'Something different for the weekend' - alterity, performance, routine and proficiency at farmers’ markets in the northeast of England

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The focus of this chapter is the role of alterity and performance in buying food at farmers’ markets. Alterity is the context in which farmers’ markets are readily understood and situated (Spiller 2007; Youngs 2003); buying at a market is different to buying at, for instance, a supermarket, and as Hetherington (1997) might suggest, farmers’ markets appropriate a heterotopic space where a marginal force implies ideals - however temporary or ephemeral that space maybe. Nevertheless, as I argue, as performances become routine, the proficiency of such actions render them normal. In contrast to what were once reactionary or alternative sites to developments and incidences in farming and food in the UK today, the farmers’ markets may now have become normalized or to some extent non-alternative. A focus of this chapter is the corporeality at the markets, which encourages performances during the event of buying, selling or just being at a farmers’ market. Performance and its delivery is distinctly corporeal and linguistic in projecting the meanings and understandings that litter everyday life, and intrinsically performance is inescapable from identity, as every interaction and action between actors incorporates degrees of performance. When producers and consumers meet at the

1 The majority of farmers’ markets in the northeast take place at the weekend, but not all. I use this term as an analogy to suggest a practice that is a relatively regular performance and one with an element of excitement and enjoyment.

2 Farmers’ markets in the northeast, generally occur once a month or at the very least fortnightly.
markets, the performances take on the guise of difference, in that the markets awaken
carnivalesque connotations, because inherently the markets are not everyday, or are not
supermarkets.

The pretext to much of the debate in this chapter are the binaries of
‘conventional’ and ‘alternative’ (Watts et al. 2005). Conventionality, in terms of the
standardization of food shopping and consumption, for example, supermarkets are often
viewed as the antithesis of alternative means of consumption and the supermarket
becomes the theme alterity challenges (see Cameron 2007; Moore 2008). As a Friends of
the Earth pamphlet stresses, ‘customers pointed out that farmers’ markets represent an
excellent alternative to mainstream supermarket shopping with a friendly, relaxed
atmosphere that cannot be duplicated anywhere else’ (2000, 13). A central theme in my
approach in terms of alterity is the role of face-to-face interaction. The nuances,
subtleties and personal contact that this allows have positioned much farmers’ market
research in terms of alterity (Ilbery and Maye 2005; Kirwan 2004; Sage 2003) and in some
ways I want to question just how alterity ‘plays out’ at farmers’ markets (Whatmore et al.
2003). The chapter begins with a brief review of farmers’ markets; highlighting the
notions of alterity often associated with the markets and then moves to consider
performance and how it adds to the markets and equally, sustains the markets’ alterity,
interactions and actions. I then focus on the routines that abound at farmers’ markets
and particularly how producers learn to embrace new identities and learn to become
farmers’ market producers (Du Gay 1996). My final focus is on proficiency and the
absorption of some of these influences. The work in this chapter is based on a 14-month
ethnographic research project\(^3\) into farmers’ markets in the northeast of England and

\(^3\) The project involved over 70 interviews with farmers’ market producers and consumers and an
extended period in the ‘field’. The research took place from September 2004 to December 2005.
after an initial pilot study; three markets in particular became the focus of the project. Those markets were Durham, Hexham and Newcastle.

**Farmers’ Markets**

We have conceptualized FM [farmers’ markets] as, potentially, simultaneously ‘alternative’ and ‘reactionary’ spaces, and as liminal, ephemeral spaces. As such, they might be usefully understood as heterotopic spaces; those spaces which, according to Gregory (1994) are the ‘marginal sites of modernity, constantly threatening to disrupt its closures and certainties’.

(Holloway and Kneafsey 2000, 297)

Farmers’ markets have enjoyed much academic consideration, and situated within this is a valuable reading of the contexts that surround markets, in particular the nascent forces that preset the re-emergence of food markets (Goodman 2003; Sage 2003). Prior to the more recent growth in public interest towards food production, opportunities to engage with alternative means of food sourcing were somewhat limited in a British context (Marsden and Arce 1995; Renting et al. 2003)\(^4\). The cultural significance of such reactions are undoubtedly important and while farmers’ markets offer a relatively ephemeral window into the economic processes of local economies and of actually buying and selling food, they also offer a distinctive approach in understanding the contexts of such actions. Previous work has considered notions of trust, face-to-face

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\(^4\) Opportunities did exist but not on the scale now present to the British public as a whole. For instance in 1997 there were 240 farmers’ markets countrywide in the UK that figure now stands at over 600 (see FARMA 2007). My emphasis here is the growing awareness of food and the ubiquity of food matters in the UK today, particularly in newspapers, magazines, advertisements and television.
transaction, high quality and social embeddedness (Curry 2002; Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000; Moore 2006). These concepts strengthen what makes the markets both different and unique in the face of more conventional means of shopping, for meeting and talking to the person who actually produces the product on sale is a fairly novel idea in an age of post-industrialization (Campbell 2005; Hinrichs et al. 2004; Slocum 2007).

My argument involves the assemblages that occur at farmers’ markets and how in many instances these assemblages produce juxtapositions that offer alterity or something different/more to those who attend farmers’ markets. For farmers’ market participants, the representations that frame understandings and appreciations of the markets allow processes to take place that may not be experienced on an everyday level, for instance purchasing something outdoors. Within the context of something like alterity there is a construction in how processes and routines become familiar, used and/or appreciated by those at farmers’ markets. What I suggest is that notions of alterity can be ambiguous or arbitrary. In essence, the markets become what participants wish them to be, for example, places to buy something of high quality, somewhere to meet people, or places to be entertained. The (re)presentations projected in such a way reconstitute notions of what the markets are; both in how attendees view the markets and in how they actively experience the markets. While the markets and their produce are tangible, the associations they appropriate are not, and as such, the markets produce mobile realities or materialities in configuring and reconfiguring how they perform alterity and exist within alternative contexts (Hetherington 1997). What may appear solid is easily transferable, as thoughts and representations at farmers’ markets are open to influences – just think of a food scare or the heightened awareness of something like BSE, Bird Flu or Foot and Mouth and how this may impact on food sales and/or public opinion (Law 2006). In these instances, the representations are mobilized and, ostensibly, situated
within an entirely different spectrum; there is similitude that becomes disassociated and re-associated in light of, something like a moral panic.

To take an example, conventional businesses may have appropriated some of the strategies and perceptions associated with the markets. Much public attention, of late, has focused on food miles and the dramatic effects this has on the environment (Pretty et al. 2005), and as a result, issues of localism have come to the fore for many consumers, both those who attend markets and those that do not. The underlying assumption that long-distance imported food is unnecessary and wasteful prevails, whereas farmers’ market food is viewed as being local with less impact on the environment and it celebrates local customs or culture rather than corroding it. As Jackson et al. (2006, 139) have noted, the ‘promotion of local and regional foods is based on the assumption that production on this scale is likely to be more sustainable than more intensive forms of farming on larger scales’. Exhibiting reconnections to local produce rather than those, for instance, at supermarkets, engages with concepts that emanate from specific strategies, as exemplified in the cabinet office report ‘Farming and Food – a Sustainable future’ (or better known as the Curry Report) (2002), which was conceived as a response to the UK outbreak of Foot and Mouth in 2001.

The Curry Report, and others like it (Agenda21 2002; FARMA 2004), offer viable incentives to producers in reconfiguring businesses affected by adverse situations (the majority of northeast farmers’ market producers began trading post-Foot and Mouth), and for consumers, they provide an awareness of the benefits of local shopping. The intention of the Curry Report was to highlight the possibilities available to the British Food and Agricultural industry - with a particular emphasis on the ‘exceptional’ qualities of UK food. As the report suggests, ‘consumers have confidence in English food’ and a
connection between the actors involved with the food and those that consume it adds to its value and appreciation. Entwined within this appreciation is the understanding of what the product is and its potential use; for to understand the mobility of the product it must be grounded within a spectrum of value; however, the value that grounds is easily shifted and mobilized. For instance, just as localism is the pretext to many consumers’ attendance at the market one month, the following month it may be issues revolving around something like childhood obesity.

Localism offers an example of how issues that were once framed within the context of alterity can become normalized. For instance, traceability and links between consumer and product have, of late, been championed in raising awareness of local issues (Holloway et al. 2007; Morris and Buller 2003; Opara and Mazaud 2001). Traceability offers a connection; a link to the product, a place of origin and a face behind the product, a ploy now readily used by supermarkets and multinationals where producers are pictured and named on labelling and packaging (see Picture 1)\(^5\). In evidence here, is the comforting effect of knowing; knowing where it comes from. Connecting a consumer with a product or the product’s manufacturer/producer enlivens a representation that is formulated to ease apprehensions within the contexts of moral panics. The labelling suggests safety because it is traceable. This is much in line with the farmers’ markets where seeing and meeting the producer face-to-face can present many of the same connotations. Linking a product to a face and a market offers certain reassurance (Hinrichs et al. 2004), as does how the producer performs or conducts themselves at the markets.

\(^5\) However, there is the problematizing potential of spatiality, as Morris and Buller (2003) question if the farmer is within, say, 30 miles are they good and if they are within 40 miles are they bad?
Performance

This is a theatre involving carnivalesque, liminoid rituals ….. There is no possibility that such an experience could be sustained for long, but its elemental forms can be seen as the basis for the process by which people create new identities and identifications with one another, unsettling and making use of their chosen spatial settings as they do so.

(Hetherington 1998, 152)
Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) considers the carnival and indeed the market square\textsuperscript{6} as a ‘place-beyond-place’, there is an element of escape or evasion from the usual constraints of public life, an exclusion or relaxation of ‘official order and official ideology’ and a distancing between carnival and ‘real world’ (Stallybrass and White 1986). For Bakhtin carnival is a metaphor for transformation, where the world is turned upside down (White 1993). Bakhtin sets his argument in the world of Rabelais, a 16\textsuperscript{th} century French writer, and challenges the ‘sanitized’ bourgeois version of the ‘self’, as Hall (1993, 7) states, ‘for Bakhtin, this upturning of the symbolic order gives access to the realm of the popular – the ‘below’, the ‘underworld’, and the ‘march of the uncrowned gods’’. Carnival offers difference and, in much the same way, the farmers’ market offers alterity in relation to food shopping, where, for instance, shopping in a supermarket is ‘upturned’ by farmers’ market shopping through the celebration of social relations or interaction at the markets (see Hunt 2006). As Hetherington suggests, the role of performance and liminality help the processes of social relations and practice, or as Rob Shields (1991, 84) expands ‘liminality represents a liberation from the regimes of normative practices and performance codes of mundane life’. The mode of interaction I emphasise at the markets centres on the face-to-face communications between producer and consumer. Within this context there is a mode of interaction similar to the carnival where performance awakens an alternative rhythm of speech, gestures, hierarchies, codes, ethics and/or practices (see Crang 2001; McCormack 2002). Liminal elements in such contexts are negotiated and learned in relation to these alternative rhythms and just as Shields (1991)

\textsuperscript{6} This is the site where farmers’ markets invariably take place.
suggests of the rituals offered by ‘places on the margins’, so to the farmers’ markets have carnivalesque and liminal potential.

Performing and performances are relatively ephemeral: the ‘action’ of the performer becomes the focus for a period - performances are rarely sustained indefinitely (Pratt 2000). Rather, the audience’s attention, gaze and understanding is usurped by the creation of something new, transfixing, and entertaining. New identities are created and in the spirit of true theatre or performance; the roles are rehearsed and rehearsed, through as Schechner (1988) states a ‘ritualized behaviour’. However, a performance, ‘can never be completely spontaneous and will always involve, as Goffman also suggests, recognisable elements’ (Hetherington 1998, 153). Just as Bakhtin (1984) talks of the carnivalesque and Schechner (1988) of performance theory, such musings can apply to farmers’ markets as performance emerges through the actor's interactions. At farmers’ markets the everyday behaviours of the actors, their interactions, personas and projections are littered with performances. Interactions at the markets are an important component in what make them alternative and indeed, attractive for many consumers, for example as Hunt (2006, 55) states, ‘through face-to-face interactions typical for direct markets, producers receive feedback on products and to develop personal connections with consumers’. In this manner, how the interactions between producers and consumers are ‘played out’ often engage with particular performances or in effect,

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7 As I argue, the farmers’ market are not always places on the margins or alternative places, but through learning, liminality, performance, routine and proficiency can become places more central or normalized.

8 As evidenced in research interviews: 22 March 2005, 7 June 2005, 27 June 2005
identities. Farmers’ market producers regularly approach their work in a very idiosyncratic fashion: they assume identities (and are remembered and thought of by consumers in these terms) and these identities are reinforced through the repetition of their actions, for instance their own appearance or that of their stall, the produce they sell or how they may conduct themselves (being friendly, remembering customer names, etc). In this way, producers learn to perform in ways conducive to selling farmers’ market products.

One producer in particular stands out from the research: a ‘farmer’ who was once a publican but then bought a farm having no previous farming experience; he now runs a very successful farm and his appearance is of a stereotypical farmer; tweed cap, crook, etc. Other producers regularly recount his story, as well as, his appearance and they generally emphasise his lack of a farming background. Goffman (1971, 56) notes how a performance may assume a role and reconceptualise an identity and the formulation of that identity:

Performers may even attempt to give the impression that their present poise and proficiency are something they have always had and that they have never had to fumble their way through a learning period.

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9 See Paul du Gay (1996), his argument surrounds paid work, identity and organizations, particularly in the context of new work identities. For du Gay a work identity is malleable and is open to many influences, thus challenging the notion of identity as being simply something like a ‘farmer’ or ‘producer’, these are expressions of identity rather than an inherent identity.

10 Interviews; 6 June 2005, 1 July 2005, 8 July 2005, 14 July 2005

11 The farmer, however, freely recounts his background and his ‘story’ figures prominently on the company’s webpage. His business has also become exceptionally successful; therefore, there may be an element of resentment on the part of some of his fellow producers.
The role played by this farmer emphasises, as Butler (1997) might state, how identity embraces and manifests within various influences. As other producers keenly point out\textsuperscript{12}, this is in fact a role, because for other producers his antecedent in some way deems his identity inauthentic. For the consumer, these thoughts may be distanced as they simply do not know or care that he has been farming for only the last 10 years or so – for them he looks the part and his food tastes good. As one consumer stressed\textsuperscript{13}, with reference to how this particular farmer has embraced the farming industry, ‘[farmer’s name] is doing a really good job, he is just so passionate. I have been up to his farm and oh! what a canny place he runs’. The farmer’s role or performance eradicates the inadequacies of experience or personal history, especially as his investment in the industry – a brand new cutting and packing shed and a new farm shop – creates an impression of ‘passion’.

Performance is an indelible component of farmers’ markets and the markets are invariably a stage and are staged, in that once a month ‘it’s Showtime’ (Crang 1994), as producers display their wares for sale. Much like the theatrical performance, the producers prepare and rehearse for the event and each market provides the platform to launch their business, themselves and their performances, where ‘a mode of embodied activity whose spatial, temporal and symbolical ‘awareness’ allows for dominant social norms to be superseded, questioned, played with, transformed’ (McKenzie 1997:218). Producers become something at the market in that they are not just a producer; performance is a vehicle that allows them to assume new practices and behaviours that conversely satisfy economic essentials (and I would argue personal ones – farmers’ market producers are generally extremely gregarious). The markets necessitate a

\textsuperscript{12} Interviews; 11 January 2005, 19 January 2005

\textsuperscript{13} Interview; 1 July 2005
performance that incorporates a transformation or something different/alternative: producers become performing producers, as well as ‘farmers’ or farmers’ market producers.

**Unconsciousness Proficiency**

Merleau-Ponty (2003) talks of ‘sense experience’ and how this can transgress into knowing. However, an unconscious practice, as I will suggest, is anything but unconscious, rather an unconscious consciousness if you like – the action evolves to become ordinary (see Shove and Southerton 2000). In a similar fashion to many shopping habits (Gronow and Warde 2001), people at farmers’ markets instinctively know what they like and want; firm apples, red meat, smelly cheese and so on. Choices may become routine through repetition or possibly because of previous experiences. The practices that are crucial to everyday life and suggest repetition of experience are fundamental to knowledge and learning or ‘rescripting’ (Watkins 2006). Once planted, in a cognitive sense, new knowledges become part of life or the everyday, and unconsciousness appropriates practices and actions (Deleuze 1993).

‘Automaticity’ focuses on mundane everyday tasks and explores how alien habits, for instance, a first-time driver’s nervous initial efforts, become habituated and effortless to the extent that the driver can multitask; listen to the radio, change the heat setting in the car, and so on (Groeger and Clegg 1997). Much of the ‘action’ of automaticity focuses on the unintentionally acquired processing that is initiated by environment or stimuli which

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the actor remains unaware of, yet inherently guides behaviour. Bargh & Chartand (1999, 469) suggest the conditions of automaticity lie within two processes:

The necessary and sufficient ingredients for automation are frequency and consistency of use of the same set of component mental processes under the same circumstances – regardless of whether the frequency and consistency occur because of a desire to attain a skill, or whether they occur just because we have tended in the past to make the same choices or to do the same things or to react emotionally or evaluatively in the same way each time.

By supplanting previous experiences with familiarity, the task inevitably dissipates into something of less importance. As a task becomes more entangled in the everyday its immanence is rendered to greater effect.

Unconsciousness may appear nondescript in that everyday practices are common to all and, in essence, speak for themselves. Despite this obviousness, Wittgenstein (1980, 39) talks of ‘how hard I find it to see what is right in front of my eyes’, or as Lorimer (2005, 84) continues in much the same vein, ‘phenomena may seem remarkable only by their apparent insignificance’. Therefore, deconstructing the actions and practices of farmers’ markets reveals the more intimate reasoning as to why producers and consumers frame routines or performances in the manner in which they do. Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism suggests we are in a constant state of being, ‘experience cannot be grounded on man, the subject, culture or language’ (Colebrook 2002, 89). Instead, experience is continual and from here, we become. While Foucault (1998, 475) argues that we should look beyond the personal experience, for him the avenues presented by personal experiences more than hint towards a priori knowledges, as he expands ‘lived experience’ [is expected] to supply the ordinary meaning of every act of knowledge. But can we not or must we not look for it in the ‘living’ itself’? Much like
Dewsbury’s (2000, 488) conviction, ‘everything is in-between where actuality happens’; those moments of insignificance are what binds. Moreover, unconsciousness allows a retraction of the usual barriers where experiences are caught unaware, elevating these moments to significance precisely because this is the when and where of cognitive experience.

At the farmers markets there is often an emphasis on established routines, for instance, market organizers, when planning a market, normally place regular producers in the same stall positions around the market\(^\text{15}\). Stall positions exemplify an apparent hierarchy and at Durham farmers’ market, stalls 1 to 8 due to high amounts of passing footfall are more attractive for producers (see Map 1). These modes of practice are paramount to how Durham market runs, as the choices made by market organisers and by producers (and consumers in where they walk, browse and buy) conclusively construct how the market works. In essence, a number of unconscious components are at work here, the producers conduct their movements in an everyday sense of turning up, setting up and working in a manner that is un-reflexive because it has been done tens of times before. Consumers approach the markets in repetitive ways: some walk straight to produce they want; others wander a little before buying. The emphasis is the practiced nature to each market, as evidenced by some consumer comments:

\[\text{..we do have a set pattern, because the meat sells out very quickly, so the meat is the priority, to get meat first of all}\,\text{16}\]

\[\text{We have a look around first and then the beef; we usually go straight to him}\,\text{17}\]

\(^{15}\) Newcastle has a deliberate policy of rotating farmers’ market producers and stall positions, Hexham and Durham do not, and producers at these markets tend to go to the same stall positions.  

\(^{16}\) A regular attendee at Hexham farmers’ market has a grown family and buys for two (18 July 2005).
I don’t browse mainly because I know what we are going to get. I go looking for a specific stall, maybe then I’ll just take a look at what else there is.\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^{17}\) This couple, are in semi-retirement and travel to as many farmers’ markets as possible each month (averaging eight a month). They buy from the markets at least once a week (1 July 2005)

\(^{18}\) A regular attendee at Hexham and an intermittent attendee at Newcastle farmers’ market, mother of two young children (13 July 2005).
Key: Each farmers’ market stall is numbered, the front of the stall faces where the arrows have been placed. The thicker the arrow the larger the amount of footfall witnessed during the course of one market.
(Source: author, 20 January 2005)
These movements and actions, while undoubtedly influenced by previous experiences, do suggest elements of automaticity and as a result, certain activities, such as buying meat, take precedence due to their prefigured affect – consumers unconsciously lay preferences towards certain stalls. These are the manifestations of subtle or small experiences that, as human nature often dictates, evolve to formulate appreciations, preferences and everyday routines or codes of practice that inevitably lead to a ‘comfort zone’ or a relatively unquestioned means of conducting the everyday. It is in these instances that the alterity of the markets becomes less alternative, as Cresswell (1996) might suggest, ‘transgressive acts’ facilitate a movement in how the markets are judged, understood and performed and, as such, there is a mainstreaming in how some of the alterity is lost or accepted as normal shopping behaviour. The appropriation of alterity or alternative discourses highlights cultural processes, as well as political-economic process, in how lessons, meanings, questions, symbols and other contexts bridge the binary notions of alternative and conventional in food production and consumption (see Freidberg 2004; Jackson et al. 2006a). Nevertheless, notions of alterity in terms of food and performance at farmers’ markets present an opportunity ‘to get behind the veil, the fetishism of the market’ (Cook 2004), and more importantly they underline, as Richardson (1982) argues, the ‘peculiar reality in which people operate’. Buying at a farmers’ market is often framed, in some shape or form, as alternative; however, what alterity often presents is not something new and different, but rather an opportunity to review practiced consuming habits.
Conclusion

The practice of attending a farmers’ market builds upon the working knowledges that commonly map the mundane acts of the everyday. When performing the everyday we walk down certain roads, we catch particular buses or sign our names in idiosyncratic ways because it’s ‘what life demands’. Actors’ lives\textsuperscript{19} are essentially a sedimentary mix of absolute mundanity with a sprinkle of difference or variety. For most, each day presents similar or identical patterns to the previous day, week or month and through this repetitive cycle, we develop modes of practice and strategies that work. Occasionally something like a farmers’ market presents newness or an oddity, something to be explored, yet with time this too becomes habituated and unreflexive. The more behaviour is practiced, the more it becomes unconscious. Equally, the political-economic activities of farmers’ markets offer an alterity that clearly has become profitable and successful and it is in this light that conventional retailing intuitions, multinationals and/or businesses appropriate farmers’ markets’ notions of alterity. Despite farmers’ markets’ ephemerality, they are a reactionary force that, in many ways, exemplify a shared commitment to issues such as localism or social and economic enhancement (Delind 2006; Winter 2003). However, as Kirwan (2004) suggests, with every success there is a danger of conventional retailers employing farmers’ market strategies and therefore reducing the alterity of the markets.

\textsuperscript{19} The lives I speak of here are UK lives.
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