a form of ethnographic method … can deepen and extend the critical project … allowing us to see beyond it to spaces of existence that are not completely engulfed by totalizing schemes' (Stainova 2019: 219). As stated in the preface of the thesis, on that first visit to OxLea allotment site I encountered the concept that I have ended up proposing in my thesis – I just did not know it yet. I met with the full force of the banality of the work that I was about to take on juxtaposed with the invitation of a utopic space by way of a ripe tomato.

Allotments as more than 'magic', more than food

There is an aesthetic aspect to gardening on allotments that is all too often overlooked. Whether it is the way in which some allotmenteers choose to bound vegetable plots with seasonal flowers or allotmenteers who exclusively grow ornamentals. Thus, my thesis contributes to a small but growing body of work that challenges the assumption that allotments are primarily about growing food and self-provisioning. Throughout the last century, there have been allotmenteers who also grew flowers on their plots (Opperman 2004), and what my fieldwork illuminates are contemporary allotmenteers who exclusively grow flowers and ornamentals as their

allotmenteering practice. Fascinatingly, all of the allotmenteers I met who exclusively grew flowers and ornamentals specifically earmarked a large proportion of what they grew to give away – routinely to strangers. They reported how much joy they received from the joy that they were giving through their floral gifts.

Michaela is a white female academic in her 30s who with her young family has an allotment plot, in the main to satisfy her husband's 'interest in being a farmer'. Perhaps unexpectedly, they almost exclusively grow flowers, and like Olivia and other flower-growing allotmenteers I interviewed, Michaela got most of her joy from giving the cut flowers away. Both Michaela and Olivia described the initial confusion and then delight experienced by strangers who they gave their flowers to. The people on the receiving end would wonder if they were trying to sell the flowers (they were not) or if there was a catch. Once it was established that Michaela, Olivia and others were simply giving them the flowers with no obligation other than to receive them, the results were always as Michaela said, 'glorious'. Reserved faces transformed by beaming smiles, people said that their days had been made. There was a 17-year-old 'chap' Olivia chatted with who was going to give them to his mother because 'she'll love' them.

Figure 10: A photo showing a selection of Michaela's flowers

The assumption that people primarily use allotments to alleviate hunger has obscured understandings of other motivations for use (Niala 2020). Allotment use

has always been multi-faceted and complex. Historically, in addition to sustainable food provision, allotments were involved in a socio-economic tension that expressed itself through a moral economy. In the early 1800s social improvement was a pressing concern, coupled with poverty alleviation. Echoing current health benefits ascribed to allotments, in the early 1800s allotments were seen to divert 'men away from the pub onto the allotment [and] this was a desired outcome by both social improvers and long-suffering wives alike' (Way 2008: 9). Archival records from the Vacant Land Cultivation Society reveal letters from the aforesaid wives pleading for land for their husbands to cultivate. However, the positioning of allotments as beneficial for the labouring landless poor was not entirely philanthropic. Following the French Revolution, there were agricultural riots and protests (such as the Swing Riots) in the UK, and it became increasingly important to connect labouring classes to the land in a way that kept them 'acquiescent and busy' (Way 2008: 10). This connection to the land was also considered in nationalistic and affective terms. When George Stephenson, known as 'father of the railways' founded his company, as well as building schools and houses for his workers he provided allotments 'to foster a love of home' (Foley 2014: 141). However, there were differing views on what the ultimate outcome of this connection to the land might be. One of the key apprehensions centred on a value that remains central for people who allotmenteer and guerrilla garden today, that of independence, including being able to grow what one wants. In order to counter this freedom of spirit, allotment rules were created, in some cases (such as those developed by the Church demanding that allotmenteers should not cultivate on Sundays) as an outright form of social control.

By the late 1800s, 'The idea that allotments would, first and foremost, improve the moral character of the poor had largely disappeared … rather stress was placed on the material benefits that could result' (King 2018). This has led to an

increasingly challenged concept of the idea that allotments are primarily about growing food in a way that is economically sustainable. In Oxford, the results of a survey carried out on allotments in 1913 is startlingly similar to what I found on allotments in 2019. Allotmenteers kept hardly any records of the amount of money they spent on their allotments, the value of their produce or their time spent in labouring on their plots. In 1913 it was noted that 'the allotment is literally their health and pleasure resort' and that 'The real value of the allotment is not to be tested in the economic sphere; it must be tested on a broader basis' (Ashby 1917: 57). Current literature has found that there are those who have 'turned to it (allotmenteering) for the recreational benefits' (Crouch and Ward 1997: 26) and others still for whom it has been a way to 'make time' (Schoneboom 2018) or improve their mental and physical health (Dobson et al. 2020). Many allotmenteers who I met during my fieldwork described it as a 'really good community activity' indicating the sense of belonging that they experienced on the allotment site. There were allotmenteers for whom the site was a home away from home and who all year round spent most of their day on the site. The various reasons that people grow on allotment sites were further heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic with allotmenteers who live in flats, for example, seeing their allotments as an extension of their homes (albeit a detached one). On City Gorse, for example, one family piece by piece transformed part of their plot into what resembled the outside seating area of a domestic garden, complete with tables and chairs.

Figure 11: An allotment veranda

This detachment is significant, as there is an emerging body of literature which demonstrates that being outside is good for your health. A Harvard health letter published in 2010 by the institution's medical school summarised both the physical and mental health benefits from several studies to that effect (Harvard 2010).

However, it is more than simply health benefits that are being pursued by the family who produced this carefully materialised space. They created a specific order which reflects a very particular kind of place. The first thing of note is the boards that they have taken the trouble to carry onto the site to place behind the chairs and in front of the allotment fence. In fact, several boards have been used in the construction of their outdoor space giving the effect of a porch or veranda attached to a house. The sense is developed not just of any outdoor seating area but a specifically domestic one. Even though there is only one wall, our internal vision creates the other walls which might exist. They also have a park bench close by to their plot, but this is not placed on the veranda area (although there is enough space for it) and indeed is also not bounded by a type of wall which denotes that it is seen as a public seating area. There is an unspoken demarcation between the private space of their plot and a nearby more public area of the wider allotment site.

The view from the 'private' veranda seat is also telling. After their own immediate garden (a description and analysis of which I will return to), all allotment plots to the far fence of the site were arranged such that one would have the sense of observing an expanded garden (albeit of slightly different gardening styles). This family's own allotment garden could be said to be classically English, with the neat rows of vegetables partially protected from more-than-human gardeners by an equally tidy and well-constructed wire cage. The effect of the garden plot and outdoor seating area is both inviting and yet sends a clear message of a cared for space that *belongs* to someone. This is in contrast to the more overgrown areas higher up on the site visible in the bottom right corner of the photo.

What makes this family's space 'magical' is the superimposition of an ordinary or banal setting on top of another everyday setting. Either of the spaces on their own would not necessarily warrant special attention – a well-cultivated allotment plot or a domestic veranda – but combined on an allotment site they bring to the fore another layer of meaning, one that leans towards a perfect place or somewhere utopic. During the COVID-19 lockdowns the family whose plot it is heightened this further by adding a rug to the flooring and complementing it with a drinks cabinet. Every extra piece of domestic furniture enhanced the feeling of a private space within an open semi-public one, a profound reminder that allotment sites are not accidental spaces but instead places where intentional interactions with non-human actors create important effects. Allotmenteers are aware of the ways in which they can practice 'magic' and make a world within a world. The anthropologist Sophie Chevalier encourages working with material culture of 'apparent banality' as she exhorts that, 'Generally speaking, objects are used as intermediaries in our relations with the world'. Chevalier argues that, 'This mediation is more obvious in England: objects and space mediate social relationships' (Chevalier 1995: 32). I noticed that

when the family entered the site (my plot was near the gate), although they were friendly and we always exchanged greetings, by the time they reached their plot (which was within my line of sight) I would avert my eyes because I did not want to intrude on their space – even just by looking at them.

> The domestic universe has a systemic power. This system is based on a normative cultural foundation onto which a characteristic and personal combination is built. In spite of the renewal of furniture or the object's circulation, the domestic decor is a space of great stability. (Chevalier 1995: 31)

The family lived in a flat and had a need for this indoor/ outdoor space and as the COVID-19 lockdowns wore on it became clear that they were creating their own idyllic world. They were transferring the symbolism of the domestic sphere into a different space. Homes had become prisons during lockdowns and allotmenteers allowed to go to their plots for an hour a day had the potential to build on this freedom and materialise a home away from the prison-like home. Sometimes, I would catch the family out of the corner of my eye and note that they were not even talking to each other. The son of the family would be reading a book while his parents were busy gardening – they might all take a break together and share a snack and drink – untouched for a spell by the vicissitudes of the world outside the allotment gates. This type of domestic/allotment, private/ public arrangement of an allotment plot was not unique to this family. On the following page is another example with a similar arrangement, in this case bounded by herbs and edible flowers demarcating the different uses of gardening and veranda space. Of particular interest is the rake that had been placed on the outside of the veranda space, but the handle has 'snuck in', breaching the imaginary wall.

Figure 12: An allotment veranda with rake handle

Although there is a growing body of literature that acknowledges the different uses and values of urban gardening spaces, whether allotments or guerrilla gardening spaces, what is less examined is the 'broader basis' of the value on which allotments rest. This thesis argues that by eschewing a strictly economic sphere and embracing the wider benefits, including the value of freedom grounded in a commonality of purpose, allotmenteers and guerrilla gardeners imagine this broader basis in utopic terms. Where land provision has been given either actively (allotments) or taken passively (guerrilla gardening spaces), the urban gardeners' practices intentionally simultaneously align with and resist the municipal reasoning for their existence. To close with the example from the beginning of the section, a consistent key policy on allotment sites in England is that crops grown on the site are not for sale to others. The kind of allotmenteering that Michaela and Olivia practice both circumvents and resists this policy. In the first instance they grow flowers,

which are not directly addressed in this policy. They then go on freely to give away the flowers from their plots to strangers outside the allotment site, behaving like pollen dispersed by the wind to bring their own slice of utopia into the wider world.

Magical guerrilla gardening sites

The stated link between magic and gardens[15] also extends to guerrilla gardening sites. One such example is a circular plot next to London's Victoria Park that has been dubbed the 'magic roundabout' (Krol 2020). Cultivated by Caroline Bousfield Gregory for 19 years, the 'transformation' she has co-created (Gregory talks about her collaboration with more-than-human gardeners) is now so well-known that it is written about in conventional gardening magazines (Richardson 2020). A key difference between guerrilla gardening and allotment sites is the physical boundaries between them and the cities in which they are located. Allotments are enclosed spaces (though this was not always the case historically), whilst guerrilla gardening sites such as roundabouts, edges of footpaths and around city trees are consciously unbounded and can (guerrilla gardeners argue) be accessed by anyone in the city. This difference matters because urban gardening sites are routinely referenced for their potential to create community. This potential in a context where inclusivity is high on societal agendas means it is crucial to tease out assumptions from the realities of whether or not urban gardening sites are inclusive (Pitt 2019). Allotments and guerrilla gardening sites make for useful comparators because they have an overlapping ancestry. Yet despite their common history and the overlap in practitioners (many urban gardeners in Oxford are both allotmenteers *and* guerrilla gardeners) the two practices are barely brought into conversation in the literature.

[15] There is also a link between gardens, magic and children that was raised by participants in my study but is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Although they are both practices of transformation, production and more, the legal status of allotments means that they have a long history of consideration. Guerrilla gardening with its ambiguous legal status appears intermittently in the literature (only making a sustained appearance from the 1970s onwards) and tends to be associated with its politics (Jahnke 2014) – the manner in which its transformative practice highlights neglect (Carlet et al. 2017), or emptiness (Desimini 2015).

This is an important conversation not only because of the common roots of allotmenteering and guerrilla gardening, but also because of what gardening (which is practised by around half of all adults in the UK (Buck 2016)) has come to represent. The bifurcation of the processes that has led to allotments as legal entities, as separate from guerrilla gardening sites, has given rise to two overlapping and yet distinctly separate communities. Although they are both places which are recognised as utopic by urban gardeners, what is of value is not only the construct (utopia) that may be applied to them but also the story of how they came and continue to be produced and constructed (Jameson 2005). The different paths taken shed light on what is gained and lost in the materialisation of utopic places within cities. Both allotmenteers and guerrilla gardeners see their engagement with the land as productive rather than extractive, but allotmenteers categorise their sites as a particular type of nature in which their human input should be recognised. Peggy, a white woman who was a recently retired public sector worker and has cultivated an allotment plot for over 46 years, when interviewed repeatedly used the word 'reclaimed' in talking about the process of turning a piece of land in the city that she characterised as 'wilderness' into an allotment site. She was categoric that allotment sites are not 'nature reserves' as 'nature reserves' are not places you can 'grow in'. When Peggy (and the vast majority of allotmenteers) reference growing they mean food – although a minority (as exemplified in the previous section) do exclusively

grow flowers.[16] Conversely, guerrilla gardeners in Oxford mainly grow plants that are seen as beautifying the city and that demonstrate their care for the city and more-than-human gardeners. They see themselves as actively making space for 'nature' in the city and often include themselves as part of nature. One of their arguments is that a reduction in public space for flowers and trees necessarily makes cities less habitable for humans.

This thesis has chosen allotmenteering and guerrilla gardening as a focus from all the different types of gardening that takes place in cities because of their common history and the manner in which they specifically call attention to the boundaries of what is public and private. Although they both share a common aim of creating utopic places within a city, the point of tension around their legality is instructive in making sense of place-making and accompanying communities in the urban context. They both foster a sense of an *alone, together* community, but guerrilla gardening communities are far looser, with minimal obligations, in part because of their lack of legal status. There are guerrilla gardening networks online which can attract a large number of users, but interaction on them can be sporadic. The Oxfordshire page on Guerrillagardening.org, for example, has not seen any new comments since January 2018. It is worth noting, however, that the lack of legality and recognition, as we will see in this thesis, does not stop the citizens who participate in guerrilla gardening from communicating directly with and impacting both the municipality and fellow city residents. Although allotments are legal, this legality does infringe on a core allotmenteer value of freedom (discussed in Chapter

[16] In the city of Oxford the allotmenteers who exclusively grow flowers grow 'cut flowers' and all who I spoke with specifically stated that they like to grow them to 'give to other people'. They did not face any discrimination from food growing on the sites on which they grew as their growing was still recognised as 'productive'. It is worth noting, however, that they all also shared plots with food growers and I did not come across any cut-flower growers who had a whole plot entirely given over to the growing of ornamentals.

Six entitled 'A place where no one tells me what to do') and sets up peculiarities about the ways in which this is negotiated on allotment sites. Their legality does not stop them from functioning as 'magical' places or places where 'magic' regularly occurs. In this way, by bringing allotment and guerrilla gardening sites into conversation, their affordances allow us to tease out the nuances of urban gardening as a place-making activity.

Troubling access

I was invited to tea at the home of an elderly white woman on the guerrilla gardening street which I monitored during my fieldwork. At least half the street knew about my doctoral research and would offer tips or suggestions that they thought might help. As we sipped our peppermint tea on a warm summer morning, it became clear that there was more than one reason that she had invited me. She felt it was important to share the views of people on the street who were not enamored with the guerrilla gardening that had been taking place.

> 'It was OK,' she said softly, 'when the planting only took place around the trees. In fact, some people felt that it made the place look rather jolly. Things became awkward when they began to plant hollyhocks along the walls in front of people's houses; not everyone likes it.'

Much like some of Malcolm Everton's neighbours (the guerrilla gardener discussed in the methodology chapter of this thesis), there are those who take offense to citizens shaping street aesthetics to their own personal tastes. My host went on to specifically name one of the residents on the streets who took to dousing the hollyhocks in herbicides in order to kill them, much to the confusion of the guerrilla gardeners. The guerrilla gardeners in question had previously left notes on their sites urging the council not to spray them and had finally even met with the council to

convince them not to spray the street altogether. Consequently, it appeared they could not understand why some of the hollyhocks they planted had died.

This quiet conflict is in direct contrast to the spreading of joy and wonder by way of flower-growing allotmenteers. Precisely because guerrilla gardeners choose to intervene on 'public' land means that they often have the wherewithal and understanding of how to navigate city systems. The name guerrilla may lead one to suggest that these are somehow marginalised community members radically taking charge of the city through transformatory practices, Whereas in Oxford quite the opposite is the case. On the street in question the guerrilla gardeners were white, middle class and retired following successful professional careers. Furthermore, while they might (as many guerrilla gardeners do in Oxford) claim that they are beautifying the city and increasing biodiversity, for the citizens who have not bought into this self-ascribed transformation of the city, their access is not being taken into consideration. While it might be easier to criminalise graffiti artists, it is arguable that paint can be easier to deal with than the effects of plants that *go wild*. Unchecked plants of particular species can block drains, cause structural damage to walls and lift roof tiles, and so-called invasive species can conversely reduce biodiversity.

Another argument concerning whether or not guerrilla gardeners both see their practice in terms of magic in their relations with more-than-human gardeners and indeed share the experience of awe is the question of access. In the chapter on methodology, I note that it can be difficult even to identify guerrilla gardening sites. Their banality is absorbed into the wider vernacular landscape of the city. That said, it has not stopped some sites being places that bring communities together in wonder at their beauty. I therefore argue that guerrilla gardening sites are banal utopic spaces. However, they do differ from allotment sites, as both the general

public and allotmenteers are aware that access onto an allotment site is controlled. Guerrilla gardeners state that their activities are beneficial to everyone in the city. Closer examination of the literature suggests otherwise. Particularly obvious guerrilla gardening sites can have the effect of being exclusionary, with the citizens of the city assuming it must be the private garden of an individual or organisation for it to be so carefully tended (Hardman and J. Larkham 2014).

Finally, unlike allotmenteers, who describe the invisible set of relations with the more-than-human gardeners with and alongside whom they practice as 'magical', guerrilla gardeners tend to be less mystical and more rational. They also express less humility even when they do not tend to their sites with the same regularity as allotmenteers. They frame their work as positively transforming the city and see their actions as the trigger for creating utopic spaces even as they work with plants and other more-than-human gardeners. It is possible that part of this is due to the constraints under which they work. Their engagement is necessarily less open because of the legal grey area in which guerrilla gardening rests. This does not afford the more mindful approach that allotmenteers describe, the sense of losing oneself in one's practice that is part of the allure of cultivating on allotment sites. It may also go some way to explaining why there are a number of urban gardeners in Oxford who practice both allotmenteering and guerrilla gardening – even though both are place-making activities, the quality of the interactions with their sites is markedly different.

Conclusion

After outlining a brief history of allotments and guerrilla gardening sites, this chapter examined the idea of magic as it relates to allotment sites in the city of Oxford. While it is possible to experience the practice of urban gardening as 'dreadful' it is also 'magical' and offers a gateway to experiencing areas within the city as enchanting. With examples such as my own experience of the magic of seeing a

tomato on a grey autumnal afternoon to the creation of the 'magic roundabout' guerrilla gardening space in London, what this chapter shows is that there are urban gardening sites that are seen and experienced as utopic places both by the urban gardeners who materialise them and some citizens of the city who encounter them. The ethnography highlighted the use of the word 'magic', and in this chapter I offer a different understanding of what allotmenteers mean by it in comparison to supernatural uses of the word magic. The allotmenteers' use reveals a set of relations with the more-than-human gardeners with whom they both collaboratively and competitively garden. This magic is also inherent in the interaction precisely because of allotmenteers' recognition of being human within a larger natural environment. This magic is born of a close attention to their cultivating practices. It contrasts with guerrilla gardeners, whose practices are necessarily fleeting given the legal grey area in which guerrilla gardening sits. What both types of engagement reveal is the transformatory potential within the banal practice of urban gardening.

CHAPTER 4: ‘A perfect set up’

Practical and legal materialisations of urban gardening sites

This chapter opens with a sequence of photos that demonstrates the materialisation of an allotment plot.

Figure 13: Gathering the materials

Figure 14: Constructing raised beds

Figure 15: Transporting soil for the raised beds

Figure 16: An allotment plot with raised beds

Chapter introduction

The previous chapter examines the ways in which urban gardeners' relations and interactions with more-than-human gardeners were a key part of making their sites 'magical' or 'utopic'. This chapter works with the utopic impulse and two of the main ways in which it has written itself on the landscape of cities across England. Beginning with the impulse is an inversion to the way in which utopias are usually approached. Previously in utopian texts whether non-fiction or fiction – the utopia is already materialised and what follows is the analysis of whether the space is indeed actually utopic. An example from non-fiction is Everyday Utopias by Davina Cooper (2014) where she works with examples as diverse as democratic schools to feminist bathhouses.. Examples abound in fiction, but the example of Herland by Charlotte Perkins Gillman (Gilman 1915) is typical where, 'the social spaces depicted in the utopia had already 'come into being' before the moment at which the given narrative opened' (Atkinson 2007: 240). This approach has tended to cement the notion that utopic spaces are therefore fantastical and unachievable. Yet we know there are spaces that are recognised as utopic and are not neutral spaces. This chapter looks at the ways in which the utopic impulse is wielded as an effective instrument. It is an impulse that holds within it a transformatory possibility that can travel through time in order to have an impact weeks, years or decades after it was first initiated.

Guerrilla gardening has long been associated with its activism and protest but is now beginning to make an entry into the literature as a utopic practice. Atkinson analysing Michel de Certeau's work characterises guerrilla gardening as 'the garden's radicalisation in a third utopian dimension' that 'works at the level of the everyday' (Atkinson 2007: 249). Because they are unbounded 'with the topography and configuration of these gardens chang[ing] continually' they tend to be

overlooked as utopias in action. I saw an example of a similar impulse in Oxford with a white elderly lady who took to planting flowers at the end of her street 'to pretty the place up'. She was not in any way an activist but was motivated to make the bit of the world she could influence – better. It was a utopic impulse.

With regards to allotmenteering, this chapter takes a step back to analyse the legal processes that enabled allotment sites to exist in the first place. It transpires that the impulse to create a legal existence for allotment sites was in the main a utopic one – an impulse that would enable people to sustain themselves and their families particularly during a historical period when this was not a guarantee and state help was limited.

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when it became clear that I was no longer going to be able to carry out semi-structured interviews in person, I sent an email to fellow allotmenteers asking if they knew anyone who would be open to speaking with me. Prior to this time, the arrangements for my semi-structured interviews had occurred organically. From the moment I received my ethical clearance, whenever I met anyone who had any kind of link to urban gardening in Oxford, I would immediately tell them about my research and gain further consent if I felt that what they shared might turn out to be useful in my study. My ethnographic approach was one grounded in extended time carrying out fieldwork, cultivating on different allotment sites throughout the city of Oxford and was based on methodological reflections by Dick Hobbs as detailed in Abigail Schoneboom's study on allotments in Newcastle, 'a definition based less around specific techniques than on sustained personal engagement in a setting aimed at understanding the meanings that people attach to their lives' (Schoneboom 2018: 364; Hobbs 2006). The state sanctioned lockdowns upended these possibilities and meant I had to take an

approach that I had been actively avoiding. Because I live in Oxford, there were allotmenteers who had a vested interest in my research and my request got shared much further afield than the details of who the person was making the request accompanying them. I began to receive emails and text messages from people I didn't know who clearly didn't know me, asking questions like 'Are you the lady from Oxford University wanting to talk to someone who has an allotment?'. This chapter shares what was gleaned from one such interview with a woman named Anabelle. We met Annabelle in the interlude on soil and slugs which features her relationship to the soil. It places Anabelle's experience into conversation with allotment law and demonstrates how the utopic impulse can work through legal processes to have a transformational effect on how city citizens become allotmenteers through their engagement with the land. The chapter closes by revealing the complexities of the transformation offered by a growing engagement with urban land.

Developing utopian laws – demand as a utopian impulse

Section 23 of the Allotments and Smallholdings Act 1908 states that if allotment authorities

> 'are of the opinion that there is a demand for allotments.... in the borough, district or parish the Council shall provide a sufficient number of allotments to persons... resident in the borough, district or parish and desiring the same'.

In determining demand, an authority must take into consideration 'a representation in writing by any six registered parliamentary electors or rate payers' (Clayden and Garner 2002). This prerequisite points to critiques about the unrealisability of utopias. Not everyone in a city is a rate payer or indeed registered to vote. David Graeber noted that this is the case for bureaucracy (of which the legal process is a part). He wrote that bureaucracies are utopic because, 'they propose an abstract ideal

that real human beings can never live up to' (Graeber 2012: 26,27) However, if utopia and dystopia are considered together (Blanes and Bertelsen 2021), it is possible instead to see how creating a credible legal route for access to land can be seen as a response of city citizens to the inequalities they face. To be able to demand an allotment site may seem remarkable (particularly if one considers the current high value of urban land) when you consider that when the act was developed it was intended to be an ordinary and straightforward response to the financially hard pressed of the two-tiered Victorian society who were scrambling to feed their families. The Allotment Act was not entirely a benevolent response by a thoughtful government concerned with feeding its starving citizens. Before allotments migrated in the late 19th century and early twentieth century (along with their humans) to urban areas,[17] they were borne out of a consistent struggle in which the working classes and labourers demanded better treatment and rights (including the right to vote). These protests (which in urban centres took to the streets) were organised through movements such as the Chartists, who even in urban areas included access to land as part of the struggle. The Chartists were the first mass working-class movement in Britain who fought for political reform including enfranchisement (the right to vote) for men who did not own property. Responses to the demands initially arose from the church and wealthy citizens (who provided land for growing to the deserving poor) but also went on to include the government by way of legislation (Foley 2014). It is interesting to note that the word demand is still part of the Allotment Act – a perceptible trace of its origins borne out of protest.

[17] 'By 1914 one quarter of allotments were now in the towns and cities' FOLEY, C. 2014. *Of Cabbages and Kings: The history of allotments,* London, Frances Lincoln. This movement has continued unabated to the present day where there are significantly more urban than rural allotments.

In the present day, parish councils have 35 'powers and duties' in order for them to be able to carry out their function and which directly impact the public. Examples of powers include being able to provide public clocks and bins. Out of the 35 'powers and duties' only two are duties. The two duties are 'to require information' pertaining to financial assistance which allows the council to spend money outside its usual remits to benefit the local community and 'to provide allotments' (Government 2021). The link between allotments and finance although not explicit in the 'powers and duties' is not entirely coincidental. If an allotment site is indeed to be created – then there are financial commitments that have to be upheld at various stages. The council may have to purchase the land and, even if that is not required, fencing and other materials (such as for creating wells) will be needed in order to materialise the site. Furthermore, a 'duty' means that if the council did not respond to the demand made by a group of citizens for an allotment site, they could compel the parish or local council to provide allotments by seeking a mandatory order under civil procedure rules in the county court. The purpose of civil procedure rules is to resolve civil conflict swiftly and simply. Unlike many other types of court proceedings, they are accessible and do not usually cost the complainant a significant financial outlay. This is what makes the provision of allotments as a duty both astonishing and yet ordinary. There are in effect very few duties which parish and town councils are bound to by law thus empowering citizens to be able to hold them directly legally accountable. The financial duty is stated in Section 137 of the Local Government Act and can be used to compel the council to spend money on grants that will benefit the local community that have not been otherwise budgeted for. The other (as indicated) is the allotment duty which is section 23 of a dedicated Small Holdings and Allotment Act. I propose that Section 23 is an example of a law that can be

instrumentalised as utopian, as per the criteria in Thomas More's book which, to paraphrase, states that in Utopia:

- Very few laws are needed
- The laws that exist are easy to understand
- No one needs a lawyer to plead their case or to benefit from these laws
- The laws are interpreted at their most basic level (More 2012 [1516])

Not only does section 23 of the Allotment Act fulfil all the criteria, when combined with section 137 of the Local Government Act, I argue that it typifies a banal utopia. This is a situation as Anabelle described where it is not out of the ordinary for just six citizens to approach the local council and demand land for an allotment which is then duly provided for them to create their 'perfect' place; a demand which is protected by law; a demand to which a citizen can compel the council to submit without the need for a lawyer and through civil proceedings should any conflict with the council arise. The six citizens can even simultaneously receive a financial grant (as well as the land) in order to carry out the works required to get the allotment site off the ground. Nevertheless, paradise is not exempt from troubles. I will now describe how even before urban land had reached its current high values, what appear to be, as More states in *Utopia*, laws that we 'should like', we can 'hardly expect' to work so efficiently (Ibid).

The first qualification that the six citizens who approach the council with their demand must meet is that they either have to be registered voters or council taxpayers. While in the present day this may seem sensible, in 1887 in the early days of the formation of urban allotments, this was in effect exclusionary. For citizens to be thus enfranchised (i.e., be able to register to vote) and thus be able to demand an allotment site they had to be men who either held land valued at more than £10 or paid an annual rent of more than £10. This disenfranchised all women and 40% of

adult men. What this requirement partially obscures are the tensions behind ordinary people having access to land at all. The Victorian era is one characterised by, amongst other things, shocking levels of urban poverty as described by writers such as Charles Dickens. Alongside political struggles to improve the living standards of the financially poor, practically speaking most allotment provision was in the hands of the church or wealthy landowners (in Oxfordshire this was the Duke of Marlborough) and in rural areas farmers, all of whom had vested interests in labourers not having greater self-determination. Land providers saw a balance to be struck between allowing people to grow enough food to keep them out of the workhouse, but not quite enough that they would flourish and be able to increase their protests and self-organise (Foley 2014). One way in which this was done was to limit the supply of available allotments meaning that waiting lists are as old as allotments themselves.

It may seem as though allotment law which began from a utopic impulse to meet the needs of the urban poor was encoded to benefit only a particular type of citizen, but the utopian process did not end there. The continued struggle of ordinary citizens through movements such as the Chartists, combined with the impact of First World War, meant that Section 23 steadily began a march back to its utopian roots (Tiller 1985 ; Cragoe and Readman 2010).

A contemporary demand

As mentioned in the chapter introduction, one respondent to my request for allotment interviewees was Anabelle, a cheery middle-aged white woman whose husband was also an allotmenteer though they cultivated on different sites. Anabelle was a teacher and, in some instances, co-opted her practice of allotmenteering as an

educational tool. Her voice clearly became more animated when she described bring able to share practical examples of growing with the children she taught. Even better was being able to get them to experiment with growing themselves. Anabelle was keen to support my research and also wanted to share her story of starting an allotment site from the ground up.

> There wasn't an allotment, but we, there were enough of us to start one off because we read about some Parish council meeting requirements, if enough residents in an area want to start an allotment, they have to supply land. So we basically put together a group. And I think it's over five, you can get a group started five or seven or something like that. And then they had to find a piece of land which is suitable. And they found a piece of land, which was perfect. And it's been now running about 25 plots. And, and they're not big plots, but there's enough people actively running it to make it worthwhile. And, and it was a bit of land that was literally just waste grassland ... we realised [allotments] was actually a really important thing that every community should have.

When Anabelle described the land on which the allotment site was located, she talked about its transformation from 'literally just waste grassland' into something 'worthwhile'. The process by which Anabelle was able to cultivate on an allotment site is at once simple and yet raises various questions – questions to which this chapter will propose explanations about the complexities that arise from what appears to be a straightforward process. These explanations are intertwined with a century and a half of allotment history that both illuminate why it can currently be challenging to gain access to grow in a city and how allotmenteers' awareness of this heightens their experience of their places as 'magical'. These illuminations speak to the wider city in which urban gardening sites are located as an important reminder of a 'generative politics' (Blanes and Bertelsen 2021), a politics by which it is possible to manifest hopes for the future in the present. When urban gardeners grow in a city, they have in effect turned utopia from an idea or a 'spirit' into a 'praxis generative of

mobilisation; an actual political intervention into the world intended for its recreation or regeneration' (Blanes and Bertelsen 2021:7; Wright 2010).

Materialising an allotment site

During my interview with Anabelle, it transpired that it took at least 'a year and a half' to start an allotment site from the initial inception of the idea until it was possible for the group to grow on it. Once the site was up and running, in common with how many allotmenteers describe their sites across Oxford, Anabelle declared it 'perfect'. Anabelle used the word 'realise' to define how her community came to view the value of allotments. However, another realisation occurred on the 'waste grassland' which became an allotment site – a material one. Anabelle described the bamboo canes that she used to support her growing plants but also across the site other allotmenteers put up, 'structures that obviously protect plants that need protecting … people have built frames and compost heaps … paths to make [plots] easier to access'. There was also a less welcome materiality – particularly as Anabelle tries 'to have as little plastic as possible'. She did not hold back her views on 'a plot that just has loads of random blue plastic things, tubs, um stuff that's fallen over – it looks, it looks nasty'.

Anabelle's comments on the plastic uncover two interrelated aspects about the meaning of allotments through their aesthetics which was triggered by the presence of a modern material. Both aspects relate to how nature is imagined and the past idyll that it signifies. It is jarring to see plastic because it immediately turns the allotment landscape into one of a contemporary time and place, cutting it off from its rural possibilities while simultaneously linking it to a modern problem. Particularly because of the current environmental crisis, the expectations placed on nature (and

our concomitant responsibilities for it) have greatly increased. Allotments are in essence rural artefacts that migrated from the countryside to the city with their people. As such, embedded within them, is what some researchers call the 'myth of the rural idyll' (Watkins and Jacoby 2007: 851). The idea being that rural life is an escape from the stresses of modern urban life. Rural life is seen as more in harmony with nature and each other and is imagined to be one that is fulfilling and centred on community. Furthermore, 'This prevailing imagination of rural space, it is argued, has long been central to British national identity – particularly that variety known as "Englishness"' (Watkins and Jacoby 2007: 6). Allotments therefore afford the possibility of an escape into the rural. Immersed in horticultural activity, allotmenteers can transcend the urbanity that surrounds the allotment sites. It makes it understandable why for Anabelle the plastic is so 'nasty'. The plastic creates a rupture between her 'perfect' place with its embedded rural idyll of the past and immediately brings her back into the present problematic urban context. There are other possible readings of the blue plastic – it could be seen as part of a different time of environmental consciousness and practice – one in which items are repurposed or reused. The fact that Anabelle does not offer these alternative readings is a powerful reminder of the aesthetics that are expected of allotments due to the idea that they are meant to represent a good (read better) time or way of being. Moreover, allotmenteers are also acutely aware of the impression that their sites make on others in the wider city and want to actively avoid a 'tatty characterisation' (Poole 2006: 203).

What is notable (and this will be expounded on in the chapter entitled 'a place where no one tells me what to do' in which the value of freedom allotmenteers share is detailed) is that in general Anabelle and other allotment committees do not actively ban plastic materials from allotment sites. Welcome or not, the material

additions to the site still manage to change it from being a 'waste' into something productive (and despite some of the imperfections) it was 'perfect'. It was Annabelle's material engagement with the piece of land that was a 'driving force behind [her and wider] humanity's attempts to transform the world in order to make it accord with beliefs as to how the world should be' (Miller 2005: 2). Anabelle echoes the words of many allotmenteers when she talks about allotment sites as worlds which are like a 'community hub' where, 'it's a nice way of being in public but also in your own private space', a place where the value of growing also extends to more-than-humans as in Anabelle's case the soil as something 'to be aware of'. As described in the interlude on soil and slugs, she works with the soil and has been researching its 'microbiology' practising methods to support its 'structure' and carrying out less 'digging over'. As a result, she feels that on a site which is prone to getting waterlogged – her plot is less affected. Although she is happy that she has got 'a whole perfect ecosystem' she would never dream of encouraging others to practice *her* particular style of gardening. Because above all else allotmenteers value their freedom to do as they wish on allotment sites – in the main they tend to extend this to others. They tolerate other allotmenteers' material engagements with the site. Anabelle instead focuses on the value of actually being an allotmenteer and creating a space from which everyone can benefit, a value seen as so positive that she and other allotmenteers not only wished to experience it themselves but wished it for *every* community in the wider city.

The word realise is particularly apt in understanding why urban gardening sites have been under-theorised as utopic places. There are both material and imaginative reasons for this. Physically,

> for supposedly public sites, allotments are often curiously hidden away, classically glimpsed in passing only from train windows, visible only fleetingly from the corner of one's eye, there for a blurred second and gone again before

> they have quite registered, framing the city and journeys between cities, so that you might almost have imagined this other higgledy-piggledy world. (Moore et al. 2014: 332)

What Moore's vivid description of allotments demonstrates is the gap between the imagination and realisation of these spaces that is closed in the active manifestation of allotment sites. 'Glimpsed' from the outside it can seem as though this gap was never closed – that allotments only exist in this 'other' world that is both out of reach and impossible to grasp. This gap is noteworthy when addressing the question of whether or not allotments are utopic places, and I will return to it at the end of my argument.

Imaginatively, anthropology is not the only discipline to struggle with the *realisation* of allotments as utopic places. To realise means both 'to become fully aware of something as fact' but also to 'achieve a wish or plan' (Soanes 2002). Anabelle and her group by setting up an allotment site in effect did both. In achieving the establishment of their site, they came to realise its value as a material fact. One reason that urban gardening sites in general and allotment sites in particular have remained challenging to theorise as utopias is because of their physical hiddenness as described above, but another is because of the way in which utopia has been traditionally understood. *Utopia* has often been understood as fictitious, but More's writing on utopia is more nuanced than this. More's book *Utopia* is in fact split into two books – book one and book two. While his second book in *Utopia* relates to a perfect fictitious island, his first book takes place in a real garden in Antwerp. Given the ambiguity of More's text, I argue that the 'discussion' that is carried out in book one (which is far less referenced) with 'the exceptional man Raphael Hythloday' gives us a clue that More may have been playfully suggesting that it is possible for a utopia to be real (More 2012 [1516]). There are further parallels – the fictional island of Utopia is not sealed off from the rest of the world but remains in relation to it. This is

much like the islands of allotment sites that are perceived as their own world by allotmenteers within the city that they have a relation to. It is even possible to argue that allotment sites are a utopia precisely because they sit in contrast to the dystopic cities that surround them. I expound on this further in Chapter Seven, entitled 'Fresh local produce', through the responses of non-allotmenteer city citizens' visits to OxLea allotment site during an Open Day.

If one is to take into consideration the commonly held view that gardens are worlds within worlds, what I offer is that allotment sites work to repair what Ingold describes as 'a rupture between the world and our imagination of it'. In an era where truth resides in science that is based on material evidence, 'the imagination is [seen] as an escape from real life rather than its impulse'. Urban gardeners do this because they 'join *with* the world in performance' (Ingold 2014: 47). For allotmenteers, there is no rupture between their imagination of a perfect world and their manifestation of it. Gardening is both practical *and* imaginative as attested to by many gardeners and authors (Don 2009 ; Kincaid 1999 ; Lively 2018). This is in direct contrast to the gap I mentioned earlier – a gap in which allotments are not 'quite registered' before being consigned as impossible places of the imagination.

What also remains hidden from view, however, are the instances where the reality of allotmenteering does not match up to the ideals of the imagination. During my fieldwork, I also spoke with people who had given up their plots (or been made to give them up by allotment committees). Here I return to the 'tatty characterisation' referred to earlier in this chapter with regards to allotment aesthetics. Allotmenteers are aware that *the way* an allotment site looks has a direct relation to the value placed on it. Allotments that do not in some way appear to be cared for, 'do little to promote the benefits that allotments could provide the community' (Poole 2006: 203). Due to the underlying tensions (all puns intended) of the value of urban land,

despite the clash it may create with the allotmenteers' value of freedom, the maintenance of a bare minimum of aesthetic is required. This tension is further heightened because of contemporary gardening practices that do not ascribe to the rows of tidy vegetables aesthetic that is strongly associated with allotment plots. Practices such as permaculture or wildlife gardening make for plots that may appear not to have had any human interaction with them. The onus is then on the allotment secretary to decide if an unkempt plot is truly uncared for, warranting a warning letter, or if it is instead a particular style of growing. The net result is that most plots on allotments have ways in which they signal that they are actively being used. This often relates to the visible health of the plants but can also stretch to other materials – a well-placed rake, a shovel mid dig, careful constructions such as canes used for climbing plants, the coveted allotment shed. These are all materials that demonstrate what will hopefully be read as a positive human interaction with the allotment landscape, one that is intended to show a movement towards productivity and value. What non-allotmenteers never get to see or hear about are those who struggle to maintain a plot and eventually get evicted. If you are a member of the public who has been on an allotment site waiting list (for example for up to a few years), when you finally receive the call that a plot has become available, the last person on your mind is who vacated it and why. In this way the utopic place that an allotment site is continues to remain 'perfect'.

A multi-faceted utopia

Even if we are to accept that allotment sites are utopias from the perspective of allotmenteers, the question still remains as to what use utopia is to anthropology as a discipline and the wider world in general. My insistence on 'staying with the trouble'

(Haraway 2016) of utopia in anthropology stems from a compulsion to join the small but growing body of work where

> anthropologists: … engage in a political anthropology of utopian confluences, where the political appears *not* as institutionalised praxis but as an emergent and generative formation that affects the 'being-ness' of the selves that take part in it. (Blanes and Bertelsen 2021: 14)

My experience of this effect arose as I was having a conversation with Karen who has been growing on the Swardland allotment site for over three decades. Karen has what could be described as a mainly 'traditional' allotment plot. As it is full sized, there are several beds within it and she has rotated the vegetables that grow on the different beds over the years, showing her concern for the soil's health. Generations of her family are also reflected in the plot – she grows a lot more pumpkins now because of the pleasure that they bring to her grandchildren. Karen routinely spends the whole day at the plot and so takes in the practicalities of what that means for a female allotmenteer on sites that do not provide the requisite facilities. As well as tools, her shed harbours a bucket which serves as a toilet. On the day in question, I had noticed that an area on her site that she had clearly planted for pollinators was blooming and, on my way out of the site, stopped to compliment her on it. We ended up chatting and the conversation eventually turned to the nearby housing development which loomed large on the land neighbouring the site. As allotmenteers understandably (but not without hyperbole) have a deep concern for their access to the land, Karen passionately declared that 'she would fight down to the last drop of her blood' to save the site should it be under threat because of the growing housing development that borders Swardland. Karen's statement demonstrated the embodied nature of her relationship with the site and in common with many other allotmenteers this relationship is not passive or unmediated. As stated in the introduction to the thesis, under English law, unless privately owned, all land

belongs to the Crown and is granted for use by the public via a local authority (Bright 2018). This means that allotmenteers (unlike many other city citizens) are not only aware of the negotiations that are required in order for them to be able to grow on so-called 'public' land – they willingly enter into material, legal and political processes to enable the manifestation of their 'perfect' places.

In working with allotmenteers ethnographically, anthropologists can learn from this 'generative formation'. I assert that this work is urgent because of the dystopian times we are said to be living in. The climate emergency, COVID-19 pandemic and rise of extremism amongst other challenges around the world have made dystopian futures seem as though they have already arrived in the present. Or, to quote Frederick Jameson, a prominent utopian thinker,

> We have seen a marked diminution in the production of new utopias over the last decades (along with an overwhelming increase in all manner of conceivable dystopias, most of which look monotonously alike). (Jameson et al. 2016: 1)

While allotments may not be new, they have continued to reinvent themselves both through moments of national crisis, such as during Second World War when they became ubiquitous around England, and also through policy moments such as in the 1960s when they legally became Allotments **and** Leisure Gardens (Jameson et al. 2016 ; Niala 2020). As such the practice of urban gardening represents precisely a type of 'utopian confluence' where government policy meets gardeners' practice and is actively transformed by it into the materialisation of 'magical places'.

It is worth stating explicitly that utopia overlaps with hope in anthropological literature because of the role that hope plays in the impetus to create a utopia. Nauja Kleist and Stef Jansen 'identify two overall trends in the anthropological literature gathered under the rubric of hope: an emphasis on hopefulness against all odds and one on specific formations of hope and temporal reasoning' (Kleist and Jansen 2016:

373). In their analysis they examine both trends by looking at ethnographies where people espouse hope. In the first trend one example is an ethnography of peoples on the African continent dealing with uncertainties (Cooper and Pratten 2015). Elizabeth Cooper and David Pratten's work is an example of hopefulness against all odds. Within it they examine everyday lives and the strategies that people deploy in order to navigate structural systems and development processes that engender mistrust and instability. Instead of taking the route of some development literature that can characterise people as helpless, these are instead African people who value a hopeful foresight (Groenewoudt 2018). Their work, 'develop[s] the notion of uncertainty as a productive force, a source of hope and aspirations, and a ground for orientation and action towards the future' (Van Den Broeck 2016: 176).

The other line of enquiry follows 'specific formations of hope' that involve knowledge production such as the hope practised by financial market traders in Japan (Miyazaki 2006). Hirokazu Miyazaki works ethnographically amongst people who work in financial markets acknowledging that they are not an obvious choice for the use of hope as a unit of social analysis. He traces the way in which hope becomes a point of commonality between traders reorienting their work in the light of neo-liberal reforms and academics who critique capitalism. Their contrasting views meet in the way in which they reorient knowledge. Miyazaki was responding to Vincent Crapanzano's call to attend to hope (Crapanzano 2003). It is also a call to which I respond in part because of the emphasis within anthropology on power, inequality, suffering and control. This in turn leads to an excessive focus on dystopian worlds at the expense of the utopian worlds that can exist within or as a counterpoint to them, the type of anthropology which Sherry Ortner refers to as 'dark anthropology' (Ortner 2016). These ethnographic works can, as Tobias Kelly points out, 'turn into a voyeuristic quasi-pornography' (Kelly 2013: 213). Dark anthropology has not gone

uncontested, and my work is situated within the anthropology that works with possibility. It is not so much a confrontation but instead a conversation which acknowledges the ways in which dystopia and utopia can be intertwined.

Allotments are spaces of radical hope (as coined by Jonathan Lear) because they offer a response to the cultural crisis that is being experienced across England (Lear 2022). Typified by the close Brexit vote, people up and down the country are still asking themselves what it means to be English. This is particularly in the context of the idea of Englishness having been co-opted in politically disturbing ways (Haseler 2017). I am not being flippant when I highlight that there was no Brexit on allotment sites; the reality is that allotmenteers of all backgrounds and heritages continued to carry on growing in their perfect worlds *alone, together*. This is in direct contrast to the wider city when work colleagues became border guards and had to ask European citizens for proof of residency in the UK. On allotment sites, no visas were required for entry. Allotment sites that had national flags continued to display them without provocation and those that did not carried on as normal. While politicians and analysts argued about what economic changes were or were not as a result of Brexit, life on this most curious piece of English material cultural heritage – namely the allotment site – carried on as it had before. There is something profoundly hopeful about a space that is strongly associated with national identity to be able to withstand that very same national identity undergoing a huge shock.

The other shock that allotment sites are negotiating with hope is the environmental one. Allotmenteers in the main do not see themselves as helpless in the face of the climate emergency. They form and maintain a relationship with the non-human gardener that is the weather, and this allows them to both relate to it and feel that they have the possibility to negotiate some of its challenges. As part of my fieldwork, I monitored the weather for nearly three years; it brought me a fresh

understanding of the microclimate in the areas in which I cultivated. Comparing the very local weather to the broader weather of the city of Oxford more widely drew my attention to both patterns but also variances between locations. Although I did not have it myself, it gave me a greater understanding of the confidence some allotmenteers displayed that they would likely be able to find ways to keep feeding themselves. On one of the allotment sites I visited (but did not cultivate on) I spoke with a journalist who reports almost exclusively on what he calls 'climate breakdown'. He explained that working in his mini orchard gave him hope for the future because in doing so he had to think 'two years ahead'. It was remarkable that a man who essentially earns his living from focusing on all the evidence of the world's environmental doom was restored by tending to and carefully pruning his fruit trees, on an allotment.

My research aims to build on the aforementioned explorations of hope by the ethnographic addition of urban gardeners in Oxford. Urban gardeners in their practice make a different offering of hope that is practical as much as it is imaginative. Furthermore, their practice is chronotropic in that as well as working towards a better future, urban gardeners also 'make time' in the present (Schoneboom 2018). Allotmenteers routinely referred to time with regards to their allotment site and differentiate it from time in the city outside the allotment gates. Once on the allotment site, time simultaneously slows down as they relax but also speeds up as they lose themselves in pleasurable activity. This distinctive way of working with time extended to practical actions. As an allotmenteer plants a seed, they bring its future as a plant into the present through their imagination and actions. A seed that is planted upside down will still grow but requires more energy to do so and thus allotmenteers take time to sow their seeds in a manner that will be

more beneficial to the plant. This collaboration with more-than-human gardeners rearranges time in ways that can be concurrent or consecutive.

Listening to allotmenteers talk about the time that they spent on their allotment plots (as Schoneboom found) it became clear that allotmenteering made different types of time. Anabelle's husband noted that it made him make time for exercise because as he said, 'it forces you to be mildly active all the time'. The more-than-human gardeners by way of plants have to be tended to either keep them growing or to remove the unwelcome ones (weeds). The recognition of the agency of more-than-human gardeners meant that allotmenteers also spoke of a relational time and one which they had to balance with their daily lives. It was unsurprising that retired people (and in the first year of the pandemic, people on furlough) reported spending as much time as they could on their plots. For those who had other obligations, the relational time with the more-than-human gardeners was further heightened. Or as Michaela who exclusively grew flowers and juggled with a busy family and work life noted,

> Our plot is always a little bit out of control looking and it's full of weeds. But there are a lot of plants growing on it. Because when we go there, we spend most of our time planting and harvesting and doing the essential things and we basically don't have time to keep up with the weeds.

This sense of keeping up with more-than-human gardeners' time (usually by way of weeds) is a concern for all allotmenteers because in the private and yet public space that allotment sites are they are acutely aware that others can read the amount of time that they have spent on their plots. In this way, weeds are a stark calendar that betrays the difference between the time allotmenteers would like to spend on their plots and the actual time that they do. This is why Michaela is quick to add that there are 'a lot of plants' which indicate time that she *did* spend cultivating even as they intermingle with the weeds. Underlying the plurality of these different sorts of time is

a sense of hope that is directly linked to the passage of time. I experienced this myself every time I put a seed into the ground – the factor of time that was necessary for my hopes of a healthy plant to be fulfilled.

Despite the obvious connections between garden spaces, hope and utopia, it is noteworthy that very few empirical anthropological studies have chosen allotment sites in England as a starting point for engaging with utopia and the imagination. In the introduction to the collection of essays that is entitled *The Anthropology of Utopia* Dan Chodorkoff asks, 'How can we reharmonize people and nature?' (Chodorkoff 2014: 7). The essays that follow are surveys of 'alternative ways of life that can help … create an ecological society.' Like the book *Environmental Anthropology Engaging Ecotopia: Bioregionalism, Permaculture and Ecovillages* the growing of food as a method of engaging with nature is prioritised whether in urban or rural settings (Lockyer and Veteto 2013). Yet, the ways in which utopia has been engaged with in the literature has been limited to certain avenues. 'Gardens and Utopias often go hand in hand – but in complex and contradictory ways' (Burrell and Dale 2002: 107) and 'To a large extent the history of Utopia has been intimately bound up with the city' (Maycroft 2001). However, strangely enough, when it comes to the material culture of utopia or the location of utopia in place, as discussed in the opening of this section, it appears to be characterised by an ephemerality that makes it difficult to pin down. Although we may envisage technological advances that ease the passage of our lives, we are also human and live in bodies that need to perform bodily functions that include eating and creating waste. Imaginations of high-tech growing spaces in underground bunkers do not encompass the mental health benefits of growing outdoors and in the ground. 'In addition, the influence of indoor local environmental factors [in greenhouse farms] including temperature, humidity, and ventilation levels on pesticide exposure levels could aggravate [negative] health

effects' (Amoatey et al. 2020). Notions of the possibilities of self-sufficiency often do not take into account the long-acknowledged hunger gap of weeks or months between growing seasons that has even lent the name to a variety of kale (Hungry Gap kale).

When imagining the future of a city complete with food sovereignty and ecological balance, anthropology has engaged with allotment sites with respect to their functionality in the historical context. In the paper 'Grow Your Own: Space, Planning, Practice and Everyday Futures of Domestic Food Production', Enrico Marcore and Nicola Spurling raise the important point of relationality of 'some of the specific relationships between food growing practices and spaces' (Marcore 2016). They take a historical view of allotments in the UK namely around First World War , during the interwar years and finally during Second World War, examining the ways in which 'different futures of domestic food growing are imagined, with elements of these imaginaries leaving traces in urban spaces and in town planning, agricultural, land use and unemployment policy' (Marcore 2016). In brief, they see the history of allotments in the UK between 1900 and 1950 as occupying three distinct moments each markedly different from the other in their imaginaries. During the time of the First World War, Marcore and Spurling argue that the urgency was provision for the urban poor, in the interwar period the focus moved towards national security, while post Second World War , allotment practices were a solution to unemployment and contemporaneous austerity. As broad overviews these moments make sense; however, they may not fully account for individual motivations and drivers for participating in allotmenteering. Furthermore, as I will detail in the next section – even the policies that co-created these moments are intricate and complex.

To briefly return to the individual grower, as Schoneboom noted (and I found), allotmenteering is often a solitary practice even while carried out in a

seemingly social context (Schoneboom 2018), hence my coining of the phrase *alone, together* in the context of allotmenteering. And considering the wider context, even in the most difficult of political times it is sweeping to relegate allotments to being purely functional. James Elkins posits that garden spaces are thoughts about nature made visible (Elkins 1993). Although there are hardly any direct voices of allotmenteers recorded from the time around First World War, their actions do speak to different sorts of relations with the other more-than-human gardeners on the site. Cultivation of flowers for example and a reflection of 'the sensory and kinaesthetic understanding of soil quality, climate, seed maturation and more complex horticultural practices, all of which relied on experience and intelligence' (Nilsen 2014: 126) speak to an imaginary that is about more than basic food production. So, while I generally agree with Marcore and Spurling's findings on relationality, and have found examples of these traces in my own fieldwork (such as the OxLea allotment site which began its life as a war allotment site), their analyses do not cover a critical aspect, namely the relations between allotment sites as places and their material and imagined cultivation as utopic (hopeful) places by allotmenteers.

Marcore and Spurling's work also does not address another aspect of allotments as utopic places in that gardening is an everyday and ordinary practice. This is because everyday utopias are impossible spaces in relation to 'other practices and institutions within their sector' (Cooper 2014: 6). Allotment sites as spaces of urban gardening do not fall into the usual classifications of gardening or agriculture. The prefix urban suggests both a qualification and a displacement, and even though allotment sites are seen as part of a wider economy, the food that is grown on them has legal restrictions on being sold. The absence of money as a primary unit of exchange on allotments further adds to their utopic sense. Yet, despite all of these

contradictions, allotment sites are and remain places where everyday citizens carry out their ordinary practice of hope by way of growing and through this practice render their growing places as banal utopias.

Competition and cooperation

As I noted earlier on in this thesis, members of the public routinely confuse community gardens (in which people work together on common gardens and share the produce amongst themselves) with allotment sites (on which people work alone on their own plots alongside other allotmenteers on a shared site). Part of this confusion is understandable. Particularly if we consider allotments as utopic spaces, then the history and general understanding of utopias is the idea of bringing people together in a common purpose, practice and goal. Allotment sites differ from this in a distinct way. There is indeed a common goal (that of urban gardening), but both the purpose and practice are carried out individually. To give a practical example – the reasons that Michaela (who mainly grows flowers to give away) chooses to grow in a city are very different from those of John an allotmenteer who is almost completely self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables all year round.

The focus on common purpose, practice, and goal as typified by the understanding of utopias is also the reason that many utopias are difficult to sustain. In his work *Urban Utopias*, Malcolm Miles carried out research on various 'ecotopias' and included allotments in his discussions on 'Intentionality, community and ecology'. In looking at what brings the group together, 'privacy is an issue' (Miles 2008: 121). I contend that there are different facets to this privacy – there is the physical privacy (some allotmenteers fence their own individual plots) while others operate visual material strategies as demonstrated in the previous chapter on

‘magical places’ by creating private spaces in full view. There is also, however, the privacy of being able to fulfil one’s own ambitions or goals. As such there is a delicate dance between having enough overlapping interests in order to form a community – in the case of allotments this interest is literally held together by the soil on which allotmenteers grow, whilst maintaining enough distance to have an ‘informally regulated community’ (Miles 2008: 123). Or as the allotment researcher David Crouch has noted, ‘Getting on with each other is important … because the margins of what any one individual does are not clearly defined. Many plot holders don’t easily get on… [But] a prevailing if perhaps exaggerated theme amongst allotment holders is the significance of friendship’ (Crouch 2003: 15). I certainly found this to be the case on allotment sites across Oxford. I would argue that there is less exaggeration than Crouch contends. The quality of friendship on allotment sites because it differs from friendship outside the allotment gates can seem distant or disjointed. It is an *alone, together* kind of friendship developed in snatches of conversation cultivated over years. On Swardland, there were a group of ‘old boys’ who would regularly meet early in the morning in the allotment building for a catch up and smoke before they began their ‘jobs’. Eric usually instigated this gathering by arriving on the site with a shout, indicating his arrival. More often than not, the other ‘old boys’ would down tools and join him. But with more frequency than one might expect from old friends, without so much as a reply to his general greeting, they would carry on with whatever they were doing, and no one took any offence (least of all Eric). Allotment friendships respect the space in between interactions as much as they nurture the connections that are forged. These friendships that form the backbone of allotment communities, are more widely connected by two modes of interaction that support allotment sites to persist across time and space – that of competition and cooperation. I will now give examples of each of these in turn and detail the way they are practised on

allotment sites which subverts stereotypically expected effects of their manifestation. In order to do so, I will unpack different photographs taken at allotment sites across Oxford – using the material culture that is present on them as indicators for the processes that occur.

Cooperation on allotment sites

Figure 17: Refuse and reuse area on an allotment site

A photograph of what looks like a pile of rubbish may seem like an odd place to start a discussion on cooperation; however, the hallmarks of successful human co-existence are most clearly seen not when people participate in what is pleasurable or what they like to do – but instead how they come together to manage what is difficult. All allotment sites have an area like this and the way in which it functions is a clear indicator of the state of affairs on an allotment site. Sites where the refuse and reuse areas are well managed are indicative of a thriving site. The first thing to note about the 'pile of rubbish' is that it is sorted. There are two distinct sections. The section on the left has objects that are gathered together in some sort of container – be it a black bin liner or a repurposed container. Inside containers like these are small bits and pieces that could be used by someone else on the site – a no longer needed brick, for example, for holding down netting or a scrap of wood to act as a peg for a length of twine. The explicit reasons that these 'bits and bobs' are placed within containers are so they do not end up scattered around the site, and as such give the site the opportunity to have neat and tidy communal areas like the one in the

photo on the following page. It is also good health and safety. The implicit reasons are twofold. What this photograph shows is a visual material recognition of the reuse and recycle attitude that allotmenteers espouse. People are acutely aware that even if they no longer need something, someone else might be able to use it and by placing it in a space where anyone can access it, they are cooperating with other allotmenteers. The less obvious use of the containers is that there reaches a point (usually after several months) when it becomes clear that the same objects have been in the containers for a long time, and no one is going to use them – at this juncture they can easily be carried and disposed of offsite (this is an activity I carried out myself from City Gorse as my plot was located next door to this refuse and reuse area).

The section on the right is not in containers because it is for materials that are of general usefulness to any allotmenteer and as such remain in constant circulation. The visible poles, wires and bollards are all used to create various constructions but not all allotmenteers need them at the same time. Having them in a common area also allows the maintenance of privacy. There is no need to go onto someone else's plot and ask them for something they appear not to be using. Like the communal areas where allotmenteers exchange crops (an exchange that is temporally spaced so the person placing the food rarely interacts with the person who takes it), people do not generally congregate around these areas.

Figure 18: A crop exchange area

Allotmenteers use these areas when they are likely to be unobserved. They take what they need *alone* even as they provide what is needed *together*.

Figure 19: A combined crop exchange and reuse area

The refuse and reuse spaces are also consciously kept as small as possible (if one area becomes too big it is usually split into another area on the site) so that wider communal areas can be kept beautiful as is seen in the photograph below.

Figure 20: An allotment communal area – note the domestic semiotics by way of the recycled bath on the centre left

Allotmenteers also cooperate in other ways to maintain communal areas. Each allotmenteer is responsible for ensuring the communal paths that immediately

border their plot are kept clear and the committee organises voluntary working parties to clear other communal areas around the site. It is interesting to note the space in the communal area above. The picnic tables are placed at a distance from each other so that even in communal spaces there is the possibility for people to keep to themselves. On most allotment sites there is an annual event when common spaces are shared together along with food and drink supplied by allotmenteers. This non-compulsory event is a touch point providing enough connection to keep the community going – year on year.

The people behind the maintenance of the communal areas (though most allotmenteers participate one way or another) are the members of the allotment committee who operate with a reluctant power. The odd site does not even have a functioning committee because there, 'is often a struggle to find people to go on the committee'. Given allotmenteers value of freedom (which will be considered in depth Chpater Six'A place where no one tells me what to do'), coupled with the fact that all allotmenteers really want to do is garden, sitting on an allotment committee is not a prized role. 'Good' committees do their best to gently remind allotmenteers of their obligations ideally from a distance using strategically placed notice boards (such as on the main gate) as is seen in the photo below.

Figure 21: A strategically placed allotment noticeboard

Of note is the way in which allotmenteers take up these duties to support the committee's work. Other allotmenteers and I routinely replaced the hand sanitiser that hung on the gates into City Gorse without any requests from the committee.

Figure 22: Health and safety sign on an allotment gate

A key feature of all the cooperative interactions that occur on allotment sites is the use of distance – either temporally or spatially. I assert that it is this use of distance (an *alone*, *together*ness) that is a key ingredient of the utopic nature of allotment sites because it circumvents the well-described obligations embedded in human cooperation. Marcel Mauss in his work *The Gift* established the obligation to

reciprocate when a gift is received (Mauss and Guyer 2016). However, on allotment sites, the vast majority of exchange occurs without the donor and recipient knowing who the other is. Furthermore, the exchange can be separated by hours, days, weeks, or, in the case of the refuse reuse areas, even months. It could be argued that perhaps what is occurring is a type of distributed exchange akin to that in anthropological literature on foraging societies, i.e., the reciprocity is not expected immediately or might even take another form (Sahlins 1974). However, on allotment sites, the configuration of the different peoples who converge to grow on the same piece of land is too amorphous to be considered to have a societal structure. This is particularly true for the sites that operate without committees. The closest example within anthropological literature that describes the exchange that is taking place on allotment sites is that of a moral economy, namely,

> The moral norm of reciprocity tells us the simple and powerful principle that social ties are maintained through deferred exchanges, which contribute towards reproducing the extant social structure into the future. (Molina et al. 2017: 14)

A moral economy is an economy which is based on fairness and is seen as good for doing so. Indeed, during my fieldwork the word 'good' is one which arose unprompted with the greatest frequency to describe allotment sites. Although there are some similarities with studied peasant societies where groups of people come together to share workloads (Barth 1967) (on allotments these are working parties), there is a marked difference. While it is fair to say that allotmenteers not only want a 'good' site to cultivate on now but also work towards leaving it for others in the future, the voluntary nature of their association also means that no one keeps an account of who joins working parties or who supports communal maintenance. No one knows who donates the most to others, who may need food, and even more importantly who takes the most from the areas where things are freely distributed. It

is paradoxical that cooperation which is the act of bringing people together on allotment sites is maintained precisely because it is mediated by the use of temporal and spatial distance. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, allotments' adjustment to lockdowns was nearly seamless. Working parties operated consecutively rather than concurrently and the natural social distance that is a feature of allotment sociality needed no further modification. This does lead to the question of when allotmenteers do actually come together and bridge time and space. Just like cooperation, it appears paradoxical as it is usually through competition.

Competition on allotment sites

Vegetable competitions are an integral part of allotment history. This section opens with introducing a First World War vegetable show and linking key features of the show to contemporary vegetable competitions and allotments. What emerges is that instead of vegetable and allotment competitions being sources of tension between allotmenteers, they provide an avenue for allotmenteers to openly discuss each other's plots and produce and instead brings allotmenteers closer together. Unlike cooperation, as described in the section above where distance is used both temporally and spatially to reduce obligation between allotmenteers while still maintaining community – the opposite occurs during competitions. Allotmenteers are encouraged to visit each other's plots and examine each other's produce. During competitions, allotmenteers share time and space and are freely able to ask each other about growing techniques, and otherwise reticent yet skilled growers are encouraged to share their knowledge. Unlike in competitions beyond the allotment gates, the *alone, together* sociality on allotment sites is reversed as allotmenteers openly delight in each other and their practice.

During the First World War, the French port city of Le Havre was turned into a giant set of English-style allotments. And in August 1917 and August 1918 huge

vegetable shows were held in which the British Expeditionary Force, Belgian military personnel, and French civilians all displayed their produce. These vegetable shows were hugely successful and attracted thousands of visitors. I have highlighted here three main features of the Le Havre show that are still relevant to vegetable shows (and accompanying competitions) held on allotment sites all across Oxford and England.

- The vegetable show committee was made up of men from almost every rank in the army.
- There were distinct competition categories including 'the biggest' of whichever vegetable.
- The participants and attendees were from different parts of the world including (but not limited to) Chinese Labour corps, Americans, Russians, Italians, and ANZAC troops (Mayhew 2021).

In a highly stratified institution like the Army (and especially during a war) it is remarkable that a Lieutenant Colonel and a Private could sit side by and come to a consensus about which categories to include in the vegetable show. This levelling[18] of society is something which I routinely witnessed on allotment sites. People of all social classes and backgrounds gardened alongside each other or, as Dot, a white female allotmenteer in her 70s, put it, 'we leave all that rubbish at the gate'. Dot took great pains to explain to me that over the years she had grown alongside all sorts of people, 'from a Lord to what nots'. She was clear that what mattered most was the activity that people were engaged in once they were on the site and none of their status elsewhere 'matters a jot here'. In a class-based country where inequality is on the rise, it is difficult to find spaces where easy interaction can occur amongst diverse

[18] The land rights group that formed around Gerald Winstanley were called The True Levellers or The Diggers.

social groups. It is fascinating to note that the diversity in people and plants I experienced on allotment sites was also true for the First World War allotment sites.

It seems that the practice of growing has specific (and possibly) useful ways of bringing people together. From the first spring after I began to cultivate on allotment sites, I started to hear whispers about competitions. The only competition I had heard about was for the biggest vegetable of whatever type and I found this puzzling, unlike the allotmenteers I was asking who unequivocally responded that sized-based competitions were 'fair'. Size, it seemed, could be objectively measured and this way everyone had a fair chance at winning and, unlike my suggestions of taste or appearance, I was repeatedly told that size never led to squabbles as there was always a clear winner.

It turned out that there are more than just the biggest vegetable competitions. There are various categories, one of which also includes the 'best kept' allotment across all allotment sites in Oxford. Entry is voluntary and the judging criteria is based on what could be considered environmental (promoting biodiversity), productivity and social (free from rubbish) considerations. Amongst other criteria it includes the number of crops (with double marks given for winter crops), the number of fruit but also the inclusion of flowers, companion plants and how well maintained the paths and borders around the plot are. When speaking to an allotmenteer who has acted as a judge in this competition he noted although both judges and participants take it seriously one of the most valued aspects of the competition was the chance it gave people to come together over a shared passion and learn from each other.

This was certainly my experience in the one vegetable show in which I participated. The annual event at the Elder Stubbs Charity allotment is a festival which occurs over a couple of days in the summer. As well as the vegetable show,

there is music and a whole host of family friendly activities for allotmenteers and visitors to participate in. It is also open to the public.

Figure 23: Vegetable show display at Elder Stubbs Festival 2021

Sam, my community partner, convinced me to enter the '1918 Allotment' into the show. It was a particularly special atmosphere because following the successive COVID-19 lockdowns it was an opportunity to enjoy the company of other people. Winning best in show was secondary to the conversations the process enabled. I spoke with allotmenteers I would have otherwise not had the chance to engage with because I was not intruding on their growing time (something I remained conscious of throughout my fieldwork when allotmenteers generously agreed to speak with me). The displays themselves also heightened my observation of the variety of ways in which people grow and the numerous approaches taken to gardening.

Figure 24: 1918 Allotment competition entry

Anthropologists have long noted that cooperation and competition are often concurrent and 'that cooperation is always and everywhere considered moral' (Curry et al. 2019: 59). On the contrary, competition is noted for the struggle that it causes between individuals (and societies) and its universality in societies around the world is contested (Thorbjørnsen 2020). It begs the question, is what is occurring during vegetable shows not in fact competition, but merely a show and tell? If we return to the vegetable shows during the First World War that does not appear to be the case.

> The shows could become rather competitive. Miss J M Wilson, a volunteer with the YMCA in Le Havre during the war wrote in her memoirs about a garden she cultivated. She described one vegetable that reached an 'enormous size' which they hoped to compete with in the show, but it was stolen, and there was a rumour that the thief exhibited it as his own. (Foster 2016)

However, despite these isolated incidences the overall sense from the accounts of the vegetable shows during the war is the capacity that they had to bring together people across divides and enable them to engage with each other in ways that were productive rather than destructive.

On allotment sites in Oxford, part of the reason that I initially learned about the vegetable competitions through whispers was because there were a few allotmenteers who did not always want to admit to participating lest they were not successful. I can also say that having won one such competition, it is a wonderful feeling. It feels like an achievement that sits outside of the usual societal categories. It also feels a little bit magical because as a grower there is the awareness that one way or another the result is also due to more-than-human gardeners who somehow decided this time to cooperate with you.

Studying competition outside of its binary of cooperation is in its infancy in anthropology but early studies, such as the one carried out amongst rural and urban schoolchildren in China, seem to indicate that there is more than one type of competition. In Euro-America there has been the focus on the sum-total competition

with winners and losers but there is also the possibility of a mutualistic competition which requires further attention. In mutualistic competition there is the sense of competing *with* others rather than competing *against* others (Kajanus 2019). Allotment vegetable competitions add an annual ritual which brings allotmenteers together as a community and fosters and strengthens bonds (Molina et al. 2017). It also opens up a space for a time in the year when allotmenteers can engage with each other without feeling as though they are impinging on each other. Within this context, who actually ends up winning is of secondary importance to the process of the competition and what it facilitates. This is an important development in understandings of utopia that have translated the concept to mean the elimination of competition. What allotment competitions (and the fact that they continue to exist over time) illuminate is the nuance within competition and the possibilities that it holds to draw people together when the focus is on the process rather than the outcome. This leads us to the final section of this chapter which concludes that despite having a fixed physical location – the utopia that is an allotment site is not a destination.

Conclusion: Utopia is not a destination

Having begun to unpack the ethnographic example of Anabelle's allotment site and positioned it within existing anthropological literature on utopia and hope, I will now return to the question of whom the transformatory (utopic) impulses (Herbert 2016) both socially and in legislation serve. I will engage with the idea of utopia as a process rather than a destination. A process that can be triggered by the recognition of a utopic impulse and can go on to transform relations (in this case to the land) even when frustrated by coercive political intentions – intentions that often have a

blind spot in their lack of awareness of the agency of the people that the policies were projected to affect. The process of utopia is not a tidy one. It is guided by the processes of cooperation and competition even while they are expressed in ways contrary to common understanding held outside the allotment gates. Urban allotments have rural roots that are intimately intertwined with protest and self-determination; however, their development has meant that in the 21st century it is most likely a middle-aged middle-class 'respectable' woman like Anabelle who is able to navigate the process in order to start a site. However, once the site gets going it develops a life of its own and the form that it takes is not one that any of the parties involved in its initiation are clearly able to predict.

This is particularly the case on guerrilla gardened sites where guerrilla gardeners actively welcome their lack of control over the plants that they cultivate. It is probably worth emphasising that they welcome this from more-than-human and non-human gardeners, not if they think another human gardener interfered with their site. This is illustrated in the sign below. Guerrilla gardeners will go out of their way to leave instructions for fellow human gardeners and yet will not cover the plants they cultivate with netting to protect them from other more-than-human gardeners for example.

Figure 25: Semi-permanent guerrilla gardening sign 'Please do not cut the grass'

Guerrilla gardeners are chiefly interested in the process that is set into motion from their actions rather than working to pin down a specific set of outcomes. Even so, in Oxford they do not just materialise their sites by working with plant gardeners, they do so by the use of other materials some of which I noted became more permanent as my fieldwork wore on. In particular, as the ideas of rewilding gained wider social acceptance, it appeared that guerrilla gardeners felt able to be more explicit in the ways that they materialised their sites.

Paradoxically, guerrilla gardeners becoming more explicit about the materialisation of their sites contains within it the understanding of the site's ever-changing nature and in some cases ephemerality. There are guerrilla gardeners who say that they know more of the plants they sow will die and yet they continue to practice – undeterred by this prospect but equally not disheartened by it. Both allotmenteers and guerrilla gardeners are aware utopias are not static but need continual engagement.

A major factor as to why utopia is not a destination is that urban gardeners work with potential. One of the deep joys (that can be intertwined with disappointment) is that the results of one's gardening labour are never 100% guaranteed. I experienced this myself on the 1918 Allotment. Having cultivated a row of beautiful and healthy tomato plants, I arrived early on the day I was expecting a group of visitors to the plot. I was looking forward to showing off the plants. What I found was that every plant had succumbed to blight. I was devastated as I removed the sick plants, and still had to tend to the rest of the plot but some of the visitors described their experience as magical. Utopia resists present realities. I still had other plants I could work with (I ended up planting leeks in the space created by the tomatoes). 'Utopia, [is a] double move of negation and anticipation' (Moylan 2007: 191). Much like Joseph's comment on Rodney's frozen potato plants earlier on in this

thesis, ‘you just stick another lot in’. There is something in the utopian method of never completely arriving, of keeping in motion, of experiencing flashes of perfection but the perfection changing, like and with the seasons, that keeps hope buoyant and alive.

Figure 26: A happy allotmenteer imagining the possibility of a newly prepared plot

Mending Wall
by Robert Frost

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
'*Why* do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'
(Frost 1914)

The poem that features in this interlude marks both a literal and figurative boundary in the thesis. The first half of this thesis was primarily concerned with the materiality of urban gardening sites and the legal and practical ways in which they are manifested. As well as introducing the themes of banal utopia and *alone, together*, it detailed the methodology used along with the ethical underpinnings of the choices made, such as the reasons for a qualitative study that combined both classical anthropology techniques along with contemporary social science public engagement with research. It then began to challenge some of the commonly held assumptions about what is required to materialise a utopic space and whether or not indeed it is the physical space or the process that matters. Following an analysis of this poem and the issues it raises – the second half of the thesis will engage with the ethnography of urban gardens in Oxford. This also means that there are fewer photographs than in the first half of the thesis.

Both allotmenteers and guerrilla gardeners remark on fences, though the way in which they engage with them is markedly different. Tom Richardson, the founder director of the Chelsea Fringe Festival, gives an accurate summary of the description of how guerrilla gardeners approach fences,

> "New gardening" has leapt over the garden fence to beautify streets, parks and roundabouts of towns and cities worldwide. There is a generation of gardeners out there who do not look upon horticulture solely as a "back-garden" activity. They achieve beautification in various ways: by creating a community garden; planting flowers in the "tree pits" that surround street trees; or even engaging in "guerrilla gardening", the practice whereby squads of horticulturists take to the streets at night to plant shrubs and flowers in places that may have been neglected by the local authorities. (Richardson 2016)

For guerrilla gardeners – fences are something to be quickly overcome. Some guerrilla gardeners practice by throwing 'seed bombs' over fences into areas they hope the seeds will germinate. During the Oxford Christmas fair of 2018 on Broad Street there was a stall that was selling insect guides and when I stopped to buy one, I ended up talking to the stallholder about my doctoral studies. When I mentioned guerrilla gardening, they offered me the 'seed grenade' below:

Figure 27: Seed grenade

Made by Ka-Bloom and trademarked ‘seed boms’ they are also known as ‘seed grenades’, they are basically compost with seeds in a compostable grenade shaped packaging. Ka-Bloom has commercialised what was once a transgressive activity. Seed bombs or grenades trace their history back to Liz Christie, an American guerrilla gardener in the 1970s, who threw analogous (though homemade) ‘seed bombs’ over fences into vacant pieces of land as part of her guerrilla gardening practice (Wingate 2008). The stall holders who practised guerrilla gardening themselves emphasised (when I asked them about the legal grey area in which guerrilla gardening exists), ‘there’s no indication who has done it’. They instead preferred to highlight the benefit to the environment that they saw guerrilla gardening provided. The ‘seed grenade’ they offered me was specifically pollinator friendly. The stall holders took great pleasure in not being restricted by the fences (I will revisit this sense of freedom in Chapter Six they encountered, instead they had found ways of joining in with nature to navigate them. Equally this meant they had a limited sense of their rate of success especially if the ‘bombs’ were thrown over a fence into somewhere they did not habitually walk past.

The poet Austin Allen asks of ‘Mending Wall’,

> Are borders necessary or regressive? Are humans naturally driven toward greater connection and cooperation, or does some old, mistrustful instinct always hold us back? These are among the questions that haunt the edges of ‘Mending Wall’ like shade in a springtime pasture. (Allen 2019)

Non-allotmenteers who participated in my public engagement with research asked me the same set of questions about allotments and allotmenteers. They are also the same questions that utopian studies contend with when seriously considering utopia as a possibility. Although the poem is called ‘Mending Wall’ the proverb referred to in the poem references fences which are a ubiquitous and (arguably) necessary feature of allotments sites across England.

The central tension in 'Mending Wall' is a neighbour who doesn't like walls but nevertheless mends it every year in order to maintain good relations. There is the strong sense that he would not choose to be friends with his neighbour – they are quite different people. The speaker in the poem is an 'apple' and his neighbour is a 'pine'. His neighbour 'will not go behind his father's saying' and the speaker lets us know that he is somewhat subversive or at the very least questioning 'What I was walling in or walling out'. Yet despite all these differences and possible frustrations, the speaker recognises that their relationship matters more than their individual expressions of it. His right to his land exists because his neighbour's right to his land exists. They might be separated by the wall, but they are also bound together by the wall. This is true of both allotment sites and the world at large. Walls, fences, borders, and boundaries have become increasingly political – whether they are going up or being torn down – they call attention to the relations that surround them and tell us something about our humanness.

Although Robert Frost did not encourage easy readings of his poem, he did suggest that it held within it both views of nationalism and one world (Juncker et al. 2013). Taken together with the final two lines of another of his poems called 'The Tuft of Flowers', which reads

> 'Men work together,' I told him from the heart,
> 'Whether they work together or apart.' (Frost 1913)

I propose that what Robert Frost is describing is the kind of utopia that occurs on allotment sites, an *alone, together* mode of existence that does not need to flatten the differences between people in order for them to cooperate. It is with this awareness that I paid attention to the fences that I encountered during the course of my fieldwork in order to find out what they could illuminate through the interactions that they necessarily facilitated.

Chapter Five which follows this interlude focuses on a case study of a specific allotment fence. However, I spoke with several other allotmenteers about fences and how they viewed them. Fences were seen as a way in which the council could demonstrate care for the allotment site and by extension the allotmenteers on it because as Dawn (who was both an allotmenteer and guerrilla gardener) pointed out, without fences, allotment sites were vulnerable. She described a situation on an allotment site that she used to cultivate on and what happened because there was no perimeter fence, 'two lads who one from Poland one from Spain. And they were really proud of their plot and they got a new shed and they got all these nice tools they bought and someone went in and nicked the lot'. I also heard a similar story from Liz, a white retired international NGO worker whose allotment had been the place she routinely returned to during her peripatetic career. For decades the allotment site had not had a fence and,

> we did have a lot of vandalism. In the early days, a lot of kids coming in and just being smashing things, not necessarily stealing things. It's breaking into sheds and smashing things. But then, about 10 years ago, the council gave about a quarter million quid to the allotments, yeah, for fencing. And so we've got this steel fence around it, this edge, as well, so you can't see it. But it has made a big difference actually.

Liz's reference to the council was important because it was typical. Most allotmenteers do not routinely talk about the council and if they do a key theme is the fences that they do or do not provide. Dawn described the transformation a fence can bring about to me,

> a major change was the council agreeing to pay for fencing and this was very important because real estate Security is an issue. And it's not only crops, it's tools. And it's personal. And if a site is fenced reasonably properly, people feel happy working there, you know, quite a lot of plots are single ladies actually. Where I where I'm thinking of at the moment, yeah, up from a single down from a single lady. Next to us is two ladies. So quite a lot of ladies who might feel threatened if it was very open. And the reason they agreed to that was it was pointed out and they'd spent nothing on allotments for the past since the war.

Dawn was describing an *alone, together* boundary making. Lots of individuals with the possibility of feeling safe as long as there was a wider boundary to enclose them. In this way the outer boundary creates a demarcation between the allotment and the wider world reducing vulnerability to vandalism. It also facilitates an ease in the tension between 'individuality and collectivity' (Mieder 2003: 155). In order for allotmenteers to grow on their individual plots, they need to be safely separated from the city outside the allotment gates. However, life is made up of 'multifaceted contradictions' (Ibid.) so it is precisely this separation that then allows for a unique sociality to occur through the fence. Kevin, an 'old boy' and reluctant committee chair on a site where no one else wanted to be on the committee, talked about how important these interactions were to him in his typical allotmenteering week,

> [I] probably have half a dozen conversations with different people. And it's just like, me, especially in sort of climate that we're all in just now I actually think it's very healthy to be able to interact with different people. And you're interacting with different people from all different ages, all different sort of cultures, all different sort of backgrounds and find out so it's actually quite good for you to actually get you know, you're talking to Greek guys, you're talking to Italian guys, you're talking to Jamaican ladies, and is just very good. I like talking to lots of different people from different cultures and different experiences.

There were a couple of statements within what Dawn and Kevin said that relate to another aspect of the poem that opened this interlude. There is a deeper meaning encoded in the erecting of a fence or engaging with someone through the fence. Dawn took the trouble to explain the reason the council felt compelled to erect the fence was because it had been pointed out to them that they had effectively abandoned the site by not providing it with any financial resources for over half a century. The council was acting to repair this neglect, much in the same way that the two neighbours meet to repair the wall between them. In volume one of an edited series on the politics of repair Francisco Martínez argues that 'fixing is a political aspiration' and that 'repair and fixing have become matters of public concern'

(Martínez 2019: 5). In England, routinely when services are not provided for citizens the phrase, 'the system is broken' is often used. In this case the 'system being broken' was demonstrated by an absence – of a fence – and when it was firmly brought to the council's attention – repair was enacted.

Repair is not just limited to actions that the state. In a volume he co-edited with Patrick Laviolette entitled, 'Repair, Brokenness, Breakthrough', Martinez declares, 'we are all repairers' (Martínez 2019: 3). Kevin demonstrated this with his concern for the conversations he was having through the fence. Read carefully, Kevin's comments are a thoughtful reflection on practical ways of repairing societal separated-ness. A white English 'old boy' his actions to speak with people who were different in some way to himself were deliberate. His words, 'especially in the climate that we're all in just now', recognised a society that struggles with difference and in his own way was trying to find ways to interact with 'different people'. He may have referred to the conversations casually, but they clearly lasted long enough for him to get to know the heritage and nationality of the people he was talking with. It was also for Kevin a moral action, one that was, 'just very good'.

What is noteworthy is both Dawn and Kevin were referencing repair that brought people closer together but through a material object that is most commonly thought of in terms of the separation that it causes. As Dawn noted, boundaries provide a certain safety which then allows people to carry on with certain activities e.g., growing. The boundary of the fence also facilitated Kevin's conversations. Both he and the people he was speaking with knew that they could move on from the conversation whenever they wanted. By choosing to engage through a boundary that brought safety – they were able to move beyond each other's differences.

Chapter 5: 'I was having conversations through the fence'

Allotment fencing and associated relational boundaries

Chapter introduction

As explained in the interlude prior to this chapter – Chapter Five focuses on allotment fences because guerrilla gardeners pay a different kind of attention to fences. For guerrilla gardeners, fences are something to efficiently and effectively overcome and not an immediate point of reference for direct engagement. This chapter instead begins with a history of fencing as it pertains to allotments.

Rural allotments (the ancestors to urban allotments) are one of the results of the acts of enclosure across England (Burchardt 2002). Their history is thus intimately interwoven with that of boundaries and fences. A relevant brief explanation of enclosure follows, as a detailed discussion of this aspect of history of rural allotments is outside the remit of this thesis.

> Enclosure was the process that ended traditional rights, such as grazing livestock on common land, or cultivating arable crops on strips in open fields. Once enclosed the uses of the land became restricted to the owner. (Willes 2014: 51)

This practice which became enshrined in law through enclosure acts had a profound impact on agricultural labourers as their independent access to fuel and food was restricted. Coupled with this, they were already poorly paid. Allotments, as a term, began to appear in enclosure acts in the 17th century recognising the need to make 'some land provision for the poor' (Willes 2014: 115). The word enclosure reflects the materiality of the process which made allotments a necessary feature of the rural (and then later urban) landscape. 6.8 million acres of land, 'just over the total area of a fifth of England ... was now hedged and fenced off, and old boundaries disappeared' (PARLIAMENT 2022).

For pieces of material cultural heritage that have far-reaching effects on the legal and visual landscape in England – the treatment of fences in the literature in relation to urban gardening is surprisingly marginal. Fences as a means to demarcate ownership, or at least exclusive use of land, only slowly began to extend to allotments themselves. Even today, not all allotment sites across England are fenced. Within allotment sites, most plot holders do not individually fence their plots and some sites have specific rules about the height and character of plot fences if they are indeed erected (LBS 2021). Although routinely mentioned, consideration of fences swiftly tends to move onto the land that is contained within them or the subjects that are created by the effects of the demarcation. In anthropology, while Fredrik Barth's seminal text on boundaries and borders has become of increasing interest (Barthes 1969), there has been an inclination to focus on social organisation and concurrent power dynamics. Presently, anthropological concerns highlight political boundaries, fences and walls both material and symbolic such as the US–Mexico border and Brexit (Horváth et al. 2018). There is a quotidian aspect of fences that is missing from this broader political analysis and yet remains present on the ground. Namely, fences' power to create meaningful relationships, many of which can be positive. This is an aspect that has been noted throughout the ages in idioms, metaphors and proverbs such as, 'Good fences make good neighbours' (Frost 1914). It is explored in numerous literary works including 'Mending Wall' by Robert Frost. 'Mending Wall' is a poem which expounds on the proverb, 'good fences make good neighbours' and unpacks the relations of neighbours through their boundary wall. This boundary causes the neighbours to both keep apart and come together. This keeping apart and coming together shares features with the *alone, together* practice of allotmenteers. It has also been described more widely in the anthropology of Britain where there is an understanding that, 'forms of cultural meaning emphasise how things are predicated

on ‘partial connections’, on a simultaneous holding together and keeping apart’ (Degnen and Tyler 2017: 39)

Literature on the anthropology of Britain also allows for another reading of the encounters that occur at allotment fences. Anthony Cohen’s work on Whalsay described a blockade carried out by protesting fishermen. This show of assertion defending their livelihoods was particularly startling in an area where such public displays were uncommon. (As will be explored in this chapter – emotive as well as casual conversations occur through allotment fences). However, as Cohen explains,

> The extraordinary nature of the event [the blockade] masks its *ordinary* elements … the process of the event may be seen to consist of the continuous interplay of ordinary and extraordinary idioms. Sometimes one predominates, sometimes the other. But the two are always contingent: ordinariness is maintained to conceal the extraordinary circumstances…(Cohen 1982b: 318)

and as will be detailed in this chapter, the conversations that occur through allotment fences echo this contingency of the extraordinary and ordinary. The allotment fences are an ordinary part of the vernacular landscape allowing for extraordinary conversations to take place through them.

What both micro and macro examinations of fences reveal are different types of relations. A steel palisade allotment fence which can be seen as defensive architecture keeping out the surrounding community may also be a demonstration of care by the city council for the allotment community as it provides security for people and crops. An ex-allotmenteer who I spoke to had given up allotmenteering because three growing seasons in a row his entire harvest had been stolen. Upon further questioning it turned out that the site he had been cultivating on was not fenced. Unlike walls, fences have gaps which allow city citizens to see through and into the allotment site and my research found that they derive benefit from being able to do so. Andrew Dawson, in an essay in Nigel Rapport’s book *British Subjects: An*

Anthropology of Britain, notes the ways in which fences facilitate the conversation between 'old boys' on allotment sites. The gaps in the fence act as a filter that still allow some of the world in by way of the radio but then equally gave the 'old boys' something to converse about. Dawson highlights the fact that the allotment fence kept them physically protected on their site which bordered a 'rough council estate' and allowed for the possibility for a 'haven' within the allotment fences (Dawson 2002).

Fences also necessitate a gate which creates a portal into a different kind of world when allotmenteers or visitors cross the gate's threshold. This chapter works with ethnographic case studies, literary texts, participant observation and semi-structured interviews to illuminate the relations created by the materiality of allotment fences. These relations operate across literal and figurative boundaries, boundaries that are necessary in order for allotment sites to function. Beginning with allotment fences as potential sites of sociality, this chapter argues for the importance of attending to fences as creative everyday objects – objects at once ordinary and yet capable of producing remarkable effects.

Figure 28: The view through an allotment fence into a different world

The fence as a site for sociality

In the first chapter of this thesis, I briefly describe a conversation that I had with Kate about a steel palisade fence that forms the boundary of the allotment site on which she cultivates. I walk past the allotment site every day and Kate and I have gone on to have many conversations about the different boundaries that she experiences on the allotment site and the relationships that they have facilitated. Kate is a short, slight, softly spoken white woman who by her own offering had never felt fully integrated into any community since she was a child. She has had jobs such as working in the local community centre which make her known to many people, but after a time she moves on from them. Although she leans toward the melancholic, Kate is a careful listener and is keen to interact with others – albeit preferably on her terms – which is why her experience with the allotment boundary fence came as a welcome surprise and yet challenge to her. Cultivating on an allotment site suited Kate, the *alone, together* sociality meant that she did not have to talk to people unless she wanted to. Yet, she was acutely aware of the passers-by who looked in through the gaps in the fence. She had taken to growing climbing flowers up the bars of the fence to 'cheer it up' for the people who would look.

Figure 29: The flowers Kate grows for passers-by

On several occasions as I walked past the site, I would casually strike up conversation with people looking into the site and Kate was right: they appreciated the view and the efforts she made on her visible plot. During the course of my fieldwork, she added a pond and water feature to her plot and grew a much-admired picture-perfect orange pumpkin. The pumpkin went on to transform her life as much as she had changed the plot with her careful cultivation. I will return to the pumpkin in the coda of this thesis.

To return to our first conversation about the fence, Kate unprompted told me about the people (non-allotmenteers) she ended up engaging with through the fence. She insisted the relations that were formed (however brief) could not have happened were it not for the effect of the fence.

> 'People were talking to me,' Kate said. 'I was having conversations through the fence. And people were getting to know me, and I them, and I was having some very important and beautiful and deep conversations through the fence. Two, if not three, I can't remember, three people have told me about suicides through the fence, about deaths, about loss of a husband who had died. So, I was finding that I was putting my hand through the fence and comforting people and people were saying things, telling me in brief conversations, a bit like a confessional it felt, about things that mattered to them. ... There was a grill between us.'

Kate is Christian and so expanded on the religious metaphor of the fence and her relationship to her allotment plot by referencing Julian of Norwich (an English Catholic anchorite who received visitors from her cell and would listen to them and offer advice). 'This fence felt a bit like I was an anchorite and I was listening ... she would listen to people through her grill in Norwich.' This sociality was not just exchanged with people walking past the plot but also Kate's fellow allotmenteers. The location of her plot near the gate meant she regularly held it open for them when they were coming and going, and they would give her excess produce on the way out. Little did they know that they were providing her with 'the best food she had ever

had' because at that point Kate had not had work for a year. As Kate expressed her gratitude it was clear that she also appreciated being able to receive the food without shame or obligation – she was extending a kindness which they appreciated and in return offered a kindness back. Allotmenteers do not usually give excess directly on site in the way that Kate was receiving it. If she needed more food, she was also able to help herself from the area on the site where excess food was left for anyone to take.

Kate's description captures something fundamental about sociality on English allotment sites: the paradox of a boundary (in this case the fence) increasing rather than diminishing social bonding. There was the simultaneous getting to know each other that Kate portrayed, but in a way that was also carefully contained. The snippets of conversation did not carry an expectation of a long exchange to follow. Kate explained that she, 'didn't need to sustain that and neither did they with me. Little bits of chat, little bits of being encouraged or listening to what they might have to say. I could listen and comfort, but they were also comforting me.'

The assumption is routinely made in the UK that people are uncomfortable talking to strangers. What Kate's description made me realise was that the discomfort tends to arise if there are no clear rules of engagement. There is something about the contained nature of these conversations on allotment sites that speaks to a particular type of English sociality, snippets of conversation that Kate described as being 'like you would have on a bus', but crucially 'didn't need to sustain'. Kate's focus on the fence and the way in which our conversation was taking place captures a fundamental aspect of allotmenteering. Boundaries on allotment sites are a vital tool, but the ways in which they get used can appear paradoxical. The obvious use of the 'ugly' fence (as Kate described it) is to keep certain people out of the allotment site; however, the clear boundary also allows for a sociality in which there is a useful focal point.

Robert Frost also acknowledges this in his poem 'Mending Wall'. Although the poem opens with a sense of discomfort about the wall, 'Something there that doesn't love a wall,' the poem moves on to recognise the difference between the two characters that feature in it. As well as identifying them by what they grow, one is 'pine' the other 'apple orchard', the poem alludes to the fact that their material boundary is not entirely necessary. Yet the 'pine' character in the poem returns to the proverb 'good fences make good neighbours'. On both allotment sites as in the poem – the 'good' comes from the sociality. The 'pine' and 'apple orchard' characters of the poem are very different people and would not otherwise meet if it were not for their annual spring ritual of repairing the boundary wall together. Similarly, allotment boundary fences can increase sociality between people passing by and allotmenteers. By providing a safe focal point, one which maintains an appropriate distance, it conversely allows for more intimate conversations than would usually occur between two strangers.

The fence as materialised distance

As discussed in the previous chapter, cooperation is supported on allotment sites by the use of temporal and spatial distance that reduces the obligation that might arise if allotmenteers were to carry out simultaneous asymmetrical exchange in order to sustain their sites. Allotmenteers were highly attuned to the obligations around exchange such that more than once when I had an excess of a particular type of seedling, for example tomatoes, and would offer them to a fellow allotmenteer – they would make an excuse to 'come and get it later'.[19] When I returned to my plot, I

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[19] The example of cooperation on allotment sites also echoes Karl Polanyi's substantive approach and his idea of embeddedness in which economic activities also take place within non-economic institutions within society POLANYI, K. (2001). *The great transformation : the political and economic origins of our time*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.

would find that they had indeed taken what I had left for them and put something else (a different type of seedling for example) in its place. If this time and space is not possible then there needs to be a sense that the simultaneous exchange is somehow equitable. A key reason that Kate did not feel shame when she was given excess food by her fellow allotmenteers was because she felt that she was simultaneously helping them. Opening and closing an allotment gate is an inconvenience especially if you are carrying produce. It requires opening a lock of some sort which either uses a security code combination or a key. Being able to hold the gate open for someone is a welcome courtesy – especially if they then go on to lock the gate after you so all that you have to do is walk through. Many allotmenteers would happily exchange some produce for this service and not think anything of it.

In the wider context she was also providing a service to people passing by because she was able to actively listen to them. The sociality that she was displaying was a, 'classic trope of English sociality, namely, that neighbours really do talk over the garden fence' (Miller 2015a: 341). In a study carried out by Daniel Miller which examined English sociality or what the anthropologist Kate Fox calls the English 'dis-ease', Miller found that it is likely that for centuries English people have shown apparent contradictions with the ways in which they interact with each other in public vis-à-vis private spaces (Fox 2014). Miller noted that while English people may be friendly and cordial in public, this did not extend into private spaces. He found that the entry of outsiders into people's private spaces was fraught. There was a sense of English individualism or autonomy which could be maintained in a public space, where conversations could be held on a more equal footing. Miller gave the example of neighbours who may have spoken over the fence for decades without once entering each other's homes. It would seem that sociality in England, therefore is organised around distance which is more readily maintained in public spaces.

This clear boundary between public and private is complicated on an allotment site. There is simultaneously agency around the way in which these boundaries are used by English allotmenteers. Jeanette Edwards has observed that, 'the English are adept at conceptualizing boundaries, and where they locate them, and what and whom they enclose within them, depends on the view taken and the purpose for taking it' (Edwards 2000: 3). While Jeanette Edwards is talking about boundaries, she is not talking about allotment fences. I am referring to her work here because allotment fences are a form of boundary engagement that can be compared to other forms of boundary making in English life. Here fences have some commonalities but in other ways are distinct from other types of boundaries in English life.

To quote Cheryl again (the allotmenteer who articulated the fuzzy category between public and private that allotments have come to occupy), 'Our castle has become our allotment, or our allotment has become our castle'. It leads one to ask the question: how does an allotmenteer who feels compelled to respond to someone outside the allotment gate because they are speaking *into* a public space and thus it is polite to do so reconcile the fact that they are speaking *from* their private space? The reason that the sort of intimate conversations that Kate described can take place is because of the allotment boundary fence. The fence acts as an unconscious reminder that the person speaking into the private space can share personal and intimate things, while the person (Kate) within the allotment site has no obligation to share her own intimate thoughts (and she did not – what she provided was comfort) as she is safely within the distance that the fence has created. By straddling the boundary, the fence acts as both a public and a private space which shares a temporality during the length of the conversations but one that is spatially separated by the steel. The effect of this distance is further enhanced by the fact that the person outside the

fence cannot physically enter the allotment site (or private space). The conversation through the fence is necessarily contained and this helps to assuage 'consistent fear [English people have] of being seen as imposing oneself on the time or interest of others' (Miller 2015a: 342). Without the materiality of the fence, there would be no materialisation of the embedded symbols of sociality within it. Much like two people who walk and nod at each other as they pass on the street it is unlikely that Kate would have been on the receiving end of the personal and revealing conversations that she described. In this way, a physical boundary facilitated an act of care that was operating on two levels. There was the act of care from the council who had erected the fence in the first place to act as a physical barrier in preventing theft from the site. There was also the act of care that, because of the sense of safety created by the fence, Kate was able to extend to those who spoke with her through it.

Fences have been used in literature to describe what they afford through their symbolism. The writer Zadie Smith notes, 'the British, can find ourselves behaving strangely when we allow material realities to turn into symbols' (Smith 2016). In the case of the allotment fence the movement between materiality and symbolism simultaneously moves in two directions to explain what might otherwise be considered, and what Smith would describe as strange behaviour. Fences are understood to create a separation but in this case a separation that fosters connection through a symbol that demarcates and yet straddles both public and private boundaries.

Fences as intimate sites

'Intimacy is fundamentally *relational*' (Dawson and Dennis 2020: 1) and as noted in the previous section of this chapter, Daniel Miller has identified the garden

fence as a place in England where neighbourly relations do occur. With the ethnographic example of the allotment fence, I extend this notion of English sociality and fences to cast allotment fences as a site of intimacy. The cultural theorist Lauren Berlant proposed that intimacy is ‘an aspiration for a narrative about something *shared*, a story about oneself and others’ (Berlant 1998: 281). I argue that this aspiration was fulfilled by the deeply personal stories that passers-by shared with Kate turning a steel palisade fence into a site of intimacy where they were able to feel listened to and Kate in turn was touched by their stories and openness (albeit temporally and spatially mediated). Furthermore, intimacy does not have to be prolonged or to carry on over an extended period of time. In contrast, sometimes it is ‘the very fleetingness of those encounters that engenders that very intimacy’ (Dawson and Dennis 2020: 2). The fact that the passers-by know that they might never see Kate again allows for a way of being that might be outside their usual patterns of behaviour. Simultaneously it is occurring at a place that has a quotidian familiarity – a fence. Furthermore, a site that has national significance in that it bounds a piece of English material cultural heritage – the allotment. This makes for a site which is arguably a site of ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig 1995). In this way, there is an ‘assurance of a common sociality’ or what Herzfeld refers to as a cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2005: 7) which further facilitates the intimacy that is taking place.

Visible and invisible boundary relations

Sarah was relieved when her allotment neighbour finally decided to give up her plot. Sarah is a middle-aged white woman and a seasoned gardener who speaks softly and swallows her words, so I often felt that I made myself stand much closer to her than I would with somebody I didn’t know well in order to hear what she was saying. ‘She

hasn't worked on it for months.' Sarah had previously earned her living from gardening and so only wanted a half plot 'to keep her hands in the soil', which meant that she was in closer proximity to her neighbour than if she had a traditional full-sized plot. Across Oxford and England, this continues to be increasingly common. Resizing allotment plots to make them smaller and more manageable is a well-received and sensible solution to the fact that given contemporary lives and time pressures, many people can no longer manage the upkeep of a full-sized plot (which is an area around the size of a doubles tennis court). Subdividing plots into half or quarter plots also means that waiting lists (where they exist) can be moved through more swiftly. The catch is that the natural distance created between full-sized plots bounded by paths for people to be able to move across allotment sites has been eroded. Two people sharing a half plot (or especially a quarter plot) will rarely add a path down the middle of it as it will reduce the size of their plot further. The net result is people being in much closer proximity than they anticipated (or would ideally like). Consequently, allotmenteers are having to find their own solutions to demarcating the newly developing boundaries. The photo below shows my half plot on OxLea – note the concrete slabs placed between my plot and my neighbour's plot in a clear and straight line.

Figure 30: A subdivided allotment

Other allotmenteers prefer to have more subtle boundary markings such as the one shown in the photo below.

Figure 31:A subtle allotment plot boundary marker

This is especially the case if the plot has been subdivided between friends or relatives. It is not uncommon to have couples or siblings who share a plot but because of different growing styles do not cultivate the plot together. Another reason that people sharing plots together may not cultivate together is also for practical reasons as people may tend to their plots at different times of day. Beth, a white short, slight and sprightly allotmenteer whose swift movements did not betray the fact that she was in her seventies, described the decision-making process her and her sister took when they came to share a full-sized plot. At the beginning they thought it would be nice to 'grow together'. They had not always been the closest of siblings and thought their love of allotmenteering would be a good way to get to know each other now that they were older. It took some months before they found an arrangement that worked. Beth preferred to garden in the morning and her sister in the afternoon. Beth would return the following morning to find work she had carried out redone or dispensed with altogether. 'She likes everything very tidy you see,' Beth explained.

Still, when another plot became available, neither of them took it on. They wanted to share a plot (and occasionally overlap in the times they cultivate) but they wanted to each have their own way of doing things. Beth feels that the plot has worked to bring them closer together and they even sometimes arrange to meet at the plot to share a cup of tea from a flask. They each wanted to be together and yet also alone.

In the previous section we have looked at the ways in which fences materialise distance and allow for a sociality to occur that otherwise would not happen. Sometimes people make use of invisible boundaries – they shift the time that they go to the allotment site to afford their allotment neighbour and themselves privacy. Other times the boundary becomes a source of conflict. Only if this conflict becomes verbalised does the committee get involved – usually it involves minor grumbles that allotmenteers pay scant attention to. There are times when the effect of boundaries becomes visible by their absence. Sarah (whose story I opened this section with) had two main complaints about her neighbour. The first was a border of brambles between them that grew from an unmaintained fruit bush. The second was the lack of cultivation which I shall return to.

When Sarah's neighbour (finally) left, Sarah moved swiftly. There is a rapidly closing window of time on allotment sites when it is considered 'fair game' to do anything to an allotment plot that is not 'yours'. The minute someone else has taken it up – whether or not they have begun to do anything to it – the boundary is immediately respected, and no one will dare to enter the plot uninvited.[20] I found Sarah huffing and puffing as she rushed to dig up and remove the bush that had been a point on which she unleashed her frustrations. I could see the satisfaction after she had triumphantly taken out the last of the bush meaning that the boundary between

[20] While there are indeed thefts that occur on allotment sites, these are relatively rare.

her and her neighbour's plot was demarcated by which one was cultivated and which one was not. 'There!' Sarah had exclaimed unexpectedly loudly, 'at last'. However, this feeling did not last long. In focusing on the problems with the overgrown bush, Sarah has stopped taking note of the fact that it provided shade for seedlings. The movement of the sun across the site meant that Sarah's plot was relatively exposed. As the bush had grown the over years, Sarah had unconsciously used the shade it provided for a number of gardening activities that she would have to change. At her more usual, quieter speaking volume, several weeks later, she confided in me that she should have waited and thought about it more carefully. She now also realised that she and her new allotment neighbour would have to negotiate a different way to mark the boundaries between their plots. This would mean an awkward conversation and one that she would rather not have. This ethnographic moment was one of many which highlighted the importance of boundaries (whether they were visible or not) on allotment sites. Anthropologists have noted that the way in which we arrange space (even private domestic spaces to which allotment plots can be analogous) have socio-cultural influences (Kent 1997 ; Pellow 1996 ; Bourdieu 1989). Boundaries on allotment sites often make visible the invisible tensions inherent in sharing a space that allotmenteers readily call 'magical' and 'good'.

While so far this thesis has focused on the tension between human gardeners or allotmenteers and non-allotmenteers, the other main tension that rests on allotment sites and is brought to the surface by the presence of fences is the one between human and more-than-human gardeners. It is here that I return to the lack of cultivation of Sarah's allotment neighbour. Most allotmenteers will say that they don't care what people do with their plots apart from one thing – if they do not cultivate. There are two aspects to why the lack of cultivation is an anathema to allotmenteers – one is practical and the other is to do with how the sense of

belonging is developed on allotment sites. Practically speaking, a lack of cultivation by human gardeners leads to plant gardeners taking over – usually by way of unwanted weeds. Weeds in turn do not respect human boundaries (particularly invisible ones) and as such their seeds can be blown by wind (weather gardener) over other allotmenteers' plots. This, over and above aesthetics, is a key reason allotmenteers will complain that a plot is not being tended. Equally important is what constitutes the sense of belonging on an allotment site. In the introduction to her edited volume on 'Locality and Belonging' Nadia Lovell states what I found to be true on allotment sites in that, 'belonging is also fundamentally defined through a sense of experience' (Lovell 1998: 1). People become and are allotmenteers because of their practice. If you are on a site and are not cultivating your plot, then it is jarring because you are not engaging in what it is that would otherwise make you belong on the site. Being on an allotment is about the love of cultivation or at least participating in the growing of plants. If you don't enjoy growing you would not be on an allotment and indeed your plot would really evidence that, which in turn could result in being evicted from the site. This is markedly different from private house gardens, which you might have without being interested in growing, for example if you have a 'low maintenance garden' or if a gardener does the work on your behalf. In a different vein, guerrilla gardeners perhaps also don't have that sense of belonging through cultivation, because what they are doing is to create an opportunity for plants to take root in the city, but the rest is up to the plants, rather than being about guerrilla gardeners become actively involved in the growing processes.

In Chapter Three entitled 'magical places', I introduced Peggy who had helped to 'reclaim' an allotment site that had turned into 'wilderness'. Like nearly all allotmenteers, her reason was to grow (in her case fruit and vegetables in which she

became self-sufficient all year round). Indeed, as I outlined in the social history of allotments, they were set up and conceived as places for growing food. Although motivations and the way in which allotmenteers carry out their practice is more nuanced and complex than the original state-led intentions for allotments, this basic understanding has endured. However, currently two trends have converged: city citizens have reduced access to nature and a lack of knowledge on how to grow food (Lapointe et al. 2020). This means that when new allotmenteers arrive on allotment sites, their appreciation of nature often extends to more-than-human gardeners that seasoned allotmenteers simply want to get rid of. New allotmenteers generally then go through a shift in attitude throughout the growing season. At first, birds and deer are welcome pleasant counterpoints to urban city life, and on the allotment site they have the time to notice them. Then, as crops begin to grow, certain more-than-humans on the site (the ones that will eat the food they have not sown) become less welcome. The invisible species boundaries become more visible as allotmenteers old and new begin to materialise objects to protect the crops that they are growing from more-than-human gardeners. Ironically, the process of fencing within allotment sites mirrors the allotment site boundary fence which is ostensibly erected to stop others from taking crops that they have not themselves sown. All types of fences create particular types of relations.

Although places where nature occurs in cities, allotments are made spaces both legally and literally. Allotmenteers are tactile people who use their hands to work with the soil and plants and so it is unsurprising that they also craft non-human gardeners like bamboo canes which act as supports for beans to climb up but also structures to keep sentient more-than-human gardeners away from their crops. As well as attending to the ethnographic encounters that I had with human gardeners, during my fieldwork I also observed that they were growing material structures as

well as plant ones. In this way, as Christopher Tilley has noted in his work, gardens can be seen as artefacts (Tilley 2009). I extend this work to allotment sites where the plot grows as part of a network with the human, more-than-human and non-human gardeners making the plot together (Hallam and Ingold 2014). Human gardeners can be surprisingly explicit about their exclusion of more-than-human gardeners in their fencing. On one site – over weeks – a human gardener steadily erected a network of fences, complete with electrification in order to protect his crops.

Figure 32:Fencing & paving to keep out more-than-humans: note the self gardened plants in the foreground

Figure 33: A carefully constructed network of fences

Figure 34: A notice advising human gardeners who is being excluded

Conclusion: In, out and in between

The notice above, erected to explain the presence of the electric fence, illuminates the sense that there are a set of relations on allotment sites which exist across visible and invisible boundaries. The allotmenteer carefully chose the word 'attempt' which demonstrates the more-than-human gardener's agency. The allotmenteer in question is aware that the fence may not work – at least not in the way that he intends it to. We saw in this chapter with the example of the conversations that Kate had *through* the fence, that as well as demarcating a boundary, fences also materialise the possibility for interaction and sometimes in unexpected ways. Boundary fences are erected to support the making of allotment sites, but they also facilitate intimate interactions that can occur through the fence. As well as keeping allotmenteers in and non-allotmenteers out, the gap in the fence allows for liminal spaces which complicate the usual categories such as public/ private allowing for specific and different encounters to occur. It is possible to argue that these encounters have a magical quality to them in enabling an allotmenteer in the present day to feel as though she were a celebrated mystic anchoress from the Middle Ages. What is clear is that fences are key in both materialising the physical presence of allotment sites as well as particular ways of being. In the following chapter, I will turn to the ways in which freedom is expressed within an allotment site in contrast to the surrounding city precisely because of their being enclosed 'magical' spaces.

Chapter 6: ‘A place where no one tells me what to do’

Unpacking the value of freedom in urban gardening practices

Chapter introduction

If there was one word that I would use to describe the atmosphere on allotment sites, it is freedom. There is a tangible autonomy once one crosses the threshold of the allotment gates. On more than one occasion if I happened to be entering the allotment site at the same time as a fellow allotmenteer, I would hear them sigh (with pleasure) as we locked the gate behind us. Ahead of us lay a world which I moot is a banal utopia. The asphalt of the city is replaced by grass and soil. If the allotment is situated far enough away from a road the sound of traffic recedes. Laid out are plots of equal size and those that have been made smaller or bigger have been done so to accommodate allotmenteers’ preferences and generally without impinging on any other allotmenteer. Time begins to take on a different quality and is demonstrated by the slower pace of ambulation. To return to the sigh – it is a sigh of relief that somehow the rest of the allotmenteer’s responsibilities have been locked out. Here allotmenteers can just be. I witnessed this state of be-ing many times during the course of my fieldwork. The middle-aged English mother on OxLea who would sit on her plot and smoke a cigarette that she would not dare do at home in front of her children. The Trinidadian ‘old boy’ who would dash over to his plot on City Gorse from his nearby home to spend half an hour playing his music as he relaxed in his chair. I also heard myself make this sigh on the days when I arrived at the site having been pushed from pillar to post with the demands of my non-allotment life. It is as the ‘old boy’ John noted, allotment sites are ‘a place where no one tells me what to do’. I will return to John in the section on ‘Imagination and practice on allotment sites’.

In this chapter I am moving into more detailed ethnographic descriptions in allotment and guerrilla gardening which I then relate to literature on the anthropology of freedom. Although there is an increasing anthropological literature on freedom (notwithstanding Laidlaw's contention about the paucity of anthropological engagement with freedom (Laidlaw 2002)), as my research is ethnographically grounded, I will not be addressing that literature exhaustively but instead will enter into conversation with the studies of relevance to urban gardening and the materialisation of utopic spaces. Growing on urban land indicates a freedom of intimate interaction with city soil, which is something most city citizens do not have the opportunity to routinely engage in. This is most keenly demonstrated by guerrilla gardeners whose practice means that they feel able to sow seeds anywhere in the city they choose.

An introduction to allotmenteers' value of freedom

Allotmenteers are more confined within the boundaries of allotment sites. Nevertheless research carried out on allotments across Europe found a chief motivator for allotmenteering to be, 'the freedom of cultivation and the freedom of access rather than economic reasons' (Maćkiewicz and Asuero 2021: 1). Having examined boundaries in the previous chapter, this chapter engages with the potentially opposite value of freedom. This chapter is part of the growing response to Laidlaw's contention that 'freedom is a concept about which anthropology has had strikingly little to say' (Laidlaw 2002: 311). It turns out that urban gardening sites are a useful location to think with, on matters of freedom. Allotment sites are plural and as such are made up of people who have different gardening practices growing alongside each other. In this setting, freedom is greatly valued. There exists a tension

between the imaginary of a perfect allotment site and what must be done to practically maintain it. It appears that a sort of double morality is practised on some sites which allows for ‘one [to] subscribe to a code in a manner that allows for it to be broken’ (Heywood 2015: 200). This is most clearly demonstrated by the way in which pesticide use is navigated.

The value of freedom is also problematised with the ethnographic demonstration that there are in fact varying degrees of freedom within allotment sites. These different degrees of freedom are directly linked to how long the allotmenteer in question has been growing on the said allotment site. The quote from which the chapter title is drawn comes from an ‘old boy’ allotmenteer who actively recognises the freedom which his longstanding practice (and advancing years) has made possible for him. It is significant that individual allotmenteers find ways to create their own freedoms by creatively working with the widely appreciated value. This value of freedom is crucial for the understanding of allotment sites as utopic spaces. The varying degrees of freedom are not the most salient characteristic of its expression on allotment sites. This is partly because there are different characteristics that lead to the freedom being cultivated in different ways. Part of the freedom is based on years of practice, but it is also partly to do with an acknowledgement of different forms of knowledge. A relative newcomer to the site who is seen to tend a plot well may experience greater freedom than one who has been there for a long time but does not. Some of these freedoms are inversions of what might be expected outside allotment gates. Demographic categories such as working-class people or ethnic minorities can experience positive stereotyping based on the assumption that they would have greater knowledge about how to garden or as Charity said to me are, ‘proper farmers’.

An introduction to guerrilla gardeners' value of freedom

Conversesly guerrilla gardening sites are neither physically bounded nor contained. This means that there is a type of freedom that is already inherently present within the practice which can technically be carried out anywhere and by anyone. However, guerrilla gardeners are very often drawn from particular demographics in English cities – white, middle class and, in Oxford, usually older women. In brief, they are people who are highly likely to both understand how the law works and critically know how they can navigate legal grey areas ensuring that they do not fall foul of them. To quote Dawn a white retired middle-aged woman who was both an allotmenteer and guerrilla gardener,

> The council never showed the slightest interest in US planting plants around the trees. I mean, who would you know? You know what you're going to charge anybody? Well, I don't leave the name on a tag. I used to at the beginning put a little sign that said, Bee cafe, please don't spray. So I still do in the spring. But I mean, there's no indication of who has done it.

They are also people who feel the freest to talk about their activities knowing they are least likely to be apprehended for them. This is in contrast to guerrilla gardeners from racialised minorities who tend be more cautious about both their practice (and talking about it) as they are aware of the differential treatment they may experience from local authorities.

It is important to note that even in this expression of freedom – there is an *alone, together* thread through the practice of guerrilla gardening. When I first asked Dawn if she knew of other guerrilla gardeners she initially said, 'I don't really know of any of the guerilla gardening in Oxford' and immediately wanted to know who else I might have interviewed. Without naming the guerrilla gardener involved, I told her that I knew of a woman who had guerrilla gardened on Port Meadow. Dawn had an

immediate and strong reaction to this, 'Well, that's a historic monument. It's an sssi[21] What are they doing?' but equally she did not probe further or indicate that she felt they should be stopped. She recognised the freedom of the other guerrilla gardener's practice so in a sense they were both practising together but yet alone on their respective chosen sites. Dawn instead turned the conversation to an area she frequently passed and observed guerrilla gardening which she thought was carried out ineffectually but still had no idea who was doing it,

> Tell you where I have seen so which is really quite funny. Do you know Bird Lane? Yes. Right? Well, when they did the upheaval approaching the path in which I was done About but it was getting wider and wider and wider and wider and horrible and so on. So anyway, so at least people stay on the tarmac now. And there were nettles on one side and hogweed on the other. Now nettles have some use for some kinds of butterfly. They're not wonderful. And on the other side hogweed is smashing - lots of pollen, lots of nectar young young, all the way so I mean, you couldn't do better if you tried. But you know, the locals were saying oh, you know, we should have a replanting of some wild flowers and wild flowers you know, and then someone went along with some bizzy Lizzy you know, Impatiens wallerina it's really funny these these pathetic little Impatiens all the way along the path for them. I think that's quite funny.

Again, whatever she might have thought of their attempts – Dawn did not interfere in the other guerrilla gardeners' freedom to practice. There is an additional aspect to freedom in guerrilla gardening which is about the freedom of plants to be growing where they should not be. It is something that is at once subversive but also attractive.

Ultimately, the experience of freedom in urban gardening practice is something that is noticeable and remarked upon by urban gardeners and other city citizens alike. This chapter will open with a series of ethnographic vignettes which I will then argue demonstrate the value of freedom on urban gardening sites in Oxford. Finally, it will close with a wider discussion on the contribution my thesis makes to anthropology as an ethnography on freedom.

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[21] SSSI – Site of Special Scientific Interest

Plants as an expression of freedom: Amanda – the running guerrilla gardener

As has been previously mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, unless you know what to look for, it can be easy to miss guerrilla gardening sites in Oxford. This is in direct contrast to the clear messages that guerrilla gardeners state that they are sending through the plants that they sow (and in some cases tend) across the city of Oxford. There are many different messages encoded within the plants that guerrilla gardeners choose. Some guerrilla gardeners sow plants to support pollinators, in which case there are two messages being sent simultaneously. There is the ecological message by the guerrilla gardener in choosing pollinator-friendly plants, but there is also the message the plant itself sends to pollinators once it has germinated. With regards to ecological messaging, there are guerrilla gardeners who choose plants to increase biodiversity or reintroduce native species that are threatened with extinction. Other guerrilla gardeners choose plants for their beauty.

Despite the variation in message delivered by the choice of plants, the root stimulus in the choice of places that guerrilla gardeners sow their seeds is common – they nearly always choose sites that they see as 'neglected' or not 'cared for' by the city council in some way. Amanda, a white allotmenteer and guerrilla gardener in her early 50s, was no different. A regular runner she saw a sign in a nature reserve in Oxford on her usual running route fall off its pole. When describing what she saw to me, she said, 'I thought to myself, well that's no good'. Her feelings were heightened both because the message on the sign was to guide the public on how to treat the nature reserve appropriately but also because several months later, the pole fell down and neither the sign nor pole were repaired or replaced by the council. Amanda said, 'I saw the empty circle where the pole had been as an opportunity to send out a different message'. Amanda wanted her message to demonstrate that the people who

used the nature reserve cared about it and so she planted a hollyhock. Amanda's choice of plant was deliberate. She noted that hollyhocks are tall and thus would mimic the pole that had fallen down and their spires are like Oxford's spires. They are also typically English, and thus spoke to the local, and finally they are usually cultivated in gardens. Amanda was reminding the authorities that even though this was a 'public space' some members of the public cared for this space as if it were theirs. The space needed to be looked after and valued just as one would care for one's own private garden. It is worth remembering that Amanda's intervention required effort. Once she had decided to carry it out, she had to plan her runs to include time to be able to sow and tend to the hollyhock. She had to watch it grow and in the early days shelter it from being trodden upon.

A guerrilla gardened street

Across the city of Oxford, there are different neighbourhoods that are being transformed. One guerrilla gardened street which I monitored throughout the course of my fieldwork provided a rich example of the way in which just a couple of guerrilla gardeners could cultivate the kind of street that they wanted. It is a friendly street with a high proportion of middle-class residents; I will call it Mansion Road. Mansion Road leads on to a public green space, which is where the guerrilla gardening activities of Robert and Dawn, a retired white couple (who are also allotmenteers), began. The activities I describe here took place over a period of nearly two years. Dawn is a confident retired academic who speaks authoritatively. Convinced in her view about the way the world should be, she does not hesitate to participate in activities that she sees as improving the environment. She volunteers in various environmental initiatives across the city of Oxford and what is notable

about her participation is that it is always hands on. Dawn is not the kind of volunteer you would find at committee level unless it was strictly necessary. She prefers a far more tangible contribution. A keen allotmenteer, Dawn was responsible for reclaiming allotment land in her local area. Her strong views and practices have led to clashes with fellow allotmenteers but these instances have left her undeterred. She and Robert are out and about from the early hours of the morning, all day working with nature. They share at least one allotment plot and although their plot is strictly demarcated, they each confessed (in separate interviews) to having changed 'something' on the other's half that did not meet with their exacting standards.

Initially, Robert and Dawn invited neighbours to help them to sow native and seasonal plant seeds in the green space. These invitations were extended verbally but also through anonymous fliers that were pushed through neighbours' doors. As seasoned guerrilla gardeners they instructed neighbours on how to do it and then left them to it. They did not appear to arrange an organised group or place close attention to the work that the neighbours who did participate were carrying out.

They then turned their attention to the street itself and began to plant pollinators around trees that lined the street. The neighbours who commented on the flowers when they were in bloom were generally positive in their responses, but there was less uptake in participation than their earlier efforts. When some of the plants died following routine spraying of herbicides by the council on Mansion Road, Robert and Dawn used bamboo canes and other natural materials to erect constructions around them, complete with written notes reading 'do not spray' and 'bee café'. These constructions either fell or were taken apart with accompanying notes also disappearing several months after they were first put up. Their message was successful because the following spring/ summer after their initial appearance – the guerrilla gardening sites blossomed unperturbed. There was strong speculation

on Mansion Road that in the end Robert and Dawn must have spoken directly to the council to stop spraying the street altogether. It is likely that this was the case as other plants (weeds, as some residents called them) also went unchecked on the street. They started to grow in cracks on the pavement and along house walls. Some low-level grumbling began on Mansion Road, but no direct action was taken.

Undeterred, Robert and Dawn began to grow hollyhocks along the walls of front gardens that bordered the street. It was then that at least one resident decided to act and spray herbicide on the hollyhocks boarding their long wall and those of a few other houses. Mansion Road became a mix of houses that had hollyhocks in front of them and those that did not. Robert and Dawn seemed puzzled that there might be something selectively killing the hollyhocks. None of the street residents directly approached them to air their views and Robert and Dawn's guerrilla gardening practice continued.

Like guerrilla gardeners who have written about their activities (Reynolds 2018) (though Robert and Dawn do not write about theirs), they expressed the desire to change the world for the better. Although they see their allotment growing as having a positive environmental impact by way of improving biodiversity, they also carried out their guerrilla gardening because they felt able to do things that others were not. Although they did not phrase it in so many words, they demonstrated the ways in which they felt they had the freedom to shape the city into something better than it currently was. This is why they were bolder in the ways that they approached their neighbours and the council, and when I asked Dawn what she would do if someone told her to stop she looked genuinely puzzled.

Guerrilla gardening also allows Robert and Dawn to express a wider freedom within the city. Allotment sites, as we have seen in the previous chapter, are regulated spaces. Robert and Dawn had cultivated on one site which they had ended

up leaving, because of a disagreement about boundaries. When there was no city-wide waiting list and uptake of plots was low, many allotmenteers took it upon themselves to cultivate more than one plot on the site. This was seen as 'good' practice because it 'saved the site from closure'. I spoke with several allotmenteers who did this on sites across Oxford. There was, however, an unspoken rule that when uptake increased, those with extra plots would begin to release them for new allotmenteers. In the main this worked well but Robert and Dawn disagreed on where the boundaries originally lay on what became their expanded site. There are at least two different versions of what occurred, but in the end, as they cultivated on different bits of land around the city, they chose to leave the site and carry on with their activities elsewhere. This kind of tension between maintaining an overall site and being able to grow whenever and wherever you want does not exist on guerrilla gardening sites which is why they maintain both sets of urban gardening practices.

What Robert and Dawn's practices also show is that although it is possible to guerrilla garden anywhere one would like to, conflict around this can be masked or muted because gardening is seen as 'legitimate behaviour' (Bright 2018). It is much harder for a neighbour to confront another over flowers (which are seen as beautiful) than over other types of behaviour which are readily understood as anti-social. Robert and Dawn know this and so are able to infringe on their neighbour's freedom by practising their own (Hardman et al. 2018a). As guerrilla gardening is increasingly condoned across the country, it will be important to explore the real impact (positive or otherwise) that it has within communities and the spaces that they all have to share.

Imagination and practice on allotment sites

John (the 'old boy' I mention in the introduction to this chapter) and I had an extended conversation during OxLea Allotment Open Day which is detailed in Chapter Seven. It was a conversation that started before the first visitors arrived, was punctuated by a steady stream of visitors to the fresh produce stall that we manned together, and carried on well after the last visitors left. John had been allotmenteering on OxLea for over 30 years and used to go to the site once a week when he was working. Once he had retired, he would go to the site, 'every other day or every day'. He described how his 'heart lifts' when he walks through the gate and emphasised that, 'even if you are doing something wrong, nobody would tell you'. I experienced this opportunity to make mistakes myself. On OxLea, my plot was next door to Rodney an 'old boy' who was a seasoned allotmenteer. Sometimes my experimental practice of urban gardening was so outrageous he would stop and watch me for a short while. He never once commented out loud on what I was doing and would avert his eyes if it looked like I might be trying to read his expression.

At the same time, if I ever asked any of the 'old boys' for advice, they would willingly dispense it. Mike on Swardland even supplied me with netting and plant plugs when I needed them. Allotmenteers in their 20s and 30s who I spoke to across different sites in the city of Oxford also experienced the same kind of generosity from 'old boys'. also shared the same kind of experience of generosity by way of the 'old boys'. One couple in particular detailed the kind gifts of gardening equipment and plants from the 'old boys' on their site, who recognised that they were a young couple starting out and had limited financial resources.

Other everyday liberties were present on the site. Although strictly speaking a plot is leased out to a specific person, a small but consistent minority of people on sites across Oxford let their friends and relatives use their allotment plot from time to time. Because no one (unless you receive a warning letter from the committee for what is seen as you neglecting your plot) will ever approach you on your plot without your invitation, your friend or relative can cultivate undisturbed. Regular allotmenteers will notice but certainly not remark on your guests' presence – even if you are not there with them. This is so implicitly understood that when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, during the lockdowns, allotment committees had to explicitly advise allotmenteers that 'guests' were no longer able to visit the site – access was reserved for plot holders.

Once practising allotmenteering, clock time is replaced by allotment time. In my field notes I found an entry from 6 August 2019 that could have described many of the days I spent on the allotment site,

> It takes me a little while to settle into what I am doing and then I completely lose myself in the work and before you know it the time has gone.

Many allotmenteers I spoke with during my fieldwork also expressed this sense of being 'out of time' or time taking on a different (read – more welcome) quality. Especially allotmenteers who were still working would contrast it to the time in their day-to-day lives which was hurried and actively required management. The sense of time not requiring management also extended into the relationship that allotmenteers had with more-than-humans by way of plants. Much in the same way that there was an appreciation of 'not being told what to do', there was the recognition that one could also not tell the plants what to do. In an unexpected chat with an allotmenteer when I asked how the growing season was going for him, he

replied, ‘well you can’t *make* plants grow’. He didn’t look distressed at the thought that no matter how much he did there would always be room for different outcomes that were beyond his control. Allotmenteers who were not completely reliant on the food that they grew for sustenance especially took a relatively relaxed approach to the outcome of their efforts.

Nearly all of the snippets of conversation I had on allotment sites were like this. Exchanges that eschewed the conventions of what is considered polite conversation outside the allotment gates. Someone would start talking to you in the middle of a thought, you may or may not respond and the conversation may continue or not. The experience was neither pressured nor rude. If I waved at a fellow allotmenteer too far away to speak to, it was genuinely fine whether they waved back or not. Either way, I would go about my business (whatever it was that day) and they would go about theirs.

There were allotmenteers who benefitted from this very specific form of allotment communication. On Swardland, I gardened near an Albanian man who had been cultivating on the site for decades. We did not have a language in common but routinely exchanged smiles and friendly gestures. Eventually, I asked one of the committee members how they communicated with him – for example if there was a rent increase. The jovial response was that it was easy: his daughter would come and translate as required. The committee member stopped and thought for a moment. Actually, it turned out that in all the time that the Albanian man had been cultivating on the site, his daughter had only had to come up a handful of times. Really, as many allotmenteers say, people go to allotment sites to ‘just get on with it’. By ‘it’ they mean allotmenteering.

Allotmenteering is both a physical and mental practice. While the effects of both aspects of this practice are visible – the mental part of allotmenteering is harder

to capture by way of simple observation. Urban gardening, whether guerrilla gardening or allotmenteering, begins in the imagination. Long before any compost is mixed into the soil or the first seeds or seedlings are carefully pressed into the earth, allotmenteers' minds are busy with the possibilities that exist by engaging in their practice. These deeply meaningful imaginings are often the spur to action that keep allotmenteers going even as they face inevitable challenges. These imaginings also allow allotmenteers to transcend time.

One evening I was walking past a plot when I called out to an older white man who had not long retired and was sitting in front of the shed on his plot. This was before the COVID-19 pandemic had started and it was the kind of pleasant summer evening that tends to instigate conviviality. I cannot recall (and did not immediately note down in my field notes because I got lost in the enjoyment of the evening) how we fell into conversation, but he invited me onto his plot to sample some of the schnapps that he had made. It was schnapps that had been over a decade in the making. It had been his dream (he told me) to make schnapps from scratch. He had secured an allotment plot (he did not have permission to plant fruit trees in the communal garden of the flats where he lived). He had then gone on to find the prefect saplings, planted and tended the brace of apple trees until they bore the suitable fruit. Once abundant he had stored the fruit and then carried out the fermenting and the distilling himself. In the run up to his retirement, when work was tough, and he wasn't sure that he would make it until his pension was at the right level – he would imagine this very moment – the moment we were sitting in. He had pictured himself sitting on his allotment plot, drinking schnapps that he had made himself – from scratch. As I sipped what turned out to be very strong yet delicious schnapps, I realised his dream had something in common with the diverse array of allotment dreams that people shared with me. Although they had started off in their

imaginations, the allotment site was the physical place their dreams would not be belittled and instead afforded the opportunity for the dreams to be materialised. Sometimes, when working on my own allotment plot, I caught sight of these dreams in ways that were explicit. They would be evident in the exquisite look of satisfaction on an allotmenteer's face as they paused for a moment to take in an agreeable piece of work that they had just carried out on their plot. Occasionally, I might even catch an allotmenteer as they would reach out (as Mike did on Swardland when spending over an hour showing me around his plots) to lovingly brush over the leaves of a verdant plant. Having laid out these ethnographic descriptions on urban gardening sites in Oxford, I will now turn to my interpretation of what was occurring in them, as I maintain that they are all examples of different types of freedoms.

The freedom to care

Amanda's choice of the words 'no good' when she described her decision to plant a hollyhock on the nature reserve indicate that she saw both the council's inaction and her own response as moral decisions. In this way, Amanda was acting as a typical guerrilla gardener who generally attempts to, 'beautify neighbourhoods and increase biodiversity in areas which generally suffer from neglect' (Hardman and J. Larkham 2014). In unpacking Amanda's actions, several issues surface. A critical one is that Amanda felt able to carry out her actions (which sit in a legal grey area) without any form of restriction. She demonstrated her autonomy by being able to carry out a semiotic conversation with the council. The level of autonomy that Amanda showed would suggest that she is the kind of person who would not find it challenging to pick up the phone and call the council to register a complaint. However, her choice of actions indicate that she was doing more than simply complaining; Amanda wanted

to *show* the council that she had registered their neglect and give a practical example of how the council could treat the city better. As well as being a guerrilla gardener and allotmenteer, Amanda also worked in the creative industries. The choice that she was making was an expression of herself and the way she interacts with the world – it could be argued that Amanda was leaving her mark on the city.

This demonstration of 'creativity and autonomy' (Crane et al. 2013: 14) has been noted amongst guerrilla gardeners in the UK and also other parts of the world, for example in Canada. Guerrilla gardeners as well as beautifying the city also participate in creating an alternative reality within it (Reynolds 2018). Amanda's concerns were more with the message she felt the council was sending out by its inaction, than the practicalities of the management of urban spaces (namely what the sign's function was). She could have, for example, expended effort in re-erecting the sign which had fallen over. Instead, she chose to send out a different message to the council (and city citizens if they noticed it) reminding them that the city was *theirs*. That they ought to be able to look after the city *as they wished*.

Her bold response illustrates a freedom that has been recognised by other commentators on guerrilla gardeners and it's important to note that it is a freedom that is not always welcomed by all city citizens. Mike Allen, a botanical surveyor and artist, wrote a column in *The Guardian* newspaper describing the way in which he saw 'guerrilla gardening in the UK as a sign of failure'. While guerrilla gardeners would interpret the failure as being on the part of the council, Allen argues that the failure is on the part of the guerrilla gardeners' actions. He claims that,

> Guerrilla gardening is a self-centred response to a situation "no one will let me do what I want so I will go out and do it anyway, whether the community wants it or not". And that's a good point – if people are guerrilla gardening, there is nothing that anyone else in the community can do about it if they don't like it, because by its very nature it is secretive. (Allen 2014)

Allen's point that people cannot do anything if they do not like the guerrilla gardening signals the ways in which ideas about the importance of nature have taken hold. Even in cases where neighbours (for example) apply herbicide onto unwanted plants, I found during my fieldwork, they do so surreptitiously in order to avoid detection – presumably to avoid conflict but also likely because having nature in a city is meant to be a 'good' thing. While Allen raises valid points about the ways in which guerrilla gardeners' actions might pit them against their community (certainly some of Robert and Dawn's neighbours would agree with him), something else is also occurring. As I will discuss further in the penultimate section of this chapter, freedom is a dialectical process and Allen is likely frustrated by witnessing expressions of freedom that he himself feels unable to actively practice. Some of Robert and Dawn's neighbours, for example, exercised their own freedom by applying herbicides to the plants that they did not want on their street. What Allen is also referencing is the tension between individual freedom and social order which guerrilla gardeners' surface by their practice. There is also the question of which individual freedoms should be privileged – those of a guerrilla gardener aiming to beautify the city or increase biodiversity, or those of a partially sighted person or wheelchair user for whom the plants can cause problems as they try to navigate the city. In the section entitled 'Everyday freedoms' I will explore how this tension is navigated on allotment sites and the practical resolution that is reached on them. I will reiterate here that the exploration of freedom is one that is based on practice as experienced and observed through my fieldwork rather than an engagement with the conceptualisation of freedom in wider philosophical and anthropological literature.

Amanda's actions form part of her practice which encapsulated both protest and care. Both are also sustained and signalled by beauty. This practice of care also sits within a wider context of care, one in which, 'care can serve as … a moral value'

(Tronto 1993: 19). Amanda responded to the absence of care which she saw as 'no good' by (in her eyes) *doing* good. She replaced neglect with beauty, and she nurtured the presence of that beauty in the city. Amanda's actions are radical in two distinct ways. Feminist theories on care in the city have focused on the unequal burden of care experienced by women. The question of freedom in these practices of care (for example, domestic workers, kindergarten teachers, and adult social carers) is one that is limited by the lack of choice that these care givers often report in their particular contexts (Viderman et al. 2021). No one directly asked Amanda to demonstrate her care for the city, and although there might be people who recognise the plant and its beauty, she was not obligated to continue caring for it or replacing it when it eventually died. She was able to practice care (even if it only lasted for the life cycle of the hollyhock) while still experiencing a sense of personal freedom that is not usually associated with many of the other types of care that women give in cities.

This self-generated interaction with the city can also be understood in the call to action raised by Henri Lefebvre's concept of the 'right to the city'. In an article examining Lefebvre's work, Mark Purcell extrapolates on the 'possible worlds' that are created where, 'Participation means inhabitants increasingly coming to manage the production of urban space themselves' (Purcell 2014: 150). This is a production that moves beyond the usual structures that govern the management of space in cities. If Amanda was merely reacting to the neglect, then she would have re-erected the sign and remained within the existing hierarchies that control the city. By planting the hollyhock, she moved beyond the city and initiated a conversation about the kind of city she wished to inhabit, namely a beautiful one. She was able to do this because she exercised a freedom of imagination which Lefebvre recognises as 'utopia' (Lefebvre et al. 2003: 141). By envisioning a city that was markedly different to the one she was experiencing she began by imagining the impossible (flowers instead of

signage) through to 'demand[ing] the impossible' (Moylan 1986) and then materialising it.

Having traced the actions of an individual guerrilla gardener and using theoretical frameworks to unpack Amanda's actions (and words), this section has revealed the possibilities afforded to city citizens who work to materialise their imaginations as they use their freedom. I will now turn to what happens when guerrilla gardeners exercise their 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 1968) by choosing to actively shape it.

The freedom to shape the city

Guerrilla gardeners across the city of Oxford are shaping its appearance by their use of plants. An obvious question in the context of the freedom that they exhibit by carrying out their actions is whether or not they consider what they are doing in a moral framework. In both anthropological and philosophical literature there is a longstanding argument that links the value of freedom to its expression of a moral choice. Following this logic, if human beings are incapable of choice, then they are not capable of deciding to do good (Kant and Ellington 1983 ; Frierson 2003 ; Christman 2020). I will expound on this question further in the penultimate section of this chapter when examining the dialectical qualities of freedom. Here, however, it is important to reignite the awareness of the tension between individual freedom and social order which is salient in the context of utopia. If in More's book *Utopia* (as has been suggested by Kenyon (Kenyon 1983)) the understanding is that freedom exists because a tight social order has been maintained (however much Utopians value the ascribed social order); then are Utopians truly acting with any free will? I argue that by their practice, guerrilla gardeners attempt to highlight a different sort of social

order which they would say allows for freedom to act as they would like within the city. We can surmise this as certain guerrilla gardeners, like Robert and Dawn (amongst others), move beyond the more abstract semiotics that Amanda engaged in by the planting of her hollyhock, to clear written communication to their fellow city citizens about the good their guerrilla gardening practice can produce.

The first instance in which the written information was expressed was in the call to action that encouraged Mansion Road residents to participate in guerrilla gardening. People were exhorted to carry out this practice to help restore ecological balance to the local environment. This was seen as particularly pertinent as Mansion Road is in a city. Mansion Road residents were encouraged to rake the ground and given instructions to treat the soil in specific ways before scattering seeds of native species of plants. The implicit message that restoring native species is good can be linked to wider rewilding efforts that are being carried out across the UK and further afield (Jerry 2020). Furthermore, there is an associated imperative for human beings to actively participate in the rewilding process (before stepping back to allow nature to take its own course) as we are living in the geological era that is the Anthropocene and human beings as such are seen as responsible for the radical changes to the environment that have taken place (Holmes et al. 2020). It is outside the remit of this thesis to engage in an extended debate about the benefits (or not) of a 'return' of native species and rewilding. What I will highlight, however, is that the link between biodiversity, ecological balance and pollinators is complex. The reason for linking these aspects in this chapter is because of the ethnographic presence of Robert and Dawn doing so themselves, both by their choice of seeds and also by using the signage 'bee café'. The reason that bees were specifically named is because there is a popular image of bees as beloved pollinators (Sumner et al. 2018). (In fact many other species including the far less loved wasps are also highly effective pollinators

and, in some cases, more efficient than bees (Rader et al. 2016)). Furthermore, there is a general lack of public awareness that the focus on honeybees for example can disadvantage native bees. Honeybees in particular have received a lot of media and public attention because they are good for agriculture, but all pollinators should be considered in a wider and more diverse balance (McAfee 2020). The net result is that bees, as such, are pollinators that are seen as welcome in local habitats and thus plants that support them should be cultivated. Therefore, combining the promotion of rewilding alongside a practice that also has the benefit of increasing the pollinators present in a habitat naturally leads to the sowing of local plants. This, however, is complicated by the widespread presence of non-native plants in city gardens across England. It raises the question as to whether or not non-native plants should also be free to exist in cities that are leaning to rewilding alongside native plants. It may seem that only native plants should be included as pollinators do not distinguish between them and non-native species; however, it is not so straightforward.

Research carried out with the support of the Royal Horticultural Society has found that with regards to both pollinators and supporting invertebrates in local habitats, native plants are useful; however, non-native (exotic) plants help to extend the flowering season. They recommend a bias towards native or near-native species (in the UK this means plants from the northern rather than southern hemisphere) with inclusion of some non-native species. Although the research was published in the *Journal of Applied Ecology*, it is important to note that the article recognised more than just the ecological value of non-native plants. As well as extending the flowering season, non-native plants were described as being valued for their 'aesthetic quality'. The researchers were realistic in their assessment that many people grow flowering plants because they love them – regardless of their origins.

The study recognised that flowering plants were critical in addressing the serious decline of pollinators in the UK, but raised the issue that native plants should not be assumed to be the only solution and in fact a mix of plants offered the possibility of better results (Salisbury et al. 2015). In the context of urban gardeners who highlight ecological concerns, a key one is non-native species, especially those that have been found to be 'invasive'. This has led to an ecosystem in which 'native' is automatically assumed to be the most appropriate and was the logic under which (particularly Dawn) was operating.

The link between categorisations of plants (insects) and humans with reference to whether or not they are 'native' or 'non-native' (i.e. belong) is one which has already been effectively made in the literature. Anthropological literature has demonstrated the interrelations between human beings and more-than-humans that illuminate an intersubjectivity and also an affective relationship (Archambault 2016). Julie Archambault's work in Mozambique for example showed the ways in which young men formed affective and emotional relationships with the plants that they cultivated. This is also displayed in the choice of the words 'bee café' that were on the labels alongside the instructions not to spray the plants in question. The idea of bee cafés is an extension of other types of ways in which human beings are urged to support bees such as bee hotels that have become ubiquitous across the country. In this context, (primarily) city citizens are urged to consider their interdependency with bees, and native bees are privileged over non-native species. These actions are seen as positive in an ecological context regardless of conflicting research as to their effectiveness in native bee conservation in particular – it appears that bee hotels are often better at supporting wasps (MacIvor and Packer 2015).

With regards to supporting pollinators, there is an implicit suggestion of freedom from ecological disaster and specifically what would happen if there was no

food. The link between pollinators and food has become so established in the public imagination that many people remain unaware that the vast majority of staple crops consumed do not require pollination by bees. There are numerous media articles that aim to answer the question 'Would we starve without bees?' (GLP 2015 ; BBC 2014) but when you consider that major global staples such as rice, wheat, corn, beans, potatoes (among others) do not need pollinating by bees it becomes easier to apprehend that just 3–8% of global crop production relies on insects for pollination (Aizen et al. 2009). Still, there remains a direct correlation in public understanding that conserved (or better still) increased pollinator numbers equal better habitats, which equals long-term human survival and in the context of the ongoing climate emergency is justifiably seen as a good thing. In this way anyone trying to increase the pollinators is doing good. Following this logic, it is not difficult to comprehend why Robert and Dawn's neighbours found it challenging to air any ambivalence they had about the 'bee cafés' that had sprung up along Mansion Road. They would effectively be seen as hampering Robert and Dawn's freedom to do good in a social order which considered humans as interdependent with their more-than-human neighbours.

There is another aspect of the city that is being shaped through guerrilla gardening that is not directly linked to ecological benefits. That is one of beauty. Before I extend my arguments there is a quote from Leo Tolstoy's short story *The Kreutzer Sonata* which succinctly associates a commonly held moral quality of beauty. The quote reads, 'It's really quite remarkable how complete the illusion is that beauty is the same as goodness' (Tolstoy and McDuff 1985: 114). Although in the case of Robert and Dawn the emphasis that they placed on their guerrilla gardening activities was ecological, there are many guerrilla gardeners who instead focus on beauty, such as the elderly white woman who plants sunflowers on her street and

said she does so, ‘to brighten the place up’. In some parts of Oxford, the spring months are characterised by the burst of colour afforded by bulbs that local residents have taken to planting in neighbouring green spaces. Like with Robert and Dawn, signs instructing people not to pick the resultant flowers but instead to leave them in place for ‘everyone to enjoy’ accompany some of these bulbs. In these cases, the residents feel free to spread their aesthetic values in public. The wording on the sign (and lack of action of the council to remove flowers that were planted without permission) strongly suggests that city citizens experience their actions as good. One could not for example imagine similar signs being adhered to should they be attached to graffiti (unless it is graffiti by the world-renowned artist Banksy) with a sign requesting for it not to be removed. The connection between flowers and beauty and goodness (who would want to stop people from spreading joy) is so complete that even in neighbourhoods in Oxford where some people have complained about guerrilla gardening, the council has gone on to ensure that the guerrilla gardeners are still able to practise away from areas that would offend their neighbours (Keeling 2006).

What all these examples show is that there is a demonstrable freedom that guerrilla gardeners take to shape the city. However, this freedom is maintained because in recognising the moral choice that guerrilla gardeners have made, city citizens will tolerate their freedom when it is seen as a morally good action. As I have indicated, however, this is not without its tensions. In the balance between individual freedom and social order I will now turn to the everyday freedoms that allotmenteers experience as their practice seems to allow for informal systems that enable allotmenteers to materialise their utopias. These banal spaces in which freedom is first practised enable a different social order to then emerge.

Everyday freedoms

One of the most common questions I get asked about allotmenteering is whether or not people give you gardening advice. They are invariably surprised when I explain that the giving of advice on how to garden or more specifically allotmenteer is not straightforward. Part of the reason for non-allotmenteers assumptions is because of the conflation of the types of places that community gardens and allotments are. Many people assume that allotments operate in some ways like community gardens. As I detailed in the introduction to this thesis, there is a marked difference between the two. Community gardens are spaces where people share common imaginations and purposes. They are also places that people actively go to meet others to engage in a communal activity. Allotment sites are places where there are specific common imaginations and people carry out their activities *alone, together*. A particular common imagination on allotment sites is the utopic ideal of freedom. Allotmenteers across the board agree that allotment sites should be somewhere that everyone is able to do what they would like to do. The dispensing of unsolicited advice would necessarily impinge on that freedom.

That is not to say that allotmenteers are unaware of the communality of the space that they share. The difference is in the way that they maintain it so that the freedom that they practice can be sustained. Some of the maintenance is practical – such as clearing and tidying shared spaces and paths on the allotment site to keep them functional. On the three sites which I cultivated, it was notable how this clearing carried on unaffected by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic the allotment site maintenance was usually carried out on predetermined days with groups of allotmenteer volunteers (called working groups) carrying out their activity together concurrently. Following the onset of the pandemic, the

allotment site maintenance was still carried out on predetermined days; however, instead individuals or small family bubbles of allotmenteers carried it out consecutively. I was particularly struck by an email that circulated after the working groups had carried out their work on OxLea stating how 'amazing' their efforts were and remarking on their success. Exchanging text messages with some participants later, it seemed that a key difference in the success was not having to actively collaborate together simultaneously, yet the working groups were still contributing with an overall benefit to the site. This spirit of being *alone, together* is practised as a way of not intruding on other allotmenteers' freedom, including – as I experienced and detailed earlier on in this chapter – the freedom to make mistakes.

Once this freedom is enacted, it allows other everyday freedoms to emerge such as those of not having to adhere to conventions of communication that exist outside the allotment gates. In a personal and yet political interview published within *The Guardian* newspaper, the Conservative British politician Sajid Javid stated that, 'if you don't speak English then there is no way you can take full advantage of the opportunities that modern Britain has to offer you' (Asthana 2018). Although the article raised important points about the marginalisation that can occur from not being able to converse fully in English, allotment sites offer a startling example of how people can still be integrated into communities. The Albanian man who I gardened alongside on Swardland was only one example of someone who might otherwise be isolated outside the allotment gates but who was able to carry out their life-enriching activities for extended periods of time. On other sites across Oxford, people who spoke limited English still participated in annual community events such as allotment barbeques and were considered very much a part of the allotment community.

There are indeed clashes that occur on allotment sites that stem from different allotmenteering practices, but I would argue that freedom is so valued on allotment sites that allotmenteers instead develop strategies to navigate these challenges. One such challenge is the use of pesticides on allotment sites. There is a commonly held assumption that the vast majority of allotmenteers grow organically (i.e., without the use of synthetic pesticides or herbicides). Certainly, following the media attention given to the negative effects to health of herbicides that contain glyphosate, herbicides as well as pesticides have suffered a loss in reputation (Maggi et al. 2020). It is also worth noting here (following this chapter's earlier discussion on human intersubjectivity with bees, that media attention is also increasingly highlighting the effect of glyphosate on bee health). The realities of growing are such that even the most ecologically concerned of allotmenteers will sometimes use pesticides as natural methods for dealing with creatures such as slugs can be more labour intensive and arguably less effective. Mike on Swardland, who is a highly productive grower (and practises organic growing coupled with some rewilding), admitted to me that the only synthetic pesticides he used were slug pellets. He was not the only allotmenteer who did so. Others said to me that they did but would not openly admit it. On the site, empty pesticide or herbicide bottles would sometimes be discarded in places where it was not possible to tell who might have been using them.

Figure 35: A discarded herbicide bottle

I also witnessed a fierce stand-up argument between two white women allotmenteers one of whom was a middle-aged former organic market gardener and saw minimal pesticide use as 'realistic', and the other a retired academic who condemned any use of them as 'genocide'. The argument ended with their agreement that neither would ever intrude on the other's plot before they stopped speaking to each other and the retired woman stormed off.

So how do allotmenteers manage these strongly held beliefs about practice? A useful framework comes from the ethnographically grounded work of Paolo Heywood carried out in Italy. Heywood found that, 'freedom does not lie merely in the absence of rules'. Furthermore, he surmised that, 'it is possible to relate to moral codes or injunctions in such a way as to allow for their betrayal in certain circumstances' (Heywood 2015: 200). The example he gives is that of LGBTQ+ activists in Bologna who work with the Italian concept of *doppia morale* (double morality). He shares the touching example of Lucio Dalla (in 2012 Italy's most well-known folk singer) who died unexpectedly. During his funeral in an important Catholic church Heywood describes a typical example of *doppia morale* where Dalla's partner (and everyone knew he was Dalla's partner) was instead described as his 'collaborator'. Or as an Italian commentator on the funeral noted, 'Dalla's funeral is one of the strongest examples of what it means to be gay in Italy: go to church, they'll give you a funeral and they'll bury you with all the rites, just as long as you don't admit you're gay' (Heywood 2015: 205). The important thing to note (and that Heywood points out) is double morality differs from hypocrisy though there is a link which will become apparent. It is an empathetic management of the gap between what a person does and the ideals to which one subscribes. And, in fact, Heywood argues that this person had subscribed to a particular moral code knowing that they were likely to break it.

I argue that 'double morality' is what allows for pesticide use on allotment sites that promote organic gardening and may even have a pesticide ban. There are allotmenteers who say that they can tell if pesticides were used, certainly empty containers I have seen indicate their application, but to accuse someone directly of doing so or to admit it openly is to expose the 'double morality' which can lead to an accusation of hypocrisy. This is part of the reason why the argument between the two women was so fierce. In her anger, the retired academic blurted out that she knew of people on a particular plot who were using pesticides. The former organic market gardener aiming to be more diplomatic instead commented on how well the cabbages were doing on the plot. On this point the retired academic conceded that the cabbages were indeed excellent, but the damage had already been done and the 'double morality' laid bare.

The sour atmosphere that lingered for a quarter of an hour after the argument took place indicates the depth of feeling when the strategies used to maintain the value of freedom are disrupted. This is also a key factor as to why being on an allotment committee is not a favoured job. It requires taking responsibility for a task which directly challenges the value of freedom – delivering a letter to the plot holder in question if a plot is seen as being neglected. Allotment committee members will go to great lengths to avoid having to issue a warning letter that can lead to the expulsion of the plot holder from the site.

Aside from the allotment committee members, there exists on allotment sites a group of people who arguably experience the *most* freedom – the 'old boys'. They are respected for the amount of time that they have been cultivating on the site and for their accompanying vast knowledge of growing. On Swardland, one of the 'old boys' would arrive every morning and sit in the allotment site building smoking his pipe (contravening rules) for half an hour before he began any work on his plot. He

was also an honorary committee member, not expected to do any work but whose opinions on the running of the site carried extra weight. There was an understanding (which allotmenteers also openly stated) that the 'old boys' had been integral to the survival of allotment sites over decades. Even though some of their methods had been less than savoury (some 'old boys' actively excluded women from allotment sites in the latter part of the twentieth century – though this practice has since ended), the gratitude allotmenteers hold for the 'old boys' is so profound that the 'old boys' in return are rewarded with a special kind of freedom. This freedom is not, however, exclusive. It is something that can be attained with the passage of time and sustained engagement on the allotment site, which means that any allotmenteer could be the potential beneficiary of it. Having now examined the strategies that allotmenteers have developed to maintain their value of freedom, I will turn to the penultimate section of this chapter to discuss the anthropology of ethics and offer what contribution I believe my ethnography of freedom makes.

Philosophical explorations of freedom in anthropology

Freedom is addressed in anthropology through various lenses. There is the route as typified by the 'ethical turn' in anthropology and exemplified in Laidlaw's book *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom*. In literature that addresses freedom through the lens of ethics and morality, the concern with freedom takes as its starting point the philosophical enquiry into what it is that makes a good life. Laidlaw argues in his text that,

> Everywhere human conduct is pervaded by an ethical dimension – by questions of the rightness and wrongness of actions, of what we owe to each other, of the kind of persons we think we are or aspire to be – so it is an inescapable part of what anthropologists study. (Laidlaw 2013: 1)

Much of this study, however, has remained in the form of philosophical enquiry with less study grounded in ethnographic fieldwork. In this section I will give a brief outline of these philosophical enquiries. Exploring them in greater depth is beyond the remit of this thesis as it is a thesis that is concerned with the analysis of the value of freedom which emerged from ethnographic fieldwork on urban gardening sites.

Laidlaw's 2002 provocation on anthropology and freedom that predated the ethical turn bases his arguments on a critique of Immanuel Kant and Émile Durkheim. He contended that because Durkheim took Kant as his starting point, what emerged was a restricted understanding of ethics which was reduced to whether rules were being followed (Laidlaw 2002). This leaning towards rules made for a focus on collective interest where a central moral authority was placed above individuals who responded to the rules that were essentially laid out for them. Moral concerns or to be seen as moral in Durkheim's view is 'supra-individual' or to quote Durkheim directly, 'To act morally, is to act in terms of the collective interest' (Durkheim 1973: 59). With this reasoning, the collective (through the moral authority) holds an obligation over the individual. Durkheim posited this as a desire rather than obligation to do good for a higher aim. This is somewhat analogous to the morality described in Thomas More's book *Utopia* and raises the question of whether someone is truly free if they are merely adhering to rules and thus not getting into conflict with them. Or as Franz Boas described in a chapter entitled 'Liberty Among Primitive People' it is a freedom that comes from living in harmony with one's culture (Ashen 1942). As I demonstrated earlier on in this chapter, in urban gardening practices the relations between individual autonomy and collective interest challenge this notion of moral actions as only those that place the collective ahead of the individual. Guerrilla gardeners go ahead and shape the city as they see fit and instead the collective make sense of their actions by seeing them as morally

good. On allotment sites, cordial relations are maintained despite potential clashes over gardening practice such as the use of pesticides through the use of 'double morality' which allows allotmenteers to subscribe to a moral code while breaking it. In both cases the value of freedom is practised initially by the individual and then there are strategies adopted by the collective to support individual freedoms. What both examples also demonstrate, however, is the dialectical nature of freedom and the extent to which, even if expressed individually – it still requires a reflexive interaction with the collective. It helps us to, 'see how people, because they continually find themselves accountable to one another, come to understand what they are up to and why' (Keane 2017: 139). What might otherwise be internal reflections become external at the point in which individual practice comes up against the collective, as I discussed in relation to the argument that I witnessed. Both women involved in the argument had considered (and strong) positions on the 'right way' to allotmenteer. It is worth remembering a point raised in the introduction to this chapter that 'freedom to cultivate' rather than 'economic reasons' is a key motivation for allotmenteering across Europe. In the end, they were able to reconcile their views because of the value of freedom on allotment sites, particularly as it is maintained in a way that allows for freedom of individual practice.

In his 2018 essay, Rasmus Dyring traces the journey of the question of freedom within the ethical turn in anthropology. He notes the way in which both James Faubion and Michel Foucault articulate the 'mutual implications of ethics and freedom' (Dyring 2018: 225) but do not then explicitly examine this axiomatic assumption. I argue that with regards to Foucault in particular, his concerns with power and subjectivity have been influential in anthropology leading to ethnographies that trace dominance and resistance, or as has been noted by other authors an enduring interest in 'the suffering subject' (Robbins 2013). In these wide-

ranging ethnographies including feminist and subaltern studies, the focus has been to show the paths of resistance taken by groups of people against hegemonic power expressed at different levels and in varying ways (Scott 1985 ; Turner 1997 ; Ong 2010). With power seen as exerting its influence everywhere, it would seem that no aspect of life is untouched, and thus the only way to experience freedom is in reaction to oppression. What these ethnographies therefore do not allow for is freedom that illustrates a positive self-creation (or a cultivation of the self as free), instead repeatedly providing examples of freedoms that only exist in opposition to restriction (Keane 2014). Allotmenteering is a state sanctioned activity and most of the people growing on allotment sites are not doing so because they *have* to. Even though the sigh that they leave at the gate signifies the release of responsibility – they are not resisting their lives outside the allotment gates. What they are doing instead is cultivating their free selves in a place that will support them to do so.

Although guerrilla gardeners routinely frame their growing as a form of protest, they are practising a freedom that does not immediately relate to oppression, particularly in Oxford, where many of the guerrilla gardeners who do so would say that they live 'good' lives. A lot are retired, for example, so they also have a freedom from work and some of the more structured activities that working life brings. Instead, I would argue that guerrilla gardeners are practising a freedom to express the imagination of the city that they wish to see and engage with it in a manner that works towards that vision. In the introduction to this thesis, I described The Grenfell guerrilla gardener, Tayshan Hayden-Smith's practice. In the wake of the Grenfell fire tragedy he could have taken to the streets to protest as a direct response to the authority's lack of action – instead he created a peaceful place in the centre of his community – a garden which manifested a sense of hope for a better future.

An ethnography of freedom

There is no doubt that the anthropology of ethics and freedom is conceptually rich. However, when it comes to ethnographies of the same it appears that they more readily fall into what Sherry Ortner terms as 'dark anthropology' (Ortner 2016). It seems with a leaning towards recognising rules, anthropology has produced greater numbers of ethnographies that readily document constraints on freedom (and accompanying resistance), than contexts in which there is a pre-existing absence of constraints. There are contexts in anthropology in which these are recognised but they tend to stem from the Majority World – most notably Amazonia where high levels of autonomy are noted amongst people who still hold a collective ethos (Overing and Passes 2000 ; Killick 2007).

When considering freedom on allotment sites, I found the literature on the anthropology of lowland South America useful as it seemed that there were direct comparisons that could be made, for example between allotmenteers and certain aspects of the ways in which Panará peoples related to the idea of living well. Ewart in her work with Panará peoples reported an 'emphasis on living well … [while] it is hard to elicit rules for how to do so' (Ewart 2015). I find this analogous to the freedom of different styles of practice on allotment sites. Non-allotmenteers routinely ask me if more experienced allotmenteers offer advice and my answer is – not easily. Precisely because allotment sites are as John says, 'the place where no one tells me what to do', there is great reluctance to tell anyone else what to do. I witnessed an extreme example of this during the COVID-19 lockdowns. On Swardland, allotmenteers looked after plots of those who were shielding or sick. What was notable was that on the plots they were looking after – they gardened with the style of the allotmenteer whose plot it was and not their own. It was also startling

to realise that many allotmenteers *knew* how their allotment neighbour gardened, but they chose their own way of being because of the sense of freedom fostered on the site.

It is a different call to freedom than that of guerrilla gardeners who conversely challenge (rather than resist) implicit rules that exist in the society in which they operate (Dresch and Scheele 2015). By growing plants in places where they do not have the permission to do so, they are issuing a call to remind city citizens that they can engage in ways that have not been prescribed in the city. This is especially true if the symbolism they use (plants) is one that the city places high value on. I have previously discussed how difficult it is for guerrilla gardeners to be challenged in their activities. So much so that even when Malcolm Everton's neighbours complained about his actions, instead of cautioning him, they came to an agreement on places that he could continue to carry it out. Everton and other guerrilla gardeners playfully tease out our shared assumptions about what it means to be a 'good' citizen in a public space and offer a freedom to reimagine the spaces that we thought we knew.

My contribution to the anthropology of freedom is to offer an ethnography where positive self-creating forms of freedom exist and within a Euro-American urban city. Furthermore, it is a freedom that is experienced as a morally good choice. I should emphasise that my thesis is not making grand claims. It is instead part of a growing body of literature that is moving towards an anthropology of the good. It sits within a framework in which,

> The point of this kind of work is not to define what might universally count as Good, and its practitioners are neither so opinionated as to claim that any given society has in fact achieved the capital G Good, nor so Pollyannaish as to imagine that societies might achieve it on a regular basis if only we could identify what it is. Their more modest aim is to explore the different ways people organize their personal and collective lives in order to foster what they

> think of as good, and to study what it is like to live at least some of the time in light of such a project. (Robbins 2013: 457)

I also must highlight that I did not begin my fieldwork looking for freedom on urban gardening sites in Oxford. My research question was 'What values underpin urban gardening practice?' As it turned out the value of freedom became so salient that I ironically was unable to escape its materialisation.

Chapter conclusion

To conclude this chapter, I will offer a brief reiteration of the challenges that ethnographies of freedom face. Anthropologists have found it challenging to track freedom because its obvious expressions tend to lean towards the individual rather than the collective. Furthermore, the moral reflexivity that philosophical anthropologists have set as a prerequisite for free (and good) actions is largely an internal process, making it harder still to recognise positive freedom. What urban gardening does in general, and allotmenteering does in particular, is provide a community setting which people have entered into of their own free will. This is a place which has then self-organised (with state backing as required) to maintain this spirit of freedom alongside the collective. It could be said that allotmenteer freedom is experienced and practised *alone, together*. As this practice is a positive freedom it is a reckoning of the challenge of squaring the theory of freedom and its practice and is as such a manifestation of the impossible in the everyday – namely a banal utopia.

The pleasure I derived from monitoring the guerrilla gardened street during the course of my fieldwork only grew as time wore on. It felt delightfully subversive that someone or some people who were not the city council or even an organised group of neighbours could have crafted a whole street to look beautiful. Over time, some of the plants that were growing there had seeded themselves. It struck me that I was living vicariously through the guerrilla gardeners' sense of freedom. The

guerrilla gardeners were doing more than mounting a protest against the council or even resisting an ordinary looking suburban street. They had cultivated the freedom to transform a place of arguably banal existence and turned it into something noticeable. It was also an unbounded kind of freedom – one that was not limited to being expressed behind an allotment gate.

When I locked the gate for the final time at Swardland (the last of my allotment plots that I gave up at the end of my fieldwork), I sighed as I watched the lettings secretary walk up the slight hill towards her plot. I had passed the keys to her through the bars on the gate and, without assistance, I no longer had access to a place where I had spent a large amount of my time over the preceding 36 months. My sigh, however, was not of relief; it was a mixture of emotions tinged with a sense of loss. Many times I had sat at the top of the incline, alone on the entire site, and looked out over the beautiful Oxfordshire countryside the view afforded. My imagination had fed into the raised beds on the plot which rewarded me with blue potatoes, chicory from plugs Mike had given me, perfect cauliflower, and many other crops that my family and I had enjoyed.

Figure 36: A crop of blue potatoes

The plot on Swardland was the first place I visited (for my hour of allotted daily exercise) during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The site had offered me (and my fellow allotmenteers) freedoms that seemed impossible to many people up and down the country. Even as the rest of life felt as though it was falling apart, the growing season in 2020 went on in exactly the same vein as the growing season of 2019 and likely the growing season of 2021 would continue to do. Some successes, some failures, but with the freedom to engage with myself, the earth, more-than-humans, and other people I grew alongside untarnished. I watched as the lettings secretary turned onto a plot and I raised my arm in a wave; she paused for a moment and then waved goodbye back.

INTERLUDE: BANAL NATIONALISM

So far, this thesis has focused on the materialisation of the utopic aspects of the banal utopia that urban gardening sites are. Yet, the word banal, from the banal utopia I propose, contains within it two aspects. The first aspect is in the meaning of ordinary or everyday. The second aspect comes from Billig's 'banal nationalism' or the ordinary ways in which people build a shared sense of national identity. It is challenging to refer to land and nationalism without invoking issues of conflict. The acknowledged link between land and nationalism is not a positive one. Despite that, the way in which national identity is displayed on allotment sites appears to offer alternative readings of the connections people can make to land and each other.

Given the diversity of people, plants, and practice on allotment sites (which will be covered in greater detail in the final chapter of this thesis), what I found was that a connection *through* the land rather than *to* the land offered a space for the expression of national identity in ways that were not perceived or meant to threaten or exclude. The presence of flags on allotment sites simultaneously allowed people to express who they were while recognising others' freedom to do so, or, as Barbara, an allotmenteer whose shed had two England flags erected on it said when I asked her about her flags, 'here's about the only place where it's OK to be proud to be English.'

Figure 37: A Polish flag on an allotment shed

Chapter 7: Fresh local produce … available in exchange for donations

A good offer

Chapter introduction

There was a sudden spike in emails from the OxLea allotment committee in August 2019. What started off as a gentle reminder quickly became a detailed list of instructions, complete with attached fliers such as the one below advertising the OxLea Open Day on the last Saturday of the month.

Road

FRESH LOCAL PRODUCE & OPEN DAY

Saturday 31st August

10 am to 3 pm

Visitors can be given a tour of the site, with an opportunity to talk to allotment holders about taking on a plot. Some produce will be available in exchange for donations to the allotment funds.

Details: Names, email addresses and telephone numbers of 3 committee members were supplied here

Figure 38: Open Day flier

An Open Day requires plot holders to negotiate a complex set of boundaries – social, legal, and physical – in order for a site to be able to raise the money required to keep the site going for the following year, negotiations that are at once necessary and uncertain. Like utopians in Thomas More's book *Utopia* (More 2012 [1516]) allotmenteers are circumspect about money and eschew it as a unit of exchange on the allotment site. The legal history of allotments means that allotment sites were set up specifically not to be commercial enterprises within the city. Although this is not a thesis that locates itself within economic anthropology, it is important to acknowledge the formidable topic that is money. Money is banal and yet treated very differently by allotmenteers depending on whether they are operating as city citizens or as allotmenteers on the allotment site. This chapter discusses the tension between the utopian space that is the allotment vis-à-vis the surrounding city from which allotmenteers escape. Using the ethnographic case study of an Open Day, during which non-OxLea Oxford City residents are actively invited and welcomed onto the site, this chapter demonstrates the manner in which the existence of the allotment site is predicated on the city's existence. The case study of the Open Day also speaks powerfully to the place of the imagination in allotmenteering. Many visitors come to visit the site to see if indeed having a plot matches what they imagine it is like. Once on the site their imaginations are further sparked by allowing themselves to daydream of what they might grow on a plot were they to have one.

City residents are invited to the Open Day for explicit and implicit reasons. The explicit reason is the donations they give in exchange for 'surplus' produce produced on the site that is used by the allotment committee to pay the water and other site bills that require cash. The implicit reason is to maintain good relations with the communities that neighbour the site. These are relations that are not to be

taken for granted as stated in a different email sent out by the committee in response to an untended bonfire:

> At the moment we have a very good relationship with our neighbours with regards to smoke pollution from bonfires. The action of a few irresponsible people will ruin this and could cause the site to be closed if the Department of the Environment gets involved.

The stated reliance on goodwill underpins the great lengths to which allotmenteers go in order to welcome people onto the site during the Open Day. When the relationship with the surrounding communities is referred to, it demonstrates the dependency of allotment sites on the surrounding city. Allotmenteers are cautioned to take great pains not to 'ruin this' [relationship] and the responsibility for it falls very much on the allotmenteers' shoulders. The Open Day is one of the ways in which good relations are maintained with the surrounding community. This annual event in its repetition reinforces the dependency of the allotment site on the city, while offering allotment site neighbours an opportunity to experience utopia for a spell. It exposes the tensions that allotment sites sit within that usually remain invisible (warning emails notwithstanding).

This chapter focuses solely on allotments in order to examine what the tools of economic anthropology can illuminate that allow allotments to function. There is no easily discernible analogous practice amongst guerrilla gardeners because the vast majority do not cultivate the same place over time. Furthermore, as has been discussed in the previous chapter on freedom highlights that guerrilla gardeners practice is in some critical ways more *alone, together* than allotmenteers practice. They are aware of other guerrilla gardeners as they can recognise their work but generally do not practice with them remaining instead both spatially and temporally distanced. Allotmenteers on the other hand are bounded by the allotment fence and engage different strategies to be able to carry out exchange together and yet alone.

Figure 39: A sign welcoming visitors to the Open Day

Preparing for the Open Day

The emails received in the run-up to the Open Day contained two main themes.[22] The first was about the day's practicalities. There were time slots from 9am to 5pm that needed to be covered by volunteers. The site building and other communal areas were going to be decorated and the site in general needed to be 'looking good'. In this case looking good meant the clearing up of rubbish (for example loose pesticide bottles), tidying up individual plots including outside sheds and cutting grass and clearing up communal areas. Each of the various activities that I will describe in the following section had to be prepared and volunteers also needed to be on hand to give visitors a tour of the site. These tours had multiple layers of meaning – superficially it was allotmenteers giving city residents a warm welcome, but I also knew from discussions with fellow allotmenteers that they wanted to ensure visitors did not stray from the main paths and wander onto people's plots. As discussed in Chapter Six allotments are sites on which freedom is an important value, but a few

[22] It is worth noting that a good number of allotment sites across Oxford hold annual Open Days.

key unwritten rules exist (such as not going onto another person's plot without invitation) of which visitors would be blissfully unaware. The committee were also very keen for the allotment site to be presented 'well'. As such, the emails received in the run-up to the Open Day seemed to be encouraging allotmenteers to remember why it was that they grow. The sentence below is from an email aimed at plot holders rather than potential Open Day visitors, and yet its language reads as though it is addressing those who did not already know the benefits of having a plot. It seemed as though the allotment committee were also subtly coaching us on what we might say to people we were encouraging to come to the Open Day.

'Fresh, home-grown vegetables and fruit on your doorstep. What could be better?'

This short sentence is densely packed with meaning which I will unpack ethnographically in order to explore the way in which allotmenteers leverage the positive connotations of ideas about what 'local' means.

Interrogating the local – allotments as good 'homes' and neighbours

The word doorstep links back to the word local in the aforementioned flier. Both are words through which the allotment committee are leveraging their city citizenship. Allotment sites are increasingly being classed as part of a local food movement and as such have moral capital. There are countless newspaper articles quoting experts like Professor Goulson of Sussex University (a professor of Biology) who argue that,

> allotments can produce crops much more efficiently than monoculture farming. A competent gardener can produce more than 30 tonnes of fruit and veg per hectare. (McDonald 2018)

Like wider local food movements, allotment sites are positioned as climate friendly and sustainable.[23] These are both important and difficult aims for cities to attain and allotmenteers are conscious and proud of maintaining a practice that espouses these values. Lorna Robinson's 2008 study in Oxford found that, 'The culture and practice of allotment holding within Oxford can help build a sustainable local economy'. (Robinson 2008). Yet Robinson herself noted that the findings from her study should not be readily generalised. The concept of sustainability and its coupling with the idea of goodness is both complex and highly valued; in this regard it means that allotmenteers self-reporting on the same may lean towards the aspirational rather than the practical. One such example is the use of pesticides which is contentious, and which has already been discussed at length with regards to the value of freedom in Chapter Six. Allotmenteers who espouse the values of a sustainable and climate-friendly practice are also aligned with the view that pesticides are harmful. As such, Robinson's study found that 9/10 plot holders said that they practised organic growing. This is in contrast to my ethnographic research where on the three sites I cultivated plots, pesticides were consistently used by certainly more than 10% of the allotmenteers. Or as one allotmenteer confessed who cultivated on a different site to mine, 'they do it secretly like I do'.

[23] 'Related to sustainability is the centuries-old controversy over how urbanisation and industrialisation affect the soil, water, air and other common resources. The debate pits those advocating for the local control of shared resources against proponents of centralised control of common holdings by state or corporate power – and this polarity has helped shape public policies and institutional arrangements' (Maida and Beck, 2016: 1) MAIDA, C. A. & BECK, S. (2016). Towards Communities of Practice in Global Sustainability. *Anthropology in Action,* 23**:** 1-5. (Agrawal, 2003). AGRAWAL, A. (2003). Sustainable Governance of Common-pool Resources: Context, methods, and politics. *Annual Review of Anthropology,* 32**:** 243-262. Allotment history is intertwined with the loss of the commons and chapter one of this thesis examined the ways in which this history impacted the particular set of legal outcomes that made for allotment sites existence.

The pressure for allotmenteers to be good or at the very least carry out good practice also exists in the wider city and the government. During a parliamentary select committee in 1998, it was noted that,

> The value of allotments should not be seen purely in monetary terms, but must include benefits to health, diet, community fellowship and protection of the environment. (Parliament 1998b)

This view was tabled by the National Society of Allotments and Leisure Gardens and supported by amongst others the Department of the Environment, National Food Alliance, and Save the Children, a view encoded within the invitation to the Open Day. The message being that *we* allotmenteers are *good* people doing a *good* thing on your doorstep. This positions allotmenteering as an ethical practice and the commitment that allotmenteers have made to carrying out as an important choice to be and do a certain way (Lambek 2010).[24] It is another way of emphasising to the wider community that we (allotmenteers) are good neighbours to have. The sentence from the email, even while appealing to city citizen values, is still calling attention to the utopia that is the allotment site and its own 'nation' beyond the gates. The word that indicates this is 'your' rather than 'our' doorstep. Many allotmenteers who grow on OxLea live in the surrounding community. On any given day that I was on the site, there were always those who walked or cycled there as they lived locally. The word 'your' functions like the allotment gate. Outside the allotment gate is the doorstep and inside the allotment gate is 'home' for the allotmenteers. This echoes Cheryl, the allotmenteer who said, 'our allotment has become our castle', the sentence talks about 'home-grown vegetables' rather than 'allotment grown vegetables'.

This appeal to the moral goodness of the local is complicated by the charge that local food movements are elitist. Local food usually costs more – as delivered by

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[24] For more on agency and ethic practice see MAHMOOD, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

places like farmers' markets. When allotmenteers say they 'should' keep track (I did not encounter a single allotmenteer who did) of the money they spend on their plot, it is likely because they are aware of the fact that not having to keep track is a luxury. This is heightened by the fact that the roots of allotment sites (starting with The Diggers in the 1600s) are understood as decidedly working class (WCML 2019). Middle-class allotmenteers were acutely aware that they could be perceived as being part of local food gentrification. One of my interview questions was 'How (if at all) has the site changed since you have had your plot?' Outside of the formality of semi-structured interviews, allotmenteers who had had their plot for over two decades on OxLea and Swardland often volunteered this information to me during the course of *alone, together* style allotment exchanges. Typical responses noted that there were more 'professional people' on the site, more 'middle-class people', 'families with young children', and definitely 'more women'. In the chapter that follows, I discuss this observed change in demographics in greater detail. In recognising this trend, allotmenteers found ways in which to justify it:

> now it seems to be like a lot of people in this sort of 30s. And they're bringing up the kids and everything like that to help them [at] the allotment and actually think that's a very good thing

What was harder to square was whether or not the increase in more middle-class children has meant that the financially poorer children with less access to fresh food might be more likely to miss out. In Oxford, over the last decade three allotment sites have been shut down and these were all in financially poorer areas. Further work (outside the scope of this thesis) would be required to disentangle the question of allotment gentrification, in part because of the values that allotmenteers hold with regards to money. Allotmenteers recognise money is necessary to keep the site going but, to directly quote Peggy, who has had a plot for over four decades and echoes

thoughts typical of many allotmenteers, '[allotmenteering] is more than, it's not about money.'

In a study examining the potential for urban food-growing initiatives like allotments to reduce inequality, Miller (2015b) expanded on how difficult it is to quantify the benefit of allotments particularly when it comes to money. In brief, quantifiable measures from the city do not readily translate into the measures used and taken by allotmenteers on their sites:

> the valuation of [quality and quantity of allotment produce] was interlinked both with the level of economic capital available to participants and with cultural capital in terms of growing and culinary skills. (Miller 2015b: 1204)

This makes it difficult to make direct comparisons. For example, while it is possible to measure how much food gets donated to a food bank, allotmenteers who share their excess do not keep any record of it. This is another reason that an ethnographic study was particularly well suited to understanding the ways in which allotment sites operate. During the course of my fieldwork, several allotmenteers confided to me that during periods of unemployment they had survived on the vegetables and fruit that allotmenteers discreetly lay out for anyone in need to take. These donations were not just limited to people on the site but extended to donations of food to communities in the surrounding city. Simultaneously, allotmenteers were insistent that once the threshold of the gates had been crossed, everyone (i.e., all allotmenteers) was equal on the allotment site.[25] As one allotmenteer said to me when we were talking about the different types of people on the site where she is a committee member:

> We have titled people here, you know, Oxford academics, but that all gets left at the gates. Once you are in the site, none of that matters.

[25] The equality that allotmenteers reference is specific to being on the allotment site. Allotmenteers acknowledge that outside the site, people may have very different circumstances but these do not carry over into the allotmenteer identity on the site.

I witnessed this on the sites where I cultivated my plots. It was not until I began to carry out semi-structured interviews that I would find out what working lives people had (or had previously). This kind of detail would not arise in everyday conversations on the site. It seemed to be an implicit practice, supported by the idea of a utopic space, that *real life* with its concomitant jobs, money and social status was detached from – allowing for the materialisation of an altogether different space.

Good, better, best – the practice of self-presentation

The final word in the sentence that came in the email priming allotmenteers for the Open Day is the word 'better' in relation to the advertised 'home-grown vegetables'. The sentence is from the aforementioned flier that read:

'Fresh, home-grown vegetables and fruit on your doorstep. What could be better?'

The word 'better' is speaking to the utopic practice of urban gardening as carried out on allotment sites. Coupled with the word 'open' – the description of the day is a reminder that allotment sites are usually closed to members of the public who are not plot holders. Indeed, the usually double-locked gates at OxLea were left open throughout the Open Day, signalling an out of the ordinary welcome to anyone who would like to come in.

An allotment Open Day is akin to a row of fresh produce stalls at a city market crossed with a muted English country fete.

Figure 40: A sign advertising what was on offer at the Open Day

Allotmenteers who drive, park further afield to leave room for visitors who drive to the site to park. Most people arrived on foot or bicycle from the surrounding neighbourhood. Upon walking through the open gate, immediately in front of the visitors lies the main allotment thoroughfare.

Figure 41: View on arrival at the Open Day

To the right is the one building on the site that houses equipment such as strimmers and lawnmowers; this was decked out in faded bunting. Just beyond the bunting is the beautifully managed plot which attracted me to the site in the first place, and opposite that plot on the other side of the allotment road is the welcoming team of

allotmenteers. They were running a raffle, tombola, bric-a-brac table, and serving tea and cakes. Should you be taken on a tour of the site you would soon pass the traditional allotment plot I described earlier with its neat rows of potatoes that leads up to a shed decked with an Irish flag. Its neighbouring plot has been split into two. The front plot also looks relatively traditional with rows of vegetables – the first being healthy courgettes. Behind it sits a plot which is only half cultivated. Half of the cultivated plot also bears healthy courgette, beetroot, and sunflower plants, but the other half shows the signs of my planting experiment gone wrong.

If you keep to the allotment road, what follows are a mixture of plots as individual as their owners. Some plots have their numbers proudly displayed, others have sheds with Union Jacks raised, there are those with children's outdoor play equipment, a few plots have mini orchards. The road then turns to the right and brings you back the quarter kilometre towards the car park and the fence that borders the main road. At the edge of the car park closest to the allotment building at the front of the site was the fresh produce stall where I was stationed. It also had more cakes for sale (one of which had been baked by my daughter who also came to help).

I volunteered to help at the fresh produce stall because unlike more seasoned allotmenteers, I was very comfortable with handling the money that I was going to receive on behalf of the site 'by way of donation'. In the following section I will deal explicitly with the challenges of handling money in what is meant to be a utopic setting. I also volunteered to be on the fresh produce stall because it meant that I was likely to see most of the visitors to the site. Not everyone wanted a tour of the site, not everyone would want a cup of tea, but everyone who had taken the trouble to come to the Open Day definitely wanted to see what sorts of vegetables were grown there, even if they did not end up taking any home. There is an awareness that

growing vegetables is not necessarily an easy thing to do and so visitors to the site are keen to see the produce for themselves. Proof of what is possible.

I recognised myself among the continual stream of visitors who came to the Open Day. On entering the site, many visitors wanted to discuss the produce at great length, asking lots of questions. They also wanted to live out their fantasies of what it must be like to have a plot, and offer unsolicited excuses for why they couldn't quite manage to take one on just now. Some of these fantasies were gendered with men talking about providing for their family from the land and women about having a space to tinker and potter – in both senses of the word. Despite it being a grey day, the allotment site was bustling, and the fresh produce stall had a steady queue from when it opened at 10am right up until after official closing. Despite the advertised time for the Open Day to end at 3pm, we didn't close down the fresh produce stall until over an hour later. I indulged these visitor fantasies as they approached me waiting to be served, until I became adept at talking and serving, catching snippets of people's lives as they were and what they hoped they might be should they become allotmenteers.

'Everything is organic here'

'It's beautiful – more than beautiful'

'I just want to walk around and around'

Gardens of all kinds have the potential to invite the imagination of a better future. So much so that in 2018, NESTA, the UK's innovation agency for social good, harnessed this capability by creating a garden for people to experience which they described as, 'a radical, experiential way of exploring possible futures' (Ward Dyer 2018). A perhaps more grounded version of this potential is exhibited by the much-lauded and visited Derek Jarman's garden – created in response to his HIV/ AIDS diagnosis in

1986 and the ensuing international crisis (Jarman and Sooley 2009). Gardens offer possibility and this is what visitors to the allotment Open Day were tapping into.

A handful of visitors wanted to show that they had a more than basic knowledge of fruits and vegetables and would declare the name of a variety of potatoes on display. 'These are Pink Firs', one white middle-aged woman visitor said to me thrusting the potato under my nose as though she wanted me to confirm her pronouncement by scent. After I agreed, she went on to tell me how difficult they are to get hold of in the shops and what a treat it was that she had been able to find them here. My confirmation had satisfied her and so she went on to fill half a carrier bag's worth to take home for dinner that night, quietly leaving a ten-pound note on the table in exchange as much for my confirmation of herself as someone who knew about potatoes, as for the surplus potatoes themselves. It was an exchange that could be described by Goffman's theory of the presentation of self. I was playing the experienced allotmenteer, while the white middle-aged woman was playing the savvy customer (Goffman 1971). If the queue had not moved on, I am not sure how long either of us would have been able to hold up our roles. This role-playing extended to other people involved in the Open Day in our varying attempts to normalise what is not at all a normal day at the allotment site.

The allotmenteering economy

Donations only: legitimising transactions across the utopian boundary

The fresh produce stall is supplied with surplus fruit and veg donated by allotmenteers for sale to the public. The word 'surplus' is critical. It is this singular word on which it is decided whether or not there has been a breach of allotment law

should cash be exchanged for produce on the allotment site. This being the one day that cash was openly exchanged for produce on the site, coupled with city citizens being present, meant the rules had to be seen to be followed. Although most members of the public in wider Oxford City may not be aware of the details of allotment association rules, there were people who came to the Open Day who previously had plots there. Such people, with knowledge of the facts that allotment sites are not legally allowed to sell produce, could be potential threats to the site's existence. They were some of the people who were choosing between Pink Fir and Maris Piper potatoes laid out on the trestle tables. At least half of the visitors who attended the Open Day have been coming to buy their produce at OxLea Open Days for over a decade. John, a ruddy committee member, who I was helping to run the stall with, was very careful with his language. He was collecting 'donations only to help pay for the site's water bill'. John himself said that one of the things that he loves about allotment sites is that 'It's a space which is far away from capitalism and the money economy.' The distance which John references is metaphorical and speaks to the separateness that allotmenteers create between their sites and the city that surrounds them. OxLea allotment site is within spitting distance of several businesses (including a supermarket) that clearly fall into the money economy. There was, however, slippage (or perhaps an effort at translation for non-allotmenteers) in John's market stall banter. When people wanted to know what an appropriate donation was, he would ask them to 'give twice as much as they would pay at supermarket X for the same amount of produce'. This is an interesting juxtaposition because in mentioning a specific supermarket, he is referencing a decidedly commercial enterprise.

To make sense of John's statement above, 'it is vitally important to understand the cultural matrix into which it is incorporated' (Parry and Bloch 1989:

1). Allotments sit in legal and financial tension within the city of Oxford. Sites have running costs which include leasing land from the Council and paying for essential facilities like water. The relatively low annual rents (£20–£40 a year) that plot holders pay do not easily cover these costs. Simultaneously, the Allotment Act prohibits allotments from operating as a business. It is also worth noting that it is the only part of the act that carries a clear legal restriction (Clayden and Garner 2002). In the context of 'allotment culture' John's statement indicates the two aspects that he had to navigate in receiving money in exchange for the produce on the stall. On the one hand there was the real legal tension in that allotment sites are prohibited from selling fruit and vegetables to the general public. On the other, there was a pressure on the materialisation of his utopic space of an allotment site. A space that, as we have seen, is strongly associated with the 'home' and 'good'. What was occurring on the produce table was that the money being exchanged was crossing two spheres. It was leaving an economic sphere (by way of the city residents who were 'donating' it) and crossing into a social sphere (of the allotment site) before it would then have to re-enter the economic sphere (when the allotment committee used it to pay for goods and services).

It is through understanding the ways in which monetary transactions occur within the economic and social spheres that we get an insight into the care that John and I had to take with our language to emphasise that what we were receiving was not 'payment' (money from the economic sphere) but instead a 'donation' (which is acceptable in the social sphere). Parry and Bloch contend that:

> money is only one aspect of a more general symbolic world of transactions, which must always come to terms with some fundamental human problems. One of these is the relationship between the individual human life and a symbolically constructed image of the enduring social and cosmic order within which that life is lived. (Parry and Bloch 1989: 28)

In this context there are two cycles of transaction: a short-term cycle of exchange in which it is considered appropriate for the individuals on the stall to acquire money on behalf of the site, and a long-term cycle in which the primary concern is transcendental and is rooted in the more enduring social order of a site that sets itself apart from the 'money economy'. Examining the exchanges that took place across the produce table through this economic anthropology lens made it understandable why most allotmenteers would prefer to offer a tour around the site rather than hold the moral weight of the transformation of the money that was being handled, money that is critical because allotment rents are relatively low and insufficient to keep the site running, so ways need to be found to make up the shortfall.

On the other side of the transaction were the visitors making the donation who fell broadly into three groups. There were those who were clearly out for a bargain and would exchange a pound for a carrier bag filled to the brim with produce. Others would press a ten-pound note into my hand for a few potatoes. The ones in between these two extremes could be seen spending a little time working out the mental maths of what John had suggested, though none demanded change. In the end a total of £738.52 was raised.[26] John was pleased with this amount as in previous years not always enough was raised. This is why within the preceding decade OxLea had taken the radical (from the allotmenteers' point of view) step of nearly doubling the rent for each plot. The fact that the new rent was still in line with rents across the city speaks to how low the prior rent had been. If the Open Days raised enough money on their own – the rent increase would not have been

[26] It did not escape my attention that the figure raised was not a round number. It suggested that some people were donating whatever coins they had in their purse and as such were giving 'spare' change for 'surplus' food.

necessary. John, who views the allotment site as being outside the monetary economy (a view regarded as favourable and which other allotmenteers also espouse), negotiated this by using the language of the gift economy: 'donations', 'support', 'fund raising', 'contributions'. He (like the allotment sites themselves) is both engaging with and resisting the competitive market economy which slips in through the allotment gates, through his references to a supermarket, and also in the physical form of supermarket carrier bags that were being repurposed for visitors to carry home their produce. The transactions in which John was taking part were an example of the dialectical tension between two domains of value (Gudeman 2008), with the money that visitors were exchanging for produce clashing with the ideals that allotmenteers hold that their practice, and indeed place, is 'not about money'.

It may seem odd that allotment sites should have to delicately navigate a rule that prohibits the sale of produce on them. This is because of the imaginations which led to the formation of allotments, and the ways in which allotment sites are used. It is important to note here that visitors to the site saw the produce that they were exchanging for donations as inherently 'good'. When I asked them why, there was the assumption that allotmenteers carried out good practices because they had chosen to grow in this utopic space. Good, for the visitors, meant that the plants had been nurtured and cared for without the use of chemicals. Good also meant that the visitors were getting the produce directly from the source, with a low ecological footprint and supporting the growers. There was the implicit suggestion that some of this goodness rubbed off on the visitors in exchange for their donations. One visitor stated this when he arrived right at the end of the Open Day, as he did every year, to clear whatever produce had not already been taken. 'It's a good thing isn't it,' he said when he didn't recognise me as having been there from previous years. 'I like doing a good thing; it won't go to waste now and I'll get good veg. This will keep me going for

some weeks it will.' The notion of being kept going dovetails with a commonly held belief about the utopian possibility of self-sufficiency despite being in a city, by growing on an allotment site.

Legally, allotment sites were conceived with the imagination of self-sufficiency. The idea being that a plot of 10 poles (250 metres squared) should be able to provide fruit and veg for a family of four through nearly all of the year. This imagination has lingered on in the practice of most allotmenteers to a degree. The shift has been from total self-sufficiency (although some allotmenteers, like John who runs the fresh produce stall on Open Days still have this goal and he regularly meets it) to a practice of engagement in 'knowing where your food comes from'. For allotmenteers who engage in this practice, growing on a site forms one part of a wider associated set of practices which include being careful about where they shop and thinking about what they consume. However, in legal terms, the imagination of self-sufficiency remains and so the emails I received were carefully worded to indicate that only 'surplus' food was to be sold. As indicated from the quoted email earlier on in this chapter, allotmenteers are sensitive to anything that might threaten their site's existence. Sites are perceived as precarious utopias with their existence being susceptible to closure by the city council, either for purposes of development or if the site is perceived as not being a 'good' neighbour. Therefore, there is a constant emphasis on not adversely affecting the world beyond the allotment fence and ensuring that on-site regulations are adhered to. The only exception to this is if a rule is being flouted by a plot holder who is seen to be a 'good' grower. The practice of 'good growing' takes primacy. If a 'good' grower could potentially be growing lots of vegetables for sale (usually signified by monocropping) then other allotmenteers are known to develop a certain blindness, or even invent reasons why it might be the case that a plot is being used to grow thousands of heads of garlic only.

The trouble with money

Allotment Open Days are not the only strategy that committees have to deploy in order to sustain sites financially. Plot holders are notorious in their resistance to any increase in rent. During the course of my fieldwork, nearly all committee members said it was understandable when the 'old boys' resisted, given their financial situations. One said, 'I mean, I could easily afford it, but it wouldn't be fair to the old boys. For some of them, even a few pounds makes a huge difference.' On the issue of any other middle-class allotmenteers who could afford modest rent increases, they were silent. A Birmingham City Council report on allotment rent increases echoes my findings and states, 'traditionalists will oppose any increase' (Council 2010).

Another strategy to increase the income of allotment sites is turning full-sized plots into half or even quarter sized plots which increases the amount of rent available to collect. This strategy has the added benefit of enticing allotmenteers who are willing to pay more per square metre for their plot but have less time to grow on the site, as smaller plot sizes are more manageable to cultivate. Although it may seem counter-intuitive for plot holders to resist the very thing that would ensure the sustainability of their sites, the disassociation between allotment sites and money (or the distance that John metaphorically created) is profound.

As soon as I reasonably could (or during the course of the semi-structured interviews I carried out), I asked allotmenteers, 'Do you track how much money you spend on your plot?' All said they did not, and all without any further prompting qualified their answer.

On the following page are three typical types of responses to the question:

A. Probably not that much. But yeah; this is the question where we always try to defend the fact that we probably spend far more on our plots than it would cost if we just bought the vegetables in the supermarket. I, well, I compare it against what I used to pay for gym membership. So, I factor that into the equation and I reckon if I added up, you know, what I spend on seeds and things like that, it varies from year to year. But, yeah, we spend more than it would cost to buy the stuff in the supermarket without any doubt. However, I have not grown anything yet that hasn't tasted vastly superior.

B. Will it pay for itself? Yeah, the answer is usually yes.

C. But no, I don't. I ought to but, you know, I think, well, I really enjoy it.

What was common to their responses was the justification process that they went through as they were speaking to me. They were all responses that invoke other regimes of value higher than the economic one. These were one-sided conversations during which allotmenteers answered their own questions in an attempt to make good their decisions about why it was they were not consciously taking stock of the money they were spending. On further analysis the three types/categories of responses illuminated different tactics of navigating the tension between something they were not actively doing, but seemed to think that they ought to be doing:

A. These were the respondents who realised that they spent more money on their allotment than the value of the produce they got. Some justified it by factoring in the cost of exercise and emphasised the value of the 'green gym'.[27] Others weighed up the money against something unquantifiable such as the taste of the vegetables or the benefits to their social life, rendering a direct comparison impossible.

[27] This was a term regularly used by allotmenteers when they talked about the benefits of having a plot.

B. These were other respondents who were certain that they ended up with a financial benefit from having an allotment. Others within this category also included factors such as being able to eat fresh green vegetables all through the winter.
C. These respondents appeared to feel some guilt but focused instead on the pleasure that they derived from allotmenteering. Some of them also deflected the question by saying that they grew food as a hobby and so did not see the need to keep track.

All of the allotmenteers I spoke with gave my question careful consideration, some saying that they intended to track their expenditure for a growing season following the interview – just out of curiosity. What was clear was that for all of them money was not something that they wished to link directly to their practice.

Although allotment sites are public spaces, they are also private ones. As one allotmenteer said, modernising the English proverb about home: 'our castle has become our allotment, or our allotment has become our castle'. In these intimate 'privatepublics', money which is seen as belonging to the public sphere of the city is not comfortably acknowledged in the private (utopic) sphere that is an allotment plot (Moore et al. 2014). This is further complicated by the fact that being an allotmenteer is not for most people an all-encompassing identity. Allotmenteers live in the city, are city citizens, and do not abandon all their city values at the allotment gates. In the city, being conscious of money is seen as a *good* thing. Allotmenteers also qualify growing as a *good* practice which meant that my question sparked a clash of ethics. This was most clearly evidenced by the allotmenteers who responded, 'I should do', the word 'should' carrying the weight of a moral goodness from outside the allotment gates.

Allotmenteers' justifications in their responses also belied the fact that even though all who I spoke with said that they did not track the amount of money they

had spent on the plot, they all had some sense of the amount of money that went into it, even though different allotmenteers factored in different costs. Their one-sided conversations by way of response included among other things the cost of renting the plot, compost, equipment and their own physical labour. In their responses to me they talked as though to themselves. The person I was speaking to would take their time to think back through the growing season and try and recall what they spent their money on. I felt as though I were witnessing an internal dialogue. Sometimes they would mention an expensive purchase and then, catching their slip up, would quickly explain to themselves that this was something they had planned to do, there was a good reason for it and then they would pivot and return to addressing me as though I was not supposed to have heard anything that they had just said. When these conversations were carried out face-to-face, I became adept at averting my eyes to give the allotmenteer in question some space and privacy as they worked through this form of 'ethical reflexivity' (Keane 2015) in negotiating the moral values inherent in being a good city citizen versus those of being an allotmenteer. Allotment sites have their own systems of exchange involving plants, seeds, produce, and labour but these are circumspect and much of the exchange is not even carried out 'hand to hand'. Items for exchange are often left in communal areas for people to help themselves to as required. On City Gorse (for example), the site where I carried out most exchange (though I did engage in exchange on all three sites), fellow allotmenteers would usually say 'I'll drop it off on your plot later' even if we were gardening at the same time. As discussed in Chapter Six on Freedom, allotmenteers actively work to minimise obligations on allotment sites and, thus, decoupling people from the exchange that is taking place is one way of doing so.

Conclusion: Reckoning money's morality

What this chapter has shown is the individual and collective strategies that allotmenteers deploy in order to maintain their utopic place and moral values within the wider city. It is a process that is fraught with contradictions because even though allotmenteers have indeed managed to materialise a place based on qualities from a 'no-place', allotment sites are not an island and indeed their existence is predicated on the existence of the city they routinely escape. It is an escape that requires as much management as the relations that the allotmenteers keep with the city. The chapter used the ethnographic example of an Open Day, beginning with the email that served as a precursor to its occurrence and closing with the day itself. It showed the ways in which Open Days foreground allotmenteer values around money and exchange that are held in tension vis-à-vis the surrounding city values.

I proposed that money as a medium of exchange is a clear example of a value that allotmenteers had to negotiate as dual citizens of the allotment site and the city at large. I conclude that the practices carried out by allotmenteers have been framed as 'good' and that this 'goodness' can be extended to the community in the city. This occurs either by direct exchange during an Open Day or through growing practices that encompass concerns for more-than-humans.

This chapter touched on the performance-based interactions on Open Days that deploy strategies allowing allotmenteers to maintain their sites as utopic places. Implicit in these strategies is the understanding that utopia is not a destination but is in need of constant renewal. The following chapter expands on this idea and, while continuing to interrogate (non-monetary) exchange, considers what it means to perform gardening practices that are associated with particular nations (e.g., tidy rows of vegetables for traditional English allotment gardening), for non-British

allotmenteers to perform national practices to re-root, and allotmenteers' production (regardless of nationality) of 'local' food.

Chapter 8: ‘Re-rooting’: super-diversity and the reproduction of urban gardening sites through time

Chapter introduction

Three pairs of eyes tracked me through the bars of the allotment fence as I hovered around outside the locked allotment gates waiting for Matthew. They belonged to three white men, mid 60s and older gathered in a group clearly discussing a mound of soil/compost on the site and what was going to be done with it. They were speaking softly in the way that people tend to do on allotment sites and so I could barely make out what they were saying, but they were close enough that when one of them spoke just louder than normal volume I could hear him easily. ‘Are you here for a plot?’ he asked after the long five minutes of my hovering had passed. When I responded that I was not and was waiting for someone who was on the site to come and let me in, they returned to their conversation. Although overtly it looked as though they had stopped watching me, I still felt as though my movements were being monitored. I was meeting Matthew to see his plot and to interview him as part of my research. The interview had come about as a result of snowball sampling. Matthew is a social scientist, and a fellow academic whom I had interviewed had put me in touch with him. This is partly why, without prompting, he commented on the men who had been watching me as we walked up the slight incline to his plot. ‘As you know,’ Matthew said, ‘it’s been white working-class blokes [growing on allotment sites], traditionally, of which those guys down there are an example.’

This chapter works to trace the reproduction of allotment sites through time. I argue that the reproduction of allotment sites is due to the coalescing of two seemingly contradictory factors. The first is the ‘old boys’ who (as the assumed dominant demographic) are credited with maintaining allotment sites throughout

history to the present day. The second is the longstanding and increasing diversity on urban allotments across the UK. What appears to have emerged is that instead of diversity being a source of conflict it is an accepted feature of allotment sites. This chapter is also an urban response to a question that Anthony Cohen posed about why rural Britain was under researched in anthropology. He posited that he feared 'that we therefore underestimate their cultural variety we may be inclined to defend ourselves by saying that there is really not much to know' (Cohen 1982a: 16-17). To be clear, allotments are well researched both in anthropology and sociology but what is less focused on in this research is precisely this 'cultural variety' which this chapter aims to illuminate.

This chapter works with the ethnographic case study of the 'old boys' who have been cultivating on allotment sites in a more or less unbroken chain since the First World War, while problematising the question of belonging on allotment sites. Despite allotment sites being seen as a quintessential piece of English material cultural heritage, they have both in human and more-than-human gardeners been more diverse than the rest of the UK for over half a century (Moran 1990). As Jeanette Edwards wrote in her ethnography of Alltown, a town, 'With a population of 15,000 people, it is one of many towns across the northwest of England which grew with the textile industry, and shrank with its decline… Incomers are not a new phenomenon' (Edwards 1998: 149). Alltown is analogous to allotment sites across England in the assumptions that have been made about the type of place that it is and the type of people that reside there. A key one being that only a particular type of person can be said to truly belong there and these people reproduce themselves and

their community.[28] With the stereotype of the 'old boys', this can lead to an image of allotments as unchanging places. Mine is not the only study that challenges this assumption but while most studies tend to focus on increasing numbers of women on allotments or the changes in the social class of allotmenteers (Buckingham 2005 ; Uteubayev and Kizdarbekova 2019), my work also includes ethnicity and nationality in its analysis of the diversity of human gardeners on allotment sites. This is an important recognition as it speaks to challenging a wider assumption of homogeneity raised by Cohen and cited earlier on in this chapter.

Human gardeners with origins in different parts of the world concurrently reproduce themselves through their own national gardening practices, while also carrying out what some call a process of 're-rooting' by participating in British cultural practices. The results are spaces where diversity is experienced in a distinctly ordinary or banal way. Despite the city location of urban allotments, this is not an enforced cosmopolitanism of 'Cool Britannia',[29] or other top-down government-promoted initiatives that have led to the idea of multiculturalism being seen as contentious by city citizens. This is instead an extension of the garden space in the British context as a site which operates as a 'mediator of sociability… linked to the idea of the little community' (Chevalier 1997: 58), as described by Sophie Chevalier in her work on material culture in British spaces. She describes suburban gardens and notes that even though they are technically domestic spaces they serve as sites for various types of exchange ranging from material (by way of plants and seeds) to

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[28] For more on English identity and Alltown see EDWARDS, J. & STRATHERN, M. (2000). Including our own. *In:* CARSTEN, J. (ed.) *Cultures of Relatedness: New approaches to the Study of Kinship.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[29] In an interview on the *New Humanist* podcast *With Reason* with Jason Arday, the author of the book *Cool Britannia and Multi-Ethnic Britain: Uncorking the Champagne Supernova*, the interviewer Samira Shackle specifically asked Jason why his book uses ethnography to challenge the view that 1990s Britain was this period of 'utopia and inclusion' (Bloch and Shackle. 2020. *With Reason*. BLOCH, A. & SHACKLE, S. 2020. With Reason. *In:* ARDAY, J. (ed.) *Looking back in anger at 'Cool Britannia' w/ Jason Arday* London: The rationalist Association.

social (by way of conversation over the fence) which has the effect of bridging and bringing people together. This is analogous to allotment sites, as noted earlier in this thesis, functioning as publicprivates (Moore et al. 2014), and spaces where both intergenerational and cross-cultural interaction occur. Much like the gardeners analysed in Chevalier's study, allotmenteers do not consciously set out to meet people from different backgrounds. Allotmenteers instead encounter them as part of their banal practice on allotment sites, and it is the location of that encounter, an allotment site which is centred on growing, that facilitates a casual engagement.

In this way, this chapter tracks multiple diversities such as the categories of people cultivating on the allotment site including nationalities, age, and sex, and their plurality of practice. Finally, it explores the ways in which diversity can be salient or hidden.

English allotments as cultural heritage

It was a crisp spring morning on Swardland, and I was standing admiring the daffodils that marked the perimeter border of the allotment building and the patch of lawn outside it. Eric, an 89-year-old 'old boy' who was one of the people who liked to get to the site early in the morning, walked up to me and, even though the COVID-19 pandemic was a year away from beginning, stood beside me a short distance away. One always knew when Eric arrived on site as he shouted to announce his arrival. Even though I heard his shout many times, I never quite deciphered what it was he was actually saying but I was able to understand that what it meant was that if another one of the 'old boys' was there (and they wanted to) – they could repair to the allotment buildings, smoke their pipes, and have a general catch up. Eric had served in the army in Libya and the friend he routinely chatted with in the building had been in the Navy. Whenever I enquired after Eric's health, he always replied he

was well 'apart from his aches and pains' and tried not to lament the fact that it took him 20 minutes instead of 15 to walk to the site these days. He had a permanent spot on the Swardland committee but was not expected to do any jobs that required effort apart from offer an opinion on what he thought was best.

My eyes were moving between the daffodils and the farmer's fields across the mini valley. It was beautifully still, and we were the only two people on the whole site.

'I planted those,' Eric eventually said.

'Thank you,' I responded even though he had not planted them for me.

Eric went on to share that he had planted flowers along the borders all over the allotment site in the past. His description was so vivid that I began to see a markedly different site materialise in front of my eyes. Eric's description transported me to a time when most plot holders would have been male, and when there were clear demarcations between each plot that were bounded by well-maintained paths. Plots were both productive and aesthetically pleasing if you like the plants you garden with to be orderly. Or as another 'old boy' on a plot had described them 'clean as a whistle'. I could not help but ask why Eric didn't do it anymore.

'It's not like it used to be, is it?'

Eric may have meant it as a rhetorical question, but I gave an instinctively African response. In many African cultures, mine included, if an elder makes a comment like that, they are inviting you into a memory and it is rude to either say nothing or to state the fact that you were not there at the time to which they are referring. The polite response, the respectful response, is to agree and so that is what I did.

‘No, it’s not, is it?’ I said.

The response that followed was the longest time Eric ever spoke to me. Eric went on to describe both nostalgia for a time that he felt had past, but also an ethics of care that accompanied it. Eric referenced the visual transformations that were evident because of the changes in growing practices on the site. These material practices, such as the ways in which people lay out their allotments, what they use to border them, how and what they grow, have amalgamated to form a stereotypical manifestation of an English allotment as discussed by Christopher Tilley in his paper ‘From the English Cottage Garden to the Swedish Allotment: Banal Nationalism and the Concept of the Garden’ (Tilley 2008).

Figure 42: A stereotypical English allotment with tidy rows of vegetables and a flower border

In his paper Tilley argues that

> The garden provides a powerful means of creating a sense of belonging, primarily because it is part and parcel of a concept of the mundane familiarity of the home for millions of people in their everyday lives. It represents a particular cultural identity evoking particular feelings and emotions. (Tilley 2008: 223)

The people who he interviewed as part of his study described the same image that came into my mind when Eric was talking about Swardland's past – row upon tidy row of regular vegetables – beans, potatoes, and peas. It was this type of allotment that I worked to recreate as part of my 1918 Allotment and which many visitors commented made them feel as if they had been transported back in time.

It is widely recognised that allotments are a longstanding and established part of English material cultural heritage (Acton 2011 ; Crouch and Ward 1997) but what is less discussed are some of the ways in which allotmenteers continue to materialise and reproduce allotment sites as heritage spaces. One of the most common ways in which this is carried out is through the specific choice of seeds. Nearly all of the allotmenteers I interacted with talked about saving seeds and exchanging seeds and other plant materials with others, and there was often a preference for the plants that had been cultivated on the specific site they grew on over years. Part of this is because it would mean that the plants had adapted and were thus better suited to the specific ecology of the site, but it was also to do with plant heritage. This echoes ethnobotanical work carried out by Roy Ellen and Simon Platten on, 'the role of networks of relationships in the dispersal and cultural selection of plant germplasm' (Ellen and Platten 2011: 563). Allotmenteers like Jim also spoke of heritage beyond the allotment gates in the choice of seeds that they used,

> So I tend to like using the heritage variety of seeds if we can get them because then you can save the seed and use them the following year. So I tend to use the Real Seed Company and people like that. So we've got a variety of beans.

Jim's seed choice reflects exactly the tension which this chapter explores on allotments as sites of both traditional English cultural heritage and diversity. There is a preference for growing plants that have both a long history as part of English culture but are also diverse in their manifestations.

This balance between building on (and in the literal sense growing) what was there before and the incorporation of diverse growers onto the site is also reflected in the attitudes of 'old boys' towards allotmenteers. I argue, however, that the public imagination of allotments as sites of English material cultural heritage is so embedded in the specifics of the white working-class man growing his tidy rows of vegetables that it obscures the longstanding diversity that has concurrently existed on allotment sites. In Tilley's paper, for example, he works with the stereotypical image of English allotment plots, an example of which is illustrated in Figure 42. On observing the plot in Figure 42 (on page 273) for the first time, it is not unreasonable to assume that the person who cultivated the plot is English or cultivates in an English style. However, on closer inspection of the photo the flag of Ireland is visible erected next to the photo on the shed. In Figure 43 on the following page is a close up in which it is possible to see the flag more clearly. What this piece of material culture demonstrates is the complex diversities that exist on an English allotment. Without digressing into the complex political relationship between England and Ireland it is possible to recognise that something about being Irish matters enough for the person cultivating this plot to erect a flag of Ireland. It is also worth noting that because the flag is not necessarily easy to spot it is precisely the kind of diversity that can be overlooked on an allotment site. Public imagination stereotypes allotments as English (previously working class) but they are in effect places where diversity flourishes and quite possibly because of the practice of cultivating *alone, together*.

Figure 43: Flag of Ireland erected on a shed

A key reason for this is what Caitlin DeSilvey describes as the 'ambiguous diversity' that occurs on allotment sites (DeSilvey 2003). Her work analyses the difficulty Scottish allotments face in securing land tenure and expounds on the apt summary by David Crouch on the complex ambivalence of allotments as, 'a different kind of place in which different values prevail' (Crouch and Ward 1997: 271-2). Although they may have been instigated with the intention of providing financially poor people with access to food, allotments are also sites of leisure, political activity, ecological biodiversity, and spaces that challenge the public/private binary. Given the wide and varied nature of the purposes they serve, it is highly unlikely that the demographic of people who grow on them would also be uniform, and yet the strong

imagination of uniformity in both the types of places allotments are and the types of people that grow on them persists.

Throughout the course of my research, I found allotment sites to be diverse places both in species and people, and at rates that seemed to be higher than the surrounding city. As I practised public engagement with research as part of my methodology, this is one of the findings that people questioned when I shared it. At an event on my *1918 Allotment*, a middle-aged middle-class white woman even took me aside after the question-and-answer session that followed my talk and poetry reading to speak with me privately. She was perturbed by the fact that I had talked about people who were not working class growing on allotments in the historic year of 1918. It was only when I said that there were also 'old boys' on the site on which my contemporary '1918 Allotment' was located (and always had been) did her incredulity wane, 'I know who you mean,' she said 'I see them at my local allotments. Great chaps who know everything!'

Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman have shown that the heuristics of availability and representativeness routinely lead us to make errors when we are making estimations under uncertainty (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). Was it possible that I was more attuned to noticing diversity because of my own background or was it that the stereotype of the 'old boy' as the typical allotmenteer was so pervasive that it masked the real diversity on the ground? Were members of the public with whom I was speaking about my research interpreting how they viewed allotments through a lens of confirmation bias, or was I overstating the case for diversity? My analysis was complicated by two factors. The first was that I was simultaneously considering four variables, namely, age, sex, nationality, and class. The second was, as discussed in the methodology of this thesis, allotmenteers are notorious for their suspicion of being surveyed. Allotment records do not routinely

stretch to the kind of information for which I was looking, and national surveys are few and far between. In the following sections of this chapter, having touched on the ideas around 'unseen' nationalities with the example of the flag of Ireland, I will untangle three aspects of demography usually expected on an allotment site (with the presumed associated growing practices) and indicate the manner in which they have co-existed with the 'old boys' for at least half a century.

The 'old boys'– keeping on or 'dying off'

Every allotment site in Oxford has its 'old boys'. As a category of people 'old boys' are so intimately linked with allotments that in the popular imagination – if you were to ask someone who they think a typical allotmenteer is – they would probably describe an 'old boy'. An older, working-class white man, likely to don a flat cap and it would not be out of step for him to hold his trousers up with bailer twine. They are the people that the woman discussed at the end of the last section wanted to hear about when she came to visit my recreation of a '1918 Allotment'.[30] I propose that the formulation of the image of the 'old boys' is just as much a part of the physical allotment site as heritage. It is not entirely fictitious. The link between labouring classes and allotment provision (stemming from their rural origins) has already been discussed earlier on in this thesis. Matthew noted that from his observations, 'the white guy is dying off', and as I will go on to describe I indeed sadly witnessed this on one of the sites (Swardland) on which I cultivated. Throughout my research I was keen to hear the perspective of the 'old boys'. Did they feel that there were fewer of them on the site? My choice of participant observation as a method also proved fruitful because often 'old boys' are reluctant to open up to strangers. Keen to

[30] The 1918 Allotment is a public engagement project I carried out alongside writing up my thesis in which I recreated an English allotment in the style of the year 1918.

support my research, Matthew tried to introduce me to a few 'old boys' whom he cultivated alongside. They politely responded to Matthew indicating interest but did not take it further with me. On Swardland and OxLea, I got to know several 'old boys' over the course of my fieldwork, one well enough for him to invite me to his home. In this way, I was able to gather information about their allotmenteering and how they saw the sites that they grew on change over time.

There is a strong link between who would get classified as 'old boys' and being working class. Indeed, one of the 'old boys' on OxLea said he specifically grew on OxLea rather than another site that was equally close to his home because the other site was 'too middle class'. His remark revealed how social class is not easy to ascribe on an allotment site. The first thing to note is a certain self-selection that may happen. It is possible if there is abundant allotment provision – (remembering that before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic Oxford did not have a city-wide waiting list) – people will choose to grow on sites with people 'like them'. This can occur but it is not entirely possible to control. For one, certain sites in Oxford have waiting lists that stretch to years. Also, the demographics on the site tend to be affected by their physical location and the neighbourhoods in which they are placed. After having cultivated on OxLea for nearly two years, I surmised that John (who I witnessed was friendly with everyone) spent more time with working-class people on a site that had students, academics and professionals growing on it. He thus therefore described it to me as a working-class site. John's remark reveals two more aspects. The first is that there are different *types* of allotment sites and some of these sites do not feature in the public imagination. As early as the 1780s in Sheffield (which was then a flourishing urban centre made wealthy by the steel trade, with more than 1,000 allotments), tradespeople such as 'cutlers, button makers, innkeepers, tailors' (Foley 2014: 138) had taken them up. For centuries there have been and continue to be

allotments rented out by private individuals, companies, or societies. Some of these sites such as historical guinea gardens (Victorian gardens in towns which usually middle-class people rented out for a guinea particularly if they lived in houses that did not have attached gardens) charge higher rents and therefore attract people of a different social background. In Birmingham in 1778, a site on Snow Hill even included a surgeon who cultivated on it (Way 2008). Finally, not just working-class men grow older whilst cultivating on allotment sites. Matthew would not classify himself as an 'old boy' and would not be classified as one – yet with his retirement only a year away from when he showed me around the site, he was about to share both an age and sex demographic with them.

The 'old boys' I spoke with were both aware and supportive of the growing numbers of young people cultivating on sites, particularly if the younger people were a couple or had children. Kevin was a reluctant committee secretary on a site where no one else wanted to do it who spoke enthusiastically about the people in their 30s becoming allotmenteers:

> And they're bringing up the kids and everything like that to help them on the allotment and I actually think that's a very good thing, because the kids are getting more involved in, sort of, actually understanding 'Oh, so that's what a beetroot looks like. That's what carrots and parsley and everything look like when they're grown', etc. Because a lot of times maybe they're not getting out into the country and actually seeing a lot of this grown in the wild.

Younger couples and families I spoke with who reported being given growing tips, seeds, plants and cuttings by the 'old boys' echoed this. Some 'old boys' even lent younger people gardening equipment so that they would not have to spend money buying their own. There was a difference in background between the 'old boys' and the younger allotmenteers. Ben, an allotmenteer who had recently moved to Oxford with his partner and toddler, thoughtfully remarked during a semi-structured interview, 'some of the people taking on newer plots, more like myself, possibly, you

know, described as, you know, white middle class, but still, you know, ... It's still very diverse'. Ben is a creative in his 30s who had recently moved to Oxford and had cultivated on allotment sites in both London and Oxford. He did not note a reduction in diversity on the site in Oxford compared to London.

What was striking about this intergenerational passing-on of knowledge was that it occurred in the main outside the immediate family of the 'old boys'. I did not, during the course of my fieldwork, see any of the 'old boys' bring their children or grandchildren onto the site. I asked Mike, an 'old boy' on Swardland who had taken me under his wing and given me netting and plant plugs, about this while having tea at his house one day. I had brought homemade biscuits for him and his wife (who was not an allotmenteer), and we were sitting in the conservatory looking out on his beautiful home garden. Mike's father had had a plot on Swardland which is how he had learned to garden and Mike had been growing there for many decades but had not passed the skills onto his son. When I asked him why, he couldn't answer. 'I don't know,' he said wistfully. He then went on to tell me about how hard he and his wife had worked to get established. They had even lived in a caravan at one point until they could afford a deposit on the house in which they still live. It became apparent that for Mike (and probably others of his generation) the allotment was an escape from the demands of life. While the allotment plot itself was still work,as acknowledged by Claire in the section on 'allotments as sites where magic happens' it is a different kind of work. Page explores in his article entitled, 'Meaningful Plots: Leisure, 'Rational Recreation' and the Politics of Gardening in British Allotments (Mid 19th -mid 20th Centuries)' the ways in which allotment sites are in fact hybrid spaces – at once work and also leisure (Page 2017). It was somewhere allotmenteers could go and 'get away from it all' as Mike said even as they were carrying out a different kind of work. Allotment work that was still meaningful but it was also in

distinct contrast to paid employment. Allotment work that made Mike make space for leisure and also satisfied many other allotmenteers' need for leisure in this instance encoded in a place and change of scene (Schoneboom 2018). That is not to say the amount of time Mike spent on the allotment when he was raising his family was straightforward, as we spoke he also showed signs of regret noting quietly that he wished he had spent more time with his family when they were younger.

Mike, however, still maintained a family connection on the allotment plot in an unexpected way. His son had married a woman from Zimbabwe who was missing the pumpkin leaves that she traditionally ate at home. He said, 'I thought to myself – I can do that', and so grew pumpkins that he could provide for her. This willingness to experiment with crops was common amongst the 'old boys' and provided me with a clue as to how some of them helped people who had come to England from other places to 're-root'.

'Re-rooting

I first heard the term 're-rooting' from a Trinidadian allotmenteer in his 70s when he talked about the process of adjusting to his new life in the UK. Like many immigrants, he talked about adjusting to the weather but also to the food and especially in the days before there were specialist shops to buy food from 'back home' when he decided he would have to grow it himself. He said he found that growing crops from 'back home' allowed him to feel 'at home' here, and that although some 'old boys' might have looked at his crops with suspicion at first, eventually 'their curiosity took over' and before long they were swopping seeds. This echoes work carried out by Bhatti and Church on cultivation and the meaning of home who found that some of their respondents, 'attached[ed] particular meaning to certain plants,

which unlike gardens are transferrable from home to home' (Bhatti and Church 2001: 377). In the case of allotmenteering, the plants from 'back home' are co-actors in the process of helping the growers from other parts of the world to create a new sense of belonging and home (Gerodetti and Foster 2016). I heard this term 're-rooting' repeatedly from different people who did not know each other and on different allotment sites. It seemed the practice of allotmenteering allowed growers from other places to bridge a social and a spatial distance – by bringing some of home to England, they were literally able to grow a home here.

On OxLea I met a Kenyan woman whom I will call Sheila. She was in her 30s who had been living in Oxford for several years. She was keen for her young son to know more about 'home' and so a friend on OxLea had apportioned her a part of her plot to grow a specific variety of kale from Kenya. Sheila remarked on the profound joy she experienced when she was able to eat the kale with her son. She said that eating the kale with him also brought back memories that she was able to share, and in turn delighted him as she had never told him as many stories from her youth. He began to join her in cultivating at the allotment plot and watching them with their friend it felt like a new configuration of family and home was forming.

Female allotmenteers – a potted history[31]

On scrutinising my field notes, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews, I found that allotmenteers I spoke with consistently talked about both the pre-existing and growing diversity on allotment sites. Some referenced age, noting that more families with young children were growing on the site. When families were

[31] It is worth noting that, like women, children are often not recognised as cultivating on allotment sites. It is, however, outside the remit of this study to take into consideration children and their contribution to allotmenteering.

mentioned, it was sometimes also in tandem with descriptions of people whose origins were from outside Britain, whose plots as Carol described were 'a family affair'. During one semi-structured interview carried out over the phone (because of the COVID-19 lockdown) with an allotmenteer whom I had not met, she answered in response to my question about whether she had noticed any changes over the more than 25 years she had been growing on her site, 'There's a lot more, what are we supposed to call them nowadays? ... Black people.' Photographs, whether published in books like Chris Opperman's *Allotment Folk* or Lia Leendertz's *My Cool Allotment*, confirm the same. Their pictures show a wide range of people of different demographics who all (for the most part) happily cultivate alongside each other (Opperman 2004 ; Leendertz 2013).

Other allotmenteers talked about the growing (pun intended) numbers of women on the site. Delia described the difference between how people tend to view allotments and the reality on the ground. Delia is an upper middle-class woman who for over 20 years split her time between her homes in France and England before returning to carry out further studies, care for her husband and cultivate on her local allotment site. Delia had offered to participate in my research because she wanted to talk about her shed which was an important part of her allotment life. Delia described a conversation she had in 2020 only a few months before the first lockdown.

> The water, people were putting new water pipes in our road a couple of months ago, and this guy said to me 'Are you off somewhere nice?' and I said, 'No I'm going to my allotment.' And he said to me 'Men usually do that don't they?' And I said, 'not this one.' I said, 'You'd be amazed, there are quite a few women here.'

A recent survey of London allotments garnered huge media interest from publications ranging from *The Daily Telegraph* to *The Independent* to *City Farmer* and even resulted in the authors Tilly Collins and Ellen Fletcher being interviewed on

BBC Women's Hour. Its results echoed what I was seeing on allotment sites across Oxford – 64% of plot holders were found to be women. The overall average age on the sites was 57 (with men typically being older than women) – this is a decrease in age compared to 1988 when across the UK, 65% of people cultivating on allotment sites were over the age of 50 (Fletcher and Collins 2020) Although the increase is notable, there have been women growing on allotment sites for far longer than is easily traceable. A parliamentary report from 1998 noted that, 'It seems likely that this figure [16% of women being plot holders across the UK] represents an underestimate of the number of women allotment gardeners, since many plots which are registered in the name of a man are actually being tended by both the man and his wife or partner' (PARLIAMENT 1998a). I found this to be the case in my fieldwork. On sites across Oxford, women also share sites with friends and relatives and are sometimes casual allotmenteers who cultivate when people need extra support or as an extension of their social life. All of these types of allotmenteers are missing from official records supporting the established assumption held by the workmen that Delia encountered.

What the underestimation of the diversity on allotment sites reveals is that they are overlooked as places within cities where both humans and more-than-humans can form a community, which may also contrast with communities from the surrounding city in meaningful ways. In the next section of this chapter, I will turn to the ethnographic case study of the 'old boys'.

Their power is not purely imaginary. Although many 'old boys' no longer sit on allotment committees, having 'done their time', allotmenteers who have had their

plots for 30–50 years clearly remember the time when 'old boys' had the final say on the sites.

Peggy (the recently retired public sector worker who has cultivated an allotment plot for over 46 years) told me that when she first tried to get a plot, she was told the site was full. (This was a site I visited during my fieldwork rather than one on which I cultivated.) Peggy suspected that this was not the case and sent her husband to the same site the following day. He was, 'offered six straightaway'. Peggy, however, did not take this personally. She understood that 'old boys' weren't 'really interested in talking to anything other than guys'. Peggy is a classic example of a woman who would not appear in archival records – as her plot is in her husband's name. The longer she stayed on the site, the more she understood the important role that the 'old boys' played in the maintenance of allotment plots. Echoing the results of the government-commissioned Thorpe report of the 1960s, she remarked that, 'by the late 50s allotments were disappearing at a huge rate of knots'. Allotments that had previously been heralded as the key fuel to keep the UK going on the domestic front during the Second World War had fallen into disrepute, and many were not even used fully for growing. Those located on prime urban land had become places where unscrupulous people could cheaply run small businesses such as garages (Thorpe et al. 1969).

This occurred for a number of converging reasons. After the Second World War – peacetime coupled with a rise in employment and increasing stability in the economy – government support for domestic food production began to wane. Concurrently functional allotment use, i.e., people growing their own food as a primary source, was also reduced. Alongside these two reasons, the legislation to protect allotments grew increasingly complex allowing councils to take advantage of gaps in the law to reclaim sites for development. A viscous cycle began where

rumours (sometimes council initiated) would be spread that a site was about to be lost; this would discourage some allotmenteers, with the result that apart from a few hard core growers the site would fall into disrepair allowing the council to indeed come in and reclaim it (Acton 2015 ; PARLIAMENT 1998a).

It was the 'old boys' who hung on and who are directly responsible for the survival of many of the sites across the UK today. As Peggy said, 'one way or another they kept the sites going.' Furthermore, Peggy wryly noted, 'And so the whole culture of allotments is an amazingly funny one – you owe a lot to the people who wouldn't give me an allotment.' This burden of gratitude is tangibly experienced by allotmenteers even if they have never had direct interaction with the 'old boys'. They are seen as an integral part of the allotment site and a group of people who need to be cared for as much as the site does. On each of the three sites where I had a plot, if the topic of rent raises came up, it was on behalf of the 'old boys' that rent could not be substantially increased, the assumption being that there was less financial flexibility amongst the 'old boys'.

Even though the 'old boys' are rarely the public face of the committee, they also function as an unofficial committee who are simultaneously ungovernable and yet also hold sway. Allotment sites are quiet gerontocracies and men on the allotment site who mark their advancing years acknowledge this. Talking to John, an older white working-class man, he reminisced about getting his first allotment plot on OxLea. 'The whole place was very much run by "old boys" who had the answer for everything and now I'm one of those old men and I know how it works because there is no one here older who can contradict me.' As such, there is a hierarchical freedom on the site. There is the general freedom which each plot holder is entitled to as an allotmenteer, and then there is a higher level of freedom to which the 'old boys' have exclusive rights.

On Swardland I saw this with the two 'old boys' who used to arrive at the site around eight o'clock in the morning and sit in the allotment building and smoke and chat for a good hour before they did anything else. Echoing John's views – no one could raise health and safety concerns with them or question what they were doing. They had full command of the site. I use the word command since as noted above both of them had indeed served King and country during the Second World War. One had been in the Navy and the other in the Army in Libya. I found this out early one summer morning in late August when I was at the site. This was always my favourite time to go. Swardland in the morning is glorious as it sits on a slope facing the countryside. If you stand at the top of the hill (where my plot was across the carpark from the allotment building) you can look out over the mini valley into fields with cows and it feels as though you are in the middle of a rural idyll. You could be somewhere else entirely – rather than a couple of hundred metres away from a busy Oxford ring road.

I was not the only person who experienced this; my plot was also near a communal space, complete with benches at which one could sit, and this was a routine topic of conversation between me and other allotmenteers.

I only had two what I would describe as detailed conversations with Eric who had served in the army in Libya during the Second World War. Eric was always well 'apart from his aches and pains'. One of these conversations took place on that August morning when he was smoking his pipe in the building, and he was telling me about his time in the army. I only had one key job to do that morning and Eric broke the unwritten rule about not telling others what to do on the site. As I was leaving, he said I had not spent enough time on the site. Eric was an 'old boy' and 'old boys' can do that.

I had previously told him more than once about my research, but he had never asked me anything about it even though other allotmenteers had said he knew everything there was to know about the site. No one directly said that I should interview him, but they intimated he would have useful information to share.

A tension exists between the exclusion that Peggy initially faced on the allotment site, and the diversity that has clearly developed since then. It would be easy to assume that sexism or racism could explain the reactions of 'old boys' to newcomers but my fieldwork led me to understand that there is more than one criterion on which allotmenteers based their inclusion – an inclusion mediated by the relationship that all growers have to the land and the demonstration of their care for it. Matthew described that on the site on which he cultivated he noticed more diversity when he returned after his decade away which he thought was a good thing, but he also noted,

> I'm not sure that all the old white guys think the same but they're not [racist]. I haven't encountered sort of hardcore racism or xenophobia, something just rumbling. Yeah, that's kind of banal … If racism can be banal.

Matthew's use of the word banal, which although might be incendiary in a social context where conversations about race and racism are still fraught, directly links to Billig's thesis on banal nationalism and the work which informed my formulation of banal utopia. If we consider allotment sites to be utopias, then it is important to remember that in the 60s at precisely the time when they were under threat of closure due to disuse, simultaneously diversity on the sites was increasing. When Eric told me I had not spent enough time on the site that morning, he was reminding me that to become part of the material cultural heritage on an allotment site in the way that he had was nothing to do with my sex or race; it was something I could

achieve by tending to and caring for the land over time – just like he had and was still doing.

Conclusion: Maintaining a utopic space over time

Two things that all allotmenteers can agree on is that a plot must be used (ideally productively) and that it must appear cared for. It is this demonstration of care that has changed over the years. According to Eric and the other 'old boys', a cared for plot is one that is 'as clean as a whistle' – row upon row of tidy vegetables. Flowers are permitted ideally on boundaries and as long as they do not take over the plot. Some sites took this so seriously in the past that the 'old boys' would actually clear a plot that had been given up, put in all the extra labour it took to get it spic and span, and then on handing it over to the new allotmenteer would utter the welcoming threat, 'Now you have a good plot, you need to keep it that way.' This does not happen anymore. When you get a plot for the first time as I did, it is because someone has abandoned it. It will likely be overgrown, covered in various weeds and require several weeks to get into a shape in which it can be used.

I suspect that this ultimately caring gift from the 'old boys' to prepare a plot for newcomers, although it is no longer customary, was one of the strategies that they deployed in order to keep sites going over the decades. Sites currently do clear land to increase the number of plots (I participated in land clearing myself during the course of my fieldwork), but the bare minimum is done – the worst of the rubbish removed, the biggest brambles cleared but no heavy digging work is carried out. It is still a caring action, but to my mind lacks the depth of what the 'old boys' did previously.

It could be argued that because there is a wide variety of growing styles now (the 'no dig' method as described earlier in this thesis, for example, is increasingly popular in Oxford), to carry out any more invasive work would be to impose a belief onto the incoming allotmenteer, restricting the critical value of freedom. It is also just as likely that, as busy allotmenteers, clearing another plot means a loss of precious time on your own plot. And with the increasing waiting lists across the country (although it must be noted that Oxford did not have a city-wide waiting list before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic), the urgency to save sites by keeping them fully used has and continues to fluctuate since the precarious time of the 1960s.

As for the 'old boys' there are those of advancing years who themselves are no longer able to keep up with their own exacting standards. Some of them get extra support from other allotmenteers and others eventually have to give up their plots. There are allotmenteers who die and the site goes through a ritual of giving the plot space and time before it is leased again, as though allowing all the various gardeners on the site to adjust to their loss. The 'old boys' practised habit of allotmenteering becomes as much about their social life on the site as it does about their productivity on the plot. They are aware that their status means that they will never receive 'a letter' or be evicted from the site but the health challenges of old age means that sometimes their plots are bigger than they can reasonably manage. They also know that no one will say anything about it. So, in those cases their increasingly scruffy plots are caringly ignored much in the same way that peculiar habits of the elderly are accommodated by loving families.

Ultimately the 'old boys' are pragmatic in their ethics of care – what is of prime importance is that the site is used, even if some of the ways in which newer allotmenteers demonstrate care is not a care the 'old boys' are used to or approve of.

One ‘old boy’ told me that he just avoids interacting with people whose ethics of care do not chime with him, to the point of giving them ‘the silent treatment’.

Conversely this ethics of care crosses boundaries that exist elsewhere in wider society. Allotments are sites of super diversity both in terms of plants and people and have been for over half a century. ‘Old boys’ do not automatically discriminate against people who have roots in other places because more often than not, they find they share an ‘ethics of care’. Allotmenteers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean islands, Eastern Europe, or the African continent, have been welcomed by the ‘old boys’ on sites across the city. There are those who hold positive stereotypes of allotmenteers from other places as they are said to be ‘proper farmers’. What is usually meant is that the end result is a very specific aesthetic – the aesthetic that is shared in the popular imagination of what allotment plots should look like: orderly vegetables on a productive plot, no space wasted, no weeds tolerated, and vegetables that look healthy and cared for. It is an aesthetic that takes a considerable amount of time and effort to maintain.

This ethics of care that the ‘old boys’ have extended to the site is also returned to them in the care that is demonstrated by other allotmenteers. On one site I visited, there was an ‘old boy’ who has the equivalent of four full-sized plots. Decades ago, his actions would have saved the site from being lost and so, even though this particular site has a three-year waiting list, no one would dare to suggest that he should give one up or reduce the size of his plot. They are a critical part of his health and well-being and are recognised as such. It is understood that the plots will become available only when the ‘old boy’ decides on his own to give them up or when nature has taken its course.

‘Old boys’ are not sentimental about this. John on OxLea casually told me ‘I learned from my father who had a plot and have taught my children, but they

probably won't take it up until after I die.' Indeed, there have been allotmenteers who have tried to leave their plots to their children in their wills. This places committee members in an awkward situation as the ethics of care extended to 'old boy' allotmenteers does not automatically transfer to their families – the hitherto unbroken chain of care is tied to the allotment site and cannot be handed to someone of the allotmenteers' choice (although this rule does sometimes get violated), but is instead meant to be transferred to the person at the top of the waiting list.

There is no awkwardness however in the way an 'old boy' who is going to permanently join with the soil is treated. The communal allotment funds are used to buy flowers for his funeral, and he is memorialised by a ritual and in some cases a plaque on a bench on the site. His actions of care live on in the memory of allotmenteers and can become the stuff of legend that is handed down in story. On one site, where an 'old boy' was remembered by way of a bench, an allotmenteer told me that when he sat on it, people would stop by and remember how the 'old boy' encouraged others to tend to their site regularly. He said he unexpectedly found himself doing the same with allotmenteers who were new to the site when they sat on the bench. The only interruption to this communal demonstration was when Eric on Swardland died during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike in previous years, people could not gather to remember him. Although sad, other things arise when I think about the quiet talk that we had on that crisp spring morning of 2019 when Eric shared with me what he felt it was important for me to know about the site, and when he might have unwittingly invited me into a memory that I now hold. I think of the physical distance that he kept, even as he spoke to me closely: a distance that allotmenteers habitually keep as they stand on a boundary path sharing some friendly words with someone who is in the middle of their plot; a distance that is not breached without invitation; a respectful distance that does not impinge on the

freedom of either allotmenteer. I knew that when news of Eric's death reached me, in different households all over our local area we were remembering Eric in the way allotmenteers do – *alone, together*.

Chapter 9: Conclusion: 'On the whole … the community rubs along quite well together'

In the introduction to the edited volume, *The Age of Dystopia: One Genre, Our Fears and Our Future*, Louisa McKay Demerjian asks, 'In what ways are we now living in an *Age of Dystopia*?' Some of the answers she gives include broken trust, not knowing what will happen to the seasons, pollinators, food production and a sense of not knowing what to do as the list of what needs to be done grows longer (Demerjian 2016). Cities in particular are said to be at the sharp edge of typifying the problems encountered by humanity. They are characterised as places with rising inequality, where multiculturalism has – if not failed – been sorely tested. Urban areas are noted for the decline in access to nature and the green spaces that they provide and that human beings require to thrive.

Despite this bleak description, city citizens are not passive in the so-called age of dystopia. There are a notable number of city citizens who are actively responding to challenges in cities by working with a potential of hope. This thesis researched two such groups – allotmenteers and guerrilla gardeners who also happened to overlap ethnographically in the city of Oxford. Though they usually appear separately in the literature, a number of new insights were gained by bringing them together in this thesis. bringing them together in this thesis a number of new insights were gained. The convergence and divergence in their methods of practice (even within the same person for example in the case of Dawn) highlighted a hitherto obscured fact about guerrilla gardeners. Beginning with its name, guerrilla gardening is often framed as a rebellious activity (also because of the legal grey area in which it sits). In actual fact, most of the guerrilla gardeners in the city of Oxford were white, middle-class professionals or retired professionals. Exactly the kind of people who knew how to

work the systems in cities in order to be able to carry out the activities that they wished to do. Despite how some their neighbours might have felt about it – they were able to change the ways in which the council managed green spaces in the city namely reducing or stopping the use of pesticides altogether. This thesis therefore challenges the idea of guerrilla gardening as a marginalised activity. It also raises questions as to the perceived helplessness of city citizens in being able to co-create their city with the state. Guerrilla gardeners in Oxford are bold enough to post signs (such as the one on page 168) instructing the public on how to engage with their guerrilla gardened site which in turn directly affects how the council goes on to treat it. Furthermore, guerrilla gardening can be routes into the establishment for racialised minorities such Tayshan Hayden-Smith who began as a guerrilla gardener and ended up with a garden at the prestigious Chelsea Flower Show. This thesis therefore highlights the flexibility of urban gardening practices that allows for the inclusion of 'outsiders'. This is echoed on allotments where growers from around the world 're-root'.

Alone, together

Alone, together is a way of being that both allotmenteers and guerrilla gardeners practice that is proposed by this thesis. Even though it has been noted elsewhere on the British Isles (such as in Whalsay by Cohen (1987)) What this thesis offers is both an urban context and one in which gardening is practised. This is important both for clarifying certain preconceptions about urban gardening but also to illuminate a critical aspect about utopic spaces – they do not have to be spaces in which practice is carried out communally even if there are shared ideals.

It is noteworthy that non-allotmenteers routinely confuse allotments with community gardens. The practice of growing is recognised as powerful and as such people assume that it means that allotmenteers would therefore grow together. Although they do grow together, they also do it alone. This subtle difference is what allows for the plurality that exists on allotment sites and allows for the super-diversity in people, plants, and practice. Because it can be missed, it explains some of the misapprehension non-allotmenteers have and why enduring stereotypes exist of who the main types of growers on allotment sites actually are, and the main ways in which they grow.

Allotments are a curious piece of English material cultural heritage and as such contain within them some of the features of English sociality, including real and imagined fences and boundaries It is considered polite and cordial to be friendly to those one is familiar with in a public space (the wider allotment site), but private spaces are not to be intruded upon (the allotmenteers' individual allotment plot). In this way (and particularly when coupled with the value of freedom), it is possible for allotmenteers who are very different from each other and who also grow in very diverse ways to practise alongside each other in relative harmony. Allotmenteers consider themselves a community as exemplified in the quote that forms this chapter's title– they refer to themselves as such but, because they are a community that is made up of individuals who work alone (although they do some activities together as required as described in Chapter which gave the ethnographic account of an Open Day), some of the key driving forces that guide human behaviour outside the allotment gates are contrary to what happens on allotment sites. Cooperation (which is underpinned by exchange) is temporally and spatially distanced on allotment sites with the effect of reducing obligations allotmenteers would otherwise feel that they have to each other. Competition, which outside allotment gates can

heighten individualism, conversely on allotment sites brings allotmenteers together and promotes conversations that would otherwise not occur in their day-to-day existence off the site.

Guerrilla gardeners are perhaps a more obvious expression of an *alone, together* community. It is routine for them to work by themselves or in pairs (at a push in small groups), and yet there is a common thread of purpose amongst them. My research found that they are both curious and look out for each other's handiwork. Dawn remarked both with amusement and concern about two different guerrilla gardened areas in Oxford. Yet despite the differences in practice, she would not actively seek out the guerrilla gardeners to tell them to do it differently. Nor would she interfere by taking out plants that had been guerrilla gardened. Much like on an allotment site, a freedom of practice is valued. The wider guerrilla gardening communities' intention is recognised and in this manner they are 'together'; however each of them are carrying out their practices, 'alone'.

Enacting freedom

Both guerrilla gardeners and allotmenteers talk about the freedom that they experience through their practice. Although they use the same word, the quality of the freedom is quite different. The idea of freedom was a completely unexpected finding to emerge from my research. It is also a finding that contributes positively to anthropology. It does so in two ways. The first is it provides a counterpoint to which in anthropology have focused on resistance (Scott 1985 ; Ong 2010). While important, these studies do not highlight a freedom that is based on self-creation and expression. Allotmenteers are not resisting the state in their practice but instead co-creating spaces of freedom *within* cities. Guerrilla gardeners might be responding to

neglect in the city, but they take it a step further and, in some cases, even influence the council to treat the city that might be read as neglect. When guerrilla gardeners stop the public and by extension council from mowing to protect wildflowers they have sown – they are actively rewriting what is seen as care for the city.

It is easier to recognise freedom amongst guerrilla gardeners who treat the city as their unbounded garden. Their practice also sits at the margin of what exactly cultivation is. On the one hand, they sow seeds. On the other, many often do not return to the same spot to tend to the plants that they have started. They are happy to 'let nature do its thing'. Even more startling are the guerrilla gardeners who know that a proportion (possibly a large proportion) of what they sow will likely not germinate or die – their unspoken collaboration with more-than-human gardeners being one that also espouses a large degree of freedom. They will work to get the plants going and then let them do what they will. It is also possible to recognise the freedom that guerrilla gardeners enact by the responses of municipalities and other city citizens to their actions. Despite the fact that they do not have legal permission to grow where they do, there is a distinct reluctance to apprehend them. This has emboldened guerrilla gardeners who in Oxford now go on to leave messages for people about how they should treat their guerrilla gardening sites – the freedom to instruct city citizens on how they should behave. The spaces that guerrilla gardeners occupy are growing (pun intended); so much so that the 'Grenfell Guerrilla gardener' Tayshan Hayden-Smith enacted his freedom by taking a guerrilla garden into one of the most regulated gardening spaces – The Chelsea Flower Show.

Although allotmenteering is state sanctioned, allotment sites are self-regulated. Allotmenteers create spaces where no one can tell the other what to do, which enables a plurality of purpose and practice. Allotmenteers subvert some of the expected rules of engagement in the wider city, which enables allotmenteers to fully

express who they are through their gardening without even necessarily sharing a common language with those who they grow alongside. Fundamentally, all urban gardeners feel free to reshape the city through their bodily practices – something that is not a widely held experience of people resident in urban areas.

Banal Utopia

Urban gardening sites are transformatory places. Urban gardening spaces, whether or not they are guerrilla gardening sites or allotments, demand the impossible (Moylan 1986) from cities. They use nature to take up space in what is some of the most valuable land in the world. In amongst concrete and other man-made materials, urban gardening spaces privilege the 5–10 inches of earth that is responsible for keeping us alive. Urban gardeners feed and nurture topsoil and develop a relationship with it. They grow food to eat in it and flowers that they give away and spread joy. The relationship that allotmenteers develop with soil is one that is based on experience. It confounds a nature culture binary because soil is natural but the engagement that human gardeners have with it has a cultural lens. There is also an intersubjectivity that occurs between soil and human gardeners. As detailed in the interlude 'soil and slugs' there are allotmenteers like Pearl who can sense when her soil is happy. All allotmenteers who talk about their soil reference paying attention to the needs of the soil, they describe feeding it and how it should (or should not) be treated.

This multispecies relationship transcends different boundaries. Beginning with their location — allotment sites were not initially conceived for cities; they began their life in rural areas, developed as a project to feed poor rural labourers and yet, when these labourers moved to the city in search of a better life, they brought

their allotments with them. Allotmenteers from other places in the world grow their plants from 'back home' to co-create a sense of belonging. With the ethnographic presence of the word 're-rooting' this thesis contributes to the development of a language around how the practice of allotmenteering is at once English and yet inclusive of other nationalities.

We tend to think of gardens as static spaces, but they are as mobile as we are. Guerrilla gardeners remind us of this when they plant their gardens wherever they choose within the city. Guerrilla gardeners' actions also highlight the impossibility of cities – that we carry out our daily activities on land that we consider as public but in actual fact we are given unspoken permission to operate on. Guerrilla gardening spaces remind us that we should not have to ask for permission to exist in a city. This is at once radical and yet obvious.

This radical sense is also true for allotment sites. Even nationalism which can be expressed for example by the waving of flags is transformed when it enters an allotment site. The connection *to* the land is also experienced as a connection to others *through* a common love of the land that growing takes place on. English people feel safe to raise their flags without being seen as nationalistic and these flags flutter alongside Irish and Polish amongst other flags, just as allotmenteers garden alone and yet together.

What is profound about allotments is that they are enchanting in the same way that Bhatti et al. have described enchantment in domestic gardens, but they beyond enchantment (Bhatti et al. 2009). Domestic gardens are purely a private space whereas allotment gardens are both public and private. They are intimate spaces where relations that are carried out across material culture that can be used to separate (fences) instead brings people together. A fence is not a wall and the gaps in a fence are an indication that it is not possible to fully seal off the 'in' and the 'out'. In

this way they are a permeable boundary and offer the possibility of relations. There are liminal or transitional spaces. What I found on allotment sites was that these relations could bring people together instead of the assumed keeping people apart. Fences could be experienced as an act of care from municipalities to allotmenteers. Fences also spoke to the wider relational boundaries that exist on allotment sites.

Despite potentially being able to grow anywhere in cities, guerrilla gardeners nevertheless create their own boundaries in order to draw the attention of city authorities and the wider city. They often grow in places that they see as 'neglected' or 'uncared for'. The self-created boundary that they place around their practice is a relational one. If they were to grow just anywhere in a city, then they would not be sending out any specific message apart from the looser message that they are able to do whatever it is that they want. Their recognition of the freedom that they have is self-regulated by the boundaries that they actively create. In this way, guerrilla gardeners' invisible boundaries (which they work to make visible through their practice) and allotmenteers' visible fences act as sites of sociality rather than sites of separation. Both remind us, in material and practical ways, of the possibilities of coming together and reaching across or through the gaps in the fence.

This thesis therefore extends the work on enchantment in domestic private gardens to an understanding of magical intimate private public spaces of allotment sites (Moore et al. 2014). The public aspect of allotment sites means that it is possible for them to transmit the benefits of this practice to city citizens beyond the allotment gates in a way that private domestic gardens are unable to. Urban gardeners both literally and figuratively reshape the city and in doing so materialise utopic spaces as they cultivate hope. What is startling is that, despite what their practice is able to achieve, it is banal – something of the ordinary and everyday. Urban gardeners are not forced to carry out their practice by anyone and yet it brings benefits to the wider

city. Their practice is routine and grounds them in the city, offering an intimacy that can be unimaginable in urban spaces. It connects them to each other without obligation – it is 'magical', 'perfect' – utopic.

With its focus on possibility and hope, this thesis forms a counterpoint to what Sherry Ortner has critiqued as a tendency in anthropology to focus on 'dark anthropology' with the utopic being obscured by the dystopic (Ortner 2016). This thesis shares a number of examples of city citizens taking positive action to improve theirs (and others) lives. To mention just one pertinent example is Anabelle who worked with the utopic impulse of the 1908 Allotment Act to exercise her right to have land to grow on. Gathering 5 other households, they were able to get the council to provide them with land – creating an allotment site where there was none. I have written elsewhere about what co-creation is possible when human gardeners come together with more-than-humans and even include members of the public. The '1918 Allotment' which formed the public engagement with research aspect of my fieldwork developed into a living memorial. It was open to visits from the public who sunk their hands into earth, partook of the harvest and some confided that their visit was intended to remember their departed loved ones (Niala 2023).

Utopia is something that can be worked towards as well as being manifested in the here and now. It is not something that is to be arrived at but is instead a method. This manipulation of time, an attentive focus on the present while also engaging with the future, is central to urban gardening practices. Both allotmenteers and guerrilla gardeners talk about the process-driven way in which they work with time. Their practice brings a better future into the present through their engagement with the earth and nature. Simultaneously there is also time that is outside their immediate control. The days, weeks, months, and seasons all form an overlapping of cyclical and linear time to which urban gardeners are attuned. There are repeated

patterns of actions throughout the day and throughout the growing season to enable plants to grow, but there is also the passage of time from once a seed has germinated until the point it ends up on someone's plate if it is food or in someone's hand if it is a flower. This dance with time is experienced as 'magical' and part of the creative process that makes the practice of urban gardening utopic. Simply put, utopia is not seen as a place at which to arrive, but instead a process of continual engagement and renewal. A process which allows challenges to be folded into celebrations and tribulations into triumphs. It also means that urban gardeners are aware of the precarious status of their utopic spaces. Allotment sites, for example, exist in the shadow of an ever-present threat of being repurposed for development. If they are seen to be underused, they are shutdown as has been the case with three sites in Oxford over the last decade. What urban gardening shows is that the impulse to materialise a utopic space is only the beginning of an engagement that requires both temporal and spatial persistence. It is this sense of persistence with which the thesis ends, returning to the ethnographic example of Kate's story, and how a fence, an allotment community and a pumpkin transformed a lifetime of exclusion and cultivated her sense of belonging.

CODA: KATE & THE PUMPKIN

One growing season, Kate grew a pumpkin. I can't recall when I first noticed it, but it was an extraordinary pumpkin. Following the semi-structured interview that I had had with Kate on the phone during the first COVID-19 lockdown, she had begun to talk with me more openly. Kate was relatively isolated and had the sense that she didn't really belong anywhere. She was middle-aged and didn't have a family of her own and lodged in someone else's home. It transpired that a thoughtful couple who knew of her situation had given up their place on the allotment waiting list so that she could get the small triangular plot that she so lovingly cultivated. The pumpkin that she grew was truly unlike any I had ever seen – it was perfectly formed and perfectly orange and looked just like Kate had plucked it from an advertisement in a seed catalogue. I was not the only person who noticed this pumpkin. Conversations were struck up on the outside of the fence about the pumpkin, and as it got bigger the question was raised – what would happen to it?

One day she was telling my partner that she didn't know what to do with the pumpkin as it was too big for her to eat on her own; he suggested that she could donate it to the local nursery, given Halloween was not far off. Kate thought this was a brilliant suggestion and the allotment rallied round, a wheelbarrow was procured, and Kate was led to the nursery by a running toddler, with his mother carrying her baby on her back quickly following behind. When they arrived at the nursery, they were met by a welcoming committee. The pumpkin brought the children a huge amount of joy and now they all knew who Kate was to say hello to.

Around the same time, an 'old boy' who had taken on extra plots when there was no waiting list on the site was facing up to the fact that he could no longer keep them all going. Kate was approached to take on a plot that had a shed on it. The plot was in the far corner of the site and tucked away where hardly anyone could see it.

When Kate told me about the shed, she said it was the first time in her life that she had had any sort of dwelling that she could call her own. The shed would need a lot of work, but it was 'perfect'. Now she had two plots on the site – her fence plot for when she felt like she wanted 'company', and her shed plot for when she needed time on her own. Along with the pumpkin, she felt like something 'magical' had happened in her life and it had all started when she first began to cultivate her little plot along the fence. Her eyes welled up as she told me that she finally understood what community was; now she finally felt as though she 'belonged'.

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Nyasae & the ancestors

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APPENDICIES

Appendix One: Detailed description of fieldwork allotment plots and sites

City Gorse allotment site

Figure 44: Niala preparing the plot

This site was examined in detail in the chapter entitled 'Magical Places', as it demonstrates the practicalities of turning a site from being described as the 'most threatening place in Oxford's Green Spaces' to 'a hidden gem' (Baker and Skinner Smith 2019: 136). There have been allotments in the area since 1956 but the site has existed in its current formation since 1993. A key aspect of this transformation involved the erection of 'a steel palisade fence' (Ibid.) in 2008. It is a small 0.315 hectare rectangular-shaped site with its entrance tucked in behind a children's playground and clump of trees off a residential road in an Oxford suburb. To the west, the short end is overlooked by a row of flats and the site rolls down a hill before rising again towards a main road on the short east end. The long south side is bounded by a brook that traditionally marked the boundary between three villages[32] that were incorporated into the city of Oxford in 1889. The plots on the site are small and are generally about a quarter of the size of a traditionally sized plot. A traditional sized plot is roughly the size of a doubles tennis court (24 x 11 metres).[33] The site

[32] I am purposely not giving the names of the villages in order to partially anonymise the site
[33] 'The Ten Pole Plot' is a standard size for an allotment, but what is ten poles? Technically a pole (or rod) is a linear measurement of five-and-a-half yards (1/320th of a mile) based on the old surveyor's

contains 32 plots, 28 of which are demonstrably tended and 4 of which are wilder (one of these is fenced). The wilder sites are possibly due to a different method of cultivation, but their status is unclear. There are 20 fully registered members, which means that there are a number of plot holders who hold more than one plot.[34] The area on the south side is for materials that can be recycled, and communal tools. There is a communal compost heap in the south-west corner with a wheelbarrow and an honour system in which a £5 charge is payable to the site Chair whenever you see him next. There is no communal allotment building or car park or plot numbers on the site. There is a small outside communal seating area. There are two wells on the site. There were no national flags when I was there. Fences and sheds are generally not a feature with only one plot being fully fenced and a couple of sheds. Tools are regularly left on people's plots in plain view and during the course of my 36 months of fieldwork only a couple of incidents of plants or tools going missing were reported. My plot was a 41.8 square metre plot and the first one immediately visible at the sole main entrance on the north-east corner.

tool used for measuring. The square of the pole was an area measurement used to divide the mythical 'perfect acre' so that an acre measuring 220 yards by 22 yards equated to 40 poles by 4 poles. This meant there were 160 square poles to the acre. The eventual standardisation of the area of a single allotment as a 16th of an acre came to be known more simply as the '10 pole plot' meaning 10 square poles. A typical 10 pole plot measures c. 33 yards by c. 8 yards (99 feet by 24 feet) or 0.0253 of a hectare' WAY, T. 2008. *Allotments*. Botley: Shire Publications.

[34] Where there is a site with empty plots and no waiting list, it is not unusual for allotmenteers to cultivate more than one plot on the site. This practice is particularly welcomed if the site is on 'reclaimed' land or under threat of 'reclamation' by the council for development. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to unpack the sensitivities of what occurs should the site become full and a waiting list develop. What is relevant to note here is that there are sites in Oxford where allotmenteers have more than one plot and this is usually resolved when the plot holder themselves decide to give up their additional plots.

Figure 45: City Gorse allotment site

I found the published description of the site by Sadia Azeem, the Chair of the site, to be accurate, 'It has a thriving community spirit with allotment holders from a range of different nationalities all with the same goal of growing fresh fruit and vegetables. Everyone is always willing to share their expertise and tools and only the muntjacs are the unwelcome visitors' (Baker and Skinner Smith 2019: 136). The site has an annual barbeque, and as well as English growers I also met Canadian, Indian, Kenyan, Trinidadian, Turkish, Pakistani, and Polish growers on the site. The Chair took an active approach to community relations and over a year after I had been cultivating on the site, I was informed that there were good reports of my presence. I was told that everyone who had spoken about me was always 'full of praise'.

Compared to other sites I experienced across the city there were relatively low numbers of flowers grown on the site. I 'inherited' some hollyhocks on my plot.

Figure 46: Fieldwork sketch of hollyhock from my plot

A significant proportion of people used the site as an extension of their home. As well as two fully registered members bringing along their partners who are regulars on the site, children are also routinely present either cultivating or playing. As part of this, at least 10% of the site is obviously used for solely recreational purposes. Three plots have dedicated seating areas – one complete with a picnic table, another with a raised mini sofa where plot holders and their family and friends gathered (pre-COVID-19) to share food and drink. Several other plots also had chairs which plot

holders sit in to simply relax. Two plot holders often play music which wafts through the site depending on the direction of the wind.

Figure 47: A prepared allotment plot

OxLea allotment site

Figure 48: A site with plots getting ready to bed down for winter

This site was featured in the chapter entitled, 'Fresh local produce available … in exchange for donations', as it is the location of the ethnographic study of an allotment Open Day. During the course of my fieldwork, I also attended the site's Annual General Meeting. This large 2.71 hectare trapezoid shaped site has its sole entrance clearly visible on a main road into the city of Oxford and is across the road from several businesses. There is a security camera mounted on the communal allotment building whose short west end faces the entrance to the site. The long north and short east ends are bounded by an Oxford University sports ground and the long south end is overlooked by houses. The front end of the site is characterised by traditionally 250-metre square plots that are fenced into netted greenhouses within which people carry out their gardening. There are also two relatively large communal seating areas. The further one walks into the site the less fencing there is. Most plots have signs demarcating their numbers and there are national flags dotted around the site, the commonest being the Union Jack. Flags were discussed in greater detail in the interlude following Chapter Six in the context of banal nationalism. There are a lot of fruit trees on the site and several self-filling water troughs. The site is meadowland that is susceptible to flooding from the river

Thames, most recently in 2014. There is a car park on the site, and it is possible to drive around the main road through the site. Most plots have sheds. The site also has a few orchards, and a number of fruit trees planted throughout. According to the site secretary there are about 140 plots but, 'not all of them are used as allotments as some are prone to flooding and some have been set aside as orchards and car parks. Due to its size and the area it occupies in the city (a lot of the local population, i.e. students, take on a plot, and having finished their courses move on), there are always empty plots, the number of which can vary from five to ten.'

The site officially started as war allotments in 1917 (there were sites in the surrounding local area from 1886), but has now moved along the main road, changing in shape and form depending on housing development by the University of Oxford and Oxford City Council. There are no written records of the site (even in its own archives) until 1944, and from then until 1962 the allotments were in a good financial state and most of the plots were taken. In the 1950s a storage shed was erected, followed by water mains, with six cattle troughs being connected in 1965. In the 1970s an amenities building was added by the council that doubled as a shop. It stopped trading in 1999. By 2010 the site was in poor financial health following projects such as Portaloos and raised beds for disabled members. This led to a radical shift in 2013 where the plot rents were doubled to £30 a year for a full plot, allowing for further development projects to be continued. My plot was on the second row of allotments as you walk in through the main entrance. It was the back half of a plot that had been split into two.[35]

[35] OxLea is one of a number of sites across the country that has recently started to split traditional sized plots into half and quarter sizes in order to attract more plot holders, as smaller sized plots require less time to maintain.

Figure 49: A site with plots beginning to wake up in the spring

This site had an active group of work party organisers who seasonally cleared up and tended to communal areas. This carried on during the COVID-19 pandemic, with plot holders carrying out their work consecutively rather than concurrently for safety reasons. Nationalities amongst plot holders included people from Canada, England, France, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Pakistan, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, Syria, the United States of America, and Zimbabwe. Given the size and number of people cultivating on the site, there may have been other nationalities represented who I did not meet. My interactions tended to involve neighbouring plot holders, apart from during the Open Day and Annual General Meeting. At least two English plot holders described the site to me as distinctly 'working class', in contrast to another nearby site which was seen (and not in a positive way) to be more 'middle class'. In this way the students on the site were considered as transient growers and not fully integrated members of the site. Perhaps because it is a much larger site, during the course of my fieldwork, emails were sent at least once every few months about missing tools, allotmenteers leaving the gate unlocked or forgetting to remove

their keys from the gate, and advice on bonfires, or unwanted species such as ragwort to be removed from the site. There was also a violent incident (thankfully no persons were harmed) which resulted in the summary eviction of one of the members of the site.

Swardland allotment site

Figure 50: The reality of taking on an allotment plot

This is a large 2.43 ha irregularly shaped dodecagon site with three entrances. From a bird's eye view, it looks like a trapezoid that has had a jagged curve and strip cut out of it. It is nestled between the edge of an older estate (built on what was a hamlet) within the city of Oxford and a new housing development. There have been allotment sites in the general area since the 19th century and the current site formation has been in existence since 1939. In 1995 some of the land (it is not clear how much – simply described as 'the southern tip') was surrendered due to a lack of demand (Baker and Skinner Smith 2019: 115). The south and west sides of the site face a noisy ring road while the north has a beautiful view towards a brook and

across Oxfordshire countryside. The main entrance entails a gate (locked from July 2020 to deter dog walkers) before a 200-metre drive to a second gate overlooked by a security camera. After the second gate there is a 150-metre drive up an apple tree-lined hill to a communal allotment building and car park. The site is characterised by traditionally sized 250-metre square plots with a wide range in variation in regard to how they are tended. Raised beds are common, and there are national flags dotted around the site on display. The site has a number of sheds and greenhouses with many plots having fences. It is a wooded site with numerous apple trees, several of which are very large. There are several self-filling water troughs. At the top of the car park there is a communal seating area. According to the site secretary when I began cultivating a plot on the site in November 2018 there were 72 plots full with 3 empty and a potential with clearance for another 20 full plots. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, plot demand was such that the site not only became full but started a waiting list, which had not been seen since the three-year waiting lists of the early 1960s.[36] At least two plot holders had chickens, both of whom reported having more time to be able to tend to them due to changes in their working circumstances because of the pandemic. When I spoke to one at length, during a semi-structured interview carried out over the phone, she described how caring for the chickens during the pandemic had been 'healing' for her. My plot was in the centre of the allotment site overlooking the communal eating area and the car park.

[36] This waiting list sits in contrast to the disuse that allotment plots had fallen into in the 1960s in other parts of the city of Oxford as well as across England. Evidence suggests that it might be due to a particular aspiration of people who were moving into the newly built estate and were aiming to develop a 'sense of space and freshness'. Research carried out in the area at the time found people who were active in their local community participating in many different societies and who equally valued their privacy. They worked to build a better life for their children beyond, 'The place almost bare of trees: the dominant colour is asbestos grey'. They did go on to transform their gardens and living places and, in many ways, espoused the values of allotmenteers today who grow both plants and themselves MOGEY, J. M. 1956. *Family and Neighbourhood: Two studies in Oxford*. London: Oxford University Press; TILLER, K. & DARKES, G. 2010. *An Historical Atlas of Oxfordshire [cartographic material]*. Chipping Norton: Oxfordshire Record Society.

Many allotmenteers live in the local area and the nationalities I met included people from Albania, Canada, China, England, France, Germany, Kenya, Pakistan, Poland, Romania, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, and Zimbabwe. This site is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Eight and is the site where I had the most involved interaction with the 'old boys' – the stereotypical older white working-class men who have been cultivating on allotment sites in an unbroken chain since the First World War. I was able to gather data on intergenerational experiences from 'old boys' whose fathers had grown on the same site. However, because all the plots on this site were the traditional ten-pole size it was harder to interact with plot holders, particularly when I did not speak their language. I gardened near a friendly Albanian man (who has been cultivating on Swardland for over 30 years) for the duration of my fieldwork but was unable to talk with him as we did not share a common spoken language.

Elder Stubbs Allotment Site

I carried out my PER by way of the '1918 Allotment' on this site. The first refence to Elder Stubbs in its current location dates to the First World War so in this way the '1918 Allotment' had a direct link to wartime growers through the soil. It is

about 12 acres in size providing in the region of 100 plots. The allotment committee see the allotments are extending the historical remit of allotments to provide for the 'deserving poor' (Baker and Skinner Smith 2019: 122). It is thus also home to two charities that support vulnerable members of the community. One is called Restore which supports people with mental health problems and the other The Porch – Steppin' Stones supports people who are homeless or vulnerably housed. As well as the allotment plots, Elder Stubbs is home to a woodland area, wildflower meadow, orchards and pond.

'The 1918 Allotment' was located near the pond and woodland area. When visitors came to the plot, I walked them through the gates down the main thoroughfare and behind the pond into the woodland area before coming out at the back of the '1918 Allotment'. The site has an annual festival which is open to the public as well as a sculpture park featuring natural wood sculptures.

Like many Oxford allotment sites I met people growing from all over England (One plot had two Cornish flags erected on it) and the rest of the world including Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, Ireland, France and Japan. Many allotmenteers (including the 'old boys') enjoyed having the '1918 allotment' on the site and engaged with it both when it was officially open to visitors and during the in-between times. Like at Swardland, one of the 'old boys' who had a plot opposite the '1918 Allotment' died during the course of my fieldwork.

Appendix Two 1918 Allotment Project

Links to public engagement with research blog posts

https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/1918-allotment-project

https://fig.studio/projects/1918-allotment/

Appendix Three

Allotment competition judging sheet crops

Crops		**Winter Crops**
French Beans		Brussels Sprouts
Runner Beans		Cauliflower
Beetroot		Kale
Carrot		Leaf Beet
Celeriac		Leeks
Celery		Parsnip
Chicory		Spring Cabbage
Oriental Vegetables		Sprouting Broccoli
Courgettes		Swiss Chard
Cucumbers		
Fennel		
Kohl Rabi		
Lettuce		
Marrow		
Peppers		
Radish		
Rocket		
Spinach		
Squash/Pumpkins		
Swede		
Sweet Corn		**Soft Fruit**
Tomatoes		Aut'n Raspberries
Turnip		Grapes

Allotment competition judging sheet criteria

Name:

Plot Number

Judging Criteria and Marks

Number of Crops (½ point per crop)	15
Number of Winter Crops (1 point each)	10
Soft fruit (1 point per type)	5
Companion planting and flowers	5
Quality of crops	15
Overall productivity	15
Compost	10
Freedom from annual weeds	5
Freedom from perennial weeds	10
Freedom from rubbish	5
Well maintained paths and edges around plot	5

Please tick crops grown on your plot. Add any additional crops

Appendix Four

‘Old boys’

Among human gardeners there is a special category of gardener – the ‘old boys’. There is an ethnographic case study of the ‘old boys’ in Chapter Eight of this thesis. However, their association with allotment sites is so ingrained that they require separate mention here – particularly as they are the only type of allotmenteer who have their own specific designation. The first point to make is that the term ‘old boy’ is not derogatory. ‘Old boys’ themselves also use the term to refer to themselves and others. It is in part descriptive as ‘old boys’ are older men who allotmenteer. They are stereotypically thought of as white, English, and working class. Perhaps the sort of man who holds up his trousers with bailer twine is considered to be salt of the earth and certainly commands a particular status on allotment sites. During the course of my fieldwork it became apparent that there were ‘old boys’ of different ethnicities and national backgrounds. Although the outcome remains unclear, it is possible that there will be increasing numbers of middle-class ‘old boys’ as some allotment sites go through a process of gentrification. I met retired university professors who would not describe themselves (or be described as) ‘old boys’ but might they in the future? I also considered the fact that it is possible we are engaging with the last generation of ‘old boys’, men who fought in the Second World War or in its wake with a particular outlook on the world that living (and cultivating) through these era-marking periods can generate.