

Possibilities for Sustainable Futurity: examining the radical potential of Small, Mobile Living Structures and the Capitol Hill Organized Protest in achieving sustainability

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**Abstract**

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Paper 1- The Social Practice of Living in Small Mobile Living Structures: A Case Study in the USA

This paper will explore the practice of living in a Small Mobile Living Structure to assess their suitability as a sustainable housing option which incorporates both social and environmental well-being. Using a social practice theory framework and interviews with 8 households and one manufacturer, I outline the practice of living in a tiny house, converted van or RV, which I combine under the category 'Small Mobile Living Structure' (SMLS). Analysing key features of the tiny movements such as reduced consumerism; their place and spatiality; mobility; and community allows me to draw conclusions about the range of radical political potentials which could be realized through SMLS. Ultimately, SMLS provide one viable path of imagining otherwise for a more equitable and healthy future. However, more research is needed into the nuances of this lifestyle and to better indicate the likelihood of these radical political potentials being realised.

## Paper 2 - Imagining Otherwise: Presenting Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP) as a Case Study in Sustainability

Over the summer of 2020, the Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP) occupied a few blocks in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, Seattle. This space arose in response to the police violence at Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of George Floyd's death in June 2020. CHOP was a police-free zone based around the East Precinct of the Seattle Police Department, where some lived and many protested. This space, and the people involved, were labelled 'terrorists' by President Trump. I argue that CHOP is among one of the best examples of 'imagining otherwise' for a more sustainable future due to the practices and methods of relationality it foregrounded. My fieldwork shows that CHOP centered meeting community needs, health and healing for BIPOC, and anti-racist education. It was common to see free food distributed and people contributing to the community gardens. However, my discourse analysis indicates that CHOP was rarely presented in this way in the media; instead, the focus was on the violence erupting around CHOP's borders. I compare CHOP to another more permanent sustainability landmark located only blocks away, The Bullitt Center. When this building appears in the media, it is always praised for its sustainability through the use of biophilic design. This paper presents CHOP as a case study in sustainability and interrogates why it is not usually presented as such, through comparative discourse analyses of CHOP and the Bullitt Center, placed in context through primary fieldwork. In doing so, I argue for new ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies of sustainability.

## Introduction

The sustainability movement has become more robust since the UN released the Brundtland report, *'Our Common Future'*, in 1987 and now has an undisputed level respect and legitimacy on both global and local scales. Since the year 2000, over 5000 books have been published with either 'sustainable' or 'sustainability' in the title and over 150 million search results appear for the search term 'sustainable' (Caradonna, 2018: 9). As a concept, 'sustainability' has achieved broad acceptance due to its flexibility; many stakeholders can project their worldview into a specific definition. However, this can also create a lack of clarity around what sustainability is (Sze et al, 2018: 6). Therefore, it is important to question what gets captured by this term and what is missed. In pursuing 'sustainability' as a political goal at a variety of scales, what futures are we enabling? Are these futures that collectively serve our communities? The papers in this series take up these questions, each drawing on a current case study of an instance where groups of people have participated in alternative ways of doing and being. I critically examine these empirical examples to determine whether they *can* and/or *should* be considered examples of sustainability, and work to unearth the possible political potentials of engaging in these practices as we work towards a sustainable future.

In the first paper, I explore the practice of living in Small Mobile Living Structures (SMLS) to assess their suitability as a sustainable housing option. This is an ongoing practice which is often conflated with sustainability in popular discourse and by members of the tiny movements. I question the ways in which SMLS meet the parameters of sustainability and the ways in which they may also be considered unsustainable. In the second paper, I outline the practices which took place during the Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP) in June 2020, and question why they were not labelled as sustainable. Sustainability was not the primary goal of the protest space, however, many of the practices that took place there are present within sustainability literature. This makes naming this site a case study in sustainability a logical intervention. However, when we view the space as a whole, new possibilities emerge for defining sustainability, particularly in anti-racist, decolonial and anti-capitalist forms. I argue that it is important work to acknowledge the potential for sustainable futurity within the case study of the Capitol Hill Organized Protest because it

changes the scope of possibilities for those undertaking sustainability activism going forward.

Both papers take up the task of critiquing normative, neoliberal understandings of sustainability, following scholars such as Moore (2016), Tulloch and Neilson (2014), Sneddon et al (2006) and Banerjee (2003). Within the context of SMLS, critiquing neoliberalism is considered a key aspect of meaning-making within tiny communities (Kroon, 2019). Therefore, understanding the role of neoliberalism and anti-capitalism is necessary to analyse the social practice of living in a SMLS. In the case of CHOP, going beyond neoliberal understandings of sustainability is necessary to make the space readable as a case study. Presenting a version of sustainability which is critical of neoliberalism, particularly in the context of these case studies, creates space for new ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies of sustainability. These ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies could build on the radical ecological traditions from the 1960s and 1970s (Tulloch and Neilson, 2014), but also need to go further to ensure they do not reproduce other hegemonic power relations, such as white supremacy. Following Kaijser and Kronsell (2014), I argue that any new theories and definitions of sustainability need to be intersectional. They suggest that research on intersectional environmentalism must ask questions such as “[w]hich social categories, if any, are represented in the empirical material?” (Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014: 429-430). The papers in this series respond to Kaijser and Kronsell’s call by providing empirical examples of sustainability and asking what makes these examples of sustainability and who is able to be involved.

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# The Social Practice of Living in Small Mobile Living Structures: A Case Study in the USA

## Abstract

This paper will explore the practice of living in a Small Mobile Living Structure to assess their suitability as a sustainable housing option which incorporates both social and environmental well-being. Using a social practice theory framework and interviews with 8 households and one manufacturer, I outline the practice of living in a tiny house, converted van or RV, which I combine under the category 'Small Mobile Living Structure' (SMLS). Analysing key features of the tiny movements such as reduced consumerism; their place and spatiality; mobility; and community allows me to draw conclusions about the range of radical political potentials which could be realized through SMLS. Ultimately, SMLS provide one viable path of imagining otherwise for a more equitable and healthy future. However, more research is needed into the nuances of this lifestyle and to better indicate the likelihood of these radical political potentials being realised.

Key Words: tiny living; sustainability; Small Mobile Living Structures; anti-capitalist politics

## **Introduction**

Neoliberalism defines our time; it is the dominant political economic paradigm which stands for free-market economics and little political interference (McChesney, 1998). Economically, this system has allowed unprecedented wealth accumulation for those in power. Politically, it removes the presence of a welfare state which was employed under Keynesian economics. Combined this system has caused "a massive increase in social and economic inequality", "a disastrous global environment" and "an unstable global economy" (McChesney, 1998: 8). The neoliberal state is increasingly globally hegemonic. However, some people have formed communities in opposition. They inhabit tiny homes on wheels, converted vans and RVs. These 'Small Mobile Living Structure(s)', (*SMLS*), attract people who do not want to accumulate debt and who desire increased freedom. Using direct political action, these individuals join a community which combats climate change and neoliberal capitalism (Kroon, 2019: 1-2). This paper will explore the practice of living in a SMLS to assess their suitability as a sustainable housing option which incorporates both social and environmental well-being and operates outside of this harmful neoliberal paradigm.

With the popularisation of the terms ‘Anthropocene’ and ‘Capitalocene’, there is an acceptance that humans have the power to alter the world at a global scale through their actions (Moore, 2016). The move to the term ‘Capitalocene’ suggests that it is the exploitative practices of neoliberal capitalism and the logic of mass consumption which have caused the biggest environmental destruction. An expanding population exacerbates natural resource degradation, as more people undertake consumptive, capitalist practices. Continuous consumption is a result of pressure to ‘keep up’ your lifestyle compared to those in your network; accumulation of the ‘next’ and ‘best’ thing is the predominant measure of success for many people (Southerton, 2003). This is exacerbated as high consumption societies tend to be the core states of neoliberalism, where policies favour practices of accumulation. Therefore, high consumption societies have the most potential to change both their practices, and the system from the inside. That is why this paper focuses on people who had the agency to choose to live in a SMLS, rather than in a traditional, stationary home. By creating the label ‘Small Mobile Living Structure’, I am formalising this as a distinct practice; it does not incorporate everyone who lives in a tiny house, converted van or other form of small and mobile house. It is a practice sustained by people with the agency and capital to choose to live alternatively in this way, when they reasonably had other options.

Currently there are only 36 affordable and available renter homes for every 100 low-income families in need in the USA (Aurand et al, 2020). Affordable housing is particularly necessary in metropolitan centres which see the fastest rising housing costs and are the sites of the best jobs (Bloom, 2017). In reducing square footage, the price of a house also decreases, both outright and in terms of utilities and maintenance, making SMLS a bastion of affordable housing for many planners and policy makers (Carlin, 2014; Ford and Gomez-Lainier, 2017; Hutchinson, 2017; Shearer and Burton, 2018). The addition of their heralded ‘sustainability’ has pushed these structures to the front of public imaginations in rethinking homes. ‘Green’ developments or those made under the broad rhetoric of ‘sustainable development’ often focus more on environmental gains and economic growth, while ignoring social well-being (Immergluck and Balan, 2018: 546). These ‘sustainability fixes’ “[selectively incorporate] environmental goals, determined by the balance of pressures for

and against environmental policy” (While et al, 2004: 552). In other words, they co-opt the term sustainability to drum up support for maintaining the neoliberal status quo.

Haraway has an alternative suggestion: the Anthropocene should be renamed the ‘Chthulucene’, after the spider species ‘*Pimosa cthulhu*’ (Haraway, 2016: 31). Unlike the term ‘Capitalocene’ which speaks to the systems of power and inequality which have caused current social and environmental harm, ‘Chthulucene’ looks to the future and the ‘tentacular thinking’ that *should* define this time. The ‘Capitalocene’ critiques neoliberalism. The ‘Chthulucene’ details a sustainable future, where we need to think with and for other beings. I think both terms have merit in understanding this epoch; it is important to be critical of the systems which foster inequality and mass environmental destruction, but we also need to move past guilt and blame and begin the process of ‘[imagining otherwise]’ (Lawson and Elwood, 2018). Also, unlike the term ‘Anthropocene’, neither ‘Capitalocene’ or ‘Chthulucene’ draw on individualistic rhetorics which suggest that creating a better future is a task for individuals. In this paper, I will outline the neoliberal structures which led many of my participants to inhabit SMLS, and I will assess their potential as one formation of imagining otherwise for a more just and healthy future.

SMLS encompasses the Tiny House and Vanlife movements, and people who choose to live in their Recreational Vehicles (RVs) full time. There is relatively little literature on the Tiny House and Vanlife movements, and particularly of the realities of these lifestyles, within academic literature. Current conversations conceptualise the movements (Shearer and Burton, 2018) or focus on the Instagram/social media aspects that have accompanied the new wave of Tiny House and Vanlife residents (Gretzel and Hardy, 2019). Conversations about RV users have been in dialogue longer, but do not usually specify that a user must be a full-time inhabitant. No other papers to my knowledge link these similar lifestyles to discuss a new form of counter resistance to the neoliberal state: permanently choosing to live in a small, and mobile, residence to avoid a lifestyle of mass consumption. This lack of literature opens up an exciting array of possibilities for my data and future work. However, there are limitations: the gaps in the conversation are wide, and this paper cannot hope to speak across the whole space. It also reduces the amount of literature I can draw on from this field to better inform my conclusions.

Recreational Vehicles, (RV), have long been used to fulfil the ‘modern Western right’ of being highly mobile in a personal vehicle (Hardy et al, 2013: 49). Vanlife’-rs are a specific subset of RV-ers who represent a renewed interest in life on the road, leaving a 9-5 job behind, for a life of ‘hippy-tinged outdoorsiness’ (Davis, 2017). Similar to the Tiny House Movement, Vanlife has recently gained increased popularity due to a huge social media presence. My reading and research suggest RV-ers and Tiny House-rs want to get away from questions that are beginning to plague even the middle classes such as “*Would you rather have food or dental work? Pay for your mortgage or your electric bill?*” (Bruder, 2017: xi). People opting to move into a SMLS seek financial and physical freedom and share a desire to live alternatively.

There are many purported benefits to tiny housing which are understood to have pushed the interconnected movements to where they are today. These include affordability, increased mobility and freedom, personal design, an increased sense of community and a host of environmental benefits. Any one of these, or combination, may be presented as a reason for “going tiny” (Mutter, 2013). While reasons for making the transition are recognised to vary between individuals, a common theme of sustainability is generally understood to be present (Hutchinson, 2017). Although, within this research, economic and more general freedom were more often cited as the main reasons for adopting a tiny, mobile lifestyle.

Despite reducing costs overall, Tiny Houses require a large up-front sum which makes the movement inaccessible to many (Ford and Gomez-Lainier, 2017; Mutter, 2013). Equally, due to the infancy of the Tiny House and Vanlife movements, there is a lack of legal and financial infrastructure, making loans or mortgages difficult to attain and making it difficult for SMLS to occupy spaces in cities where police presence is typically higher (Kilman, 2016; Mutter, 2013; Shearer and Burton, 2018). Further complicating the issue, are the different laws between countries, states and even municipalities, and for different types of SMLS (Carlin, 2014; Mingoya, 2015; Shearer and Burton, 2018). Many people avoid the transition to SMLS out of fear of these laws. While SMLS (especially the Tiny House and Vanlife contingents) remain illegal, financing options are undeveloped, making it harder for

those without direct access to capital to participate (Shearer and Burton, 2018). This prevents SMLS from occupying space as a widespread sustainable housing option because it is not a widely accessible housing structure within current spaces of neoliberal capitalism.

Most people living in SMLS are relatively similar to myself: middle class, occupying a space of socio-economic privilege (which is often formalised through higher education) and with few responsibilities which tie them to a particular place. This reduced the power relations between the interviewees and myself, granted me access to the community and the privilege to represent them through this piece, even as a non-member. It is ironic that to best resist the neoliberal status quo, it is necessary to occupy a space of privilege within the same system. This privilege allows these people to accumulate capital as a successful neoliberal agent and then continue to navigate the legal and financial obstacles that currently inhibit the lifestyle. This is not altogether surprising, since this research took place in the USA - the bastion of neoliberal thought. Since the 1980s and Reagan's presidency, the USA has operated within this individual system where a free market is a guiding force to liberate all people from social and economic hardship, so long as they work hard enough (Harvey, 2005). Most of my participants grew up within this system and lived according to its rules until they transitioned to an alternative lifestyle.

This paper will first present the practice of living in a SMLS. Using Social Practice Theory (SPT), through its recent iterations developed by Shove and her colleagues, and the data I collected, I was able to gain an understanding of the practice as a whole: the elements (materials, competences and meanings) and who is participating. I will then analyse this practice for sustainability on a metric which promotes social and environmental well-being over capitalist accumulation. Finally, I will lay out directions for future research in this emerging field of small, mobile living structures.

### **Social Practice Theory**

There is not a single 'Social practice theory' (SPT), but multiple variations on similar themes developed by authors such as Bourdieu, de Certeau and Giddens, and more recently Reckwitz, Schatzki, and Shove and her colleagues (Shove and Pantzar, 2005: 44; Warde, 2005: 132). Social practice theory (SPT) is a heuristic device used to enrich our

understanding of social affairs (Nicolini, 2017). Analytically, SPT is useful because it can be applied at the level of society or the individual (Pred, 1981). Unlike other cultural theories, it provides a practical understanding of culture rather than overly theorising a situation (Reckwitz, 2002).

As opposed to behavioural theories, which place individuals as the primary agent of change who respond rationally, SPT sees practices as made up of three elements (competences, materials and meanings) which develop from historically and culturally specific contexts (Shove et al, 2012). Practices depend on the interconnection between these elements (Reckwitz, 2002; Pantazar and Shove, 2010). Individuals are treated as 'practitioners' who use resources and their skills and draw meanings from being involved in practices (Ropke, 2009). These practices create patterns of social relations which contribute to social systems.

SPT allows us to consider everyday labour and practices which are linked to the material world, giving a broad view of a spatial and temporal reality (Pred, 1981). The meanings allow us to assess if these people are intentionally committing to sustainability. If this is the case, they may recruit other practitioners with similar values, furthering the sustainability of the practice. This increases the possibilities that scaling the movement with sustainability as a core motive is possible.

A practice exists as a 'block' made up of these elements and their specific relationality (Reckwitz, 2002: 249-250). The practice cannot be reduced to any single element. Unique skills, technology or products, and the shared meanings within this lifestyle all need to be considered to understand the overall practice of living in a SMLS. This theory does not attempt to generalize the movement or suggest everyone performs 'living' in SMLS in the same way; rather, it attempts to find the commonalities within a group of people pursuing similar lifestyles.

## **Methods**

This paper used semi-structured elite interviewing with eight households, 4 tiny houses and 4 van lifers (split equally between converted vans and converted RVs), and one

manufacturer. I define elite semi-structured interviewing as: a strategic, consensual, interaction between a researcher and research participant that allows the researcher to gain knowledge by asking open-ended questions and letting the research participant guide both what is important and the knowledge that is shared, as informed by Dexter (1970). I formed my questions broadly around Shove's social practice theory framework and then allowed interviewees to guide the conversation. This approach allowed me to gain a large amount of information on subjects I would not have known to include in any pre-designed questions. Where necessary, information about my research participants has been excluded or altered to protect their privacy, in line with my initial research ethics form submitted to The University of Edinburgh. The number of interviews was informed by Shove et al's (2007) work on different social practices in her book *'The Design of Everyday Life'* which each draw on nine to fourteen interviews. As a student, I was limited by time and funding, therefore only nine interviews were possible within the time period.

Interviewees were recruited via online blogs, Tiny House events in Washington state, and Instagram. As the movements exist 'primarily online' (Hutchinson, 2017: 34), this was found to be the best way to find and approach potential participants. Participants were then given the option between a skype or face-to-face interview depending on their location and availability. For this research, skype interviews were equally appropriate as face-to-face interviews as many participants were geographically dispersed, a consequence of studying a 'mobile' group. Therefore, skype interviews increased the scope of this research and allowed a greater number/diversity of participants to be included. However, despite these precautions to promote diversity in my respondents, this work only reached singles or couples, who were able bodied and who, for the most part, have a level of capital to support their lifestyle, which I think to a large part reflects the majority of people engaging in the lifestyle. There are families who live in Tiny Houses and converted vans out of choice and for similar reasons that I identified in my participants: freedom and flexibility. However, the movement is largely sustained by couples and singles who can more simply transition their lifestyle and do not have family commitments to restrict their movement.

## The Practice of Living in a SMLS

I used my interview data to create the graphic below (Fig. 1), which details the practice, broken down by the core elements: materials, competences and meanings. I will outline further details in the proceeding section.



*Figure 1– A graphic summarising the different elements for the social practice of living in Small Mobile Living Structures.*

Materials are the tangible aspects of a practice. They can act as visual representations of belonging to a group of practitioners and provide the necessary basis for performing the practice (Alkemeyer and Bushmann, 2017). Most practices require material artefacts such as equipment or infrastructure. Therefore, this is the site of consumption within the practice. The growth in the movements which contribute to SMLS in the USA can be largely attributed to the available materials. The expansive road network, a focus on, and availability of personal vehicle use and relatively low cost of gas all contribute to the increasing numbers of people participating in a small, mobile lifestyle. The necessary materials are accessible for practitioners.

The tiny movements have a minimalist ethos; therefore, it could be assumed that there are few material components. However, this is not true. Many practitioners also install solar panels to reduce their dependence on the energy grid. The primary visible

material in this is the Tiny House, RV or converted van. However, there are also more specific components such as highly durable tyres, latches on cupboards, certain water pumps and compostable toilets which were found to be common across all types of SMLS. Composting toilets allow practitioners to be mobile and independent; they do not have to be connected to waste or water pipes. They are also small enough to fit into the space, and do not need to be connected to the grid. This material artefact permits the SMLS lifestyle some of its biggest benefits: mobility, freedom and flexibility. Due to the limited space in these small houses, multi-functional furniture is also common to maximise space and usage. Any of these materials and the small number of material artefacts can actually be a signifier to other practitioners of belonging in their community.

Materials are imbued with meaning. Materials act as a physical signifier of shared meanings. Slightly different meanings are present across the practice and type of SMLS. Those in converted vans or RVs, which are more mobile, expressed a greater desire to travel than those in Tiny Houses. However, this is not an absolute divide. One Tiny House participant frequently moves and confirms that wanting to travel more was one reason to convert to this lifestyle. There are several meanings that bind the practices of living and travelling in SMLS into a cohesive unit. Six households talked about the freedom and flexibility of having a moveable house. Many mentioned their improved financial health. This low-cost lifestyle, which necessitates fewer possessions and opens up possibilities for travelling more, has allowed many respondents to focus more on self-care than a traditional lifestyle may permit. A couple living in a Tiny House suggest that they are happier because they cannot start the day by comparing themselves to other people like they used to when they immediately accessed social media. Instead, they have to manage their grey water and waste because they are not tied to 'the grid'. Finally, respondents noted the social and environmental benefits from reduced consumerism. One Tiny House couple correlated owning less with reduced anxiety and an increased sense of safety, while a different Tiny Household suggested that they were more comfortable with their (reduced) environmental impact now that they had transitioned to a Tiny Home.

Practitioners need skills to navigate their new lifestyle. These skills allow them to use the material elements in a way that fits the meanings they subscribe to in living in a SMLS.

The most common competences were learning how to manage their onboard systems, such as water, energy and waste. One Vanlifer noted that they are now generally “much more cognisant of [their] waste”. While others had more practical advice, such as how to use the composting toilets which only deal with liquids or solids at one time, or how to fill a water catcher for minimum spillage. Households with more than one resident noted their reliance on soft skills such as communication and quick conflict resolution to make co-existing in a small space both possible and enjoyable, with one Tiny House couple noting: “In the first month of living in the tiny house with a significant other, we learned that compromise is important. Sometimes you want to be in the same space that your partner is in ... You have to take turns.”. Overall, there was an understanding that any person could develop these skills over time and thanks to the prevalence of tutorials and advice online.

The materials, meanings and competences can be analysed separately, but it is also important to consider how they connect to form a meaningful practice for people who partake in living in a SMLS. As you will see in the upcoming sections, where I outline the practice for a Tiny House couple, a Vanlife resident and a couple living in a converted RV, the practice of living in a SMLS looks different for each practitioner. However, there are also some commonalities across all of the elements of the practice which form the foundations of a common practice and the SMLS community.

### **Erin and Chris**

*Their tiny home sits on a piece of land surrounded by forest in Washington State. This alternative lifestyle is their way of giving the middle finger to the socio-economic systems which cause high rent, high parking prices in the city and the bigger is better mentality.*

We did it to kind of denounce the American lifestyle that you just need to have the biggest house you can to be successful. Our last place in Capitol Hill (Seattle) was \$2200 a month. What is that? Where I come from, that’s a mansion payment. That’s insane. So, it just made every bit of sense to us. This is plan C for so many people who are just so stuck. We’re stuck. Like we’re never going to own a home. The median house price in Seattle is what, like \$700,000?! So, this is the only home ownership we could ever have. This is a solution for so many people who can’t get over the rent trap.

Just cause we can move, doesn't mean we want to. I hope we don't have to move our Tiny House around. We're so happy. We *love* it out here. But we can. The fact that we just have the ability to move is huge. That's such a weird weight off our shoulders. If everything goes wrong, if the earthquake happens tomorrow, we're ok. We can move. It affords you a little bit of freedom. But, we really hope we never have to. We're in paradise. I could stay here for the next 20 years.

It keeps your existence in check. To sift through what's important and what's not possession wise. You end up with so much crap that you just don't need and it makes you feel like you're underwater at certain points. This allows you to live simply and think about what you're gonna buy before you buy it. You know, can I fit this into my existence? No. We're under 90 square feet of no. Oddly enough, even though we can afford more, you consider what you buy a little more carefully. Like why buy things anymore? On a dying planet. We do grey water. Everything is sustainable here. So, we had to learn to haul our grey water over to the little mulch pit that we made where it'll aerate and what not. Once you got used to what went where and how it works, it was really a snap to do it. Everything has been made so simple by a lot of modern technology. I mean a lot of the technology we use here has kind of been perfected by RVs. They've done a lot of the work for tiny houses. Rather than getting up and having breakfast and a coffee, you gotta get up and empty the pisser, fill the water, empty the grey water. You actually have to get up and start doing stuff or else your day is not going to be well by the middle of it. I like the discipline it provides. It's oddly enough a lot nicer to start your day taking care of your homestead and living entirely for yourself opposed to immediately being in this place where you're living for other people. You don't have this immediate ego trip of trying to compare your life to other peoples'. Same thing with the news. You start here. You start present. It's the best.

## **Mark**

*Mark turned towards Vanlife after working for 2 years in construction management, which gave him very little time off to appreciate the kinds of things he thought he'd be able to enjoy with his salary. He has been living in his van since August 2017 with his dog. He now pursues a career as a video producer, which is something he genuinely enjoys doing.*

I've gone both routes. I went to college and graduated in 2009. I took a job with an engineering firm right out of college. I basically went the route of construction management and went straight into that field. The work hours and the balance are not there. So, I really got burnt out after working for two years in oil and gas refineries and petrochemical facilities. Working 50 hours a week, working seven days a week and not really seeing a future in the company where I wasn't gonna continue to sacrifice a lot of lifestyle to get that salary that I always thought I wanted. I was making almost six figures straight out of college and I was not happy whatsoever. I was barely getting any time off and any time I did get off I thought 'man I've been working so hard, I want to blow some of this money, I want to have some fun'. But I ended up in this lifestyle where you work yourself to the bone then the couple of times you get off you feel like you have to live your whole life in those few moments. So, I just realised at 25 it's not about salary and title and it's more important for me to focus on lifestyle and how I want to balance what my job is with other things I value in life.

I've been in my van for thirteen months and I cook almost every meal here in the van. I have everything I need in terms of refrigeration, water, toilet. For showers I use a gym membership. If I was to put a shower in here, it would take away from something else, either the closet or kitchen. I didn't want to use that space in the van and under the van for water storage. I looked at all the things it would take to build a shower. Did you know, with a regular shower you waste ten to twenty gallons of water. It's pretty shocking. When you're managing that yourself, you realise. I just thought why go to all this trouble and take up all this space in my van when you're going to end up jumping in your shower and taking a military shower for like five seconds, you know superfast, because you don't want to waste water. So, for me, I thought I'd rather just go to Planet Fitness and take a shower anytime I want, heated. I don't have to worry about managing it or storing it.

The community is friggin' awesome. I'm a community person. I've done a bunch of these gatherings. I really like bringing people together. That's something, among my friends in the Vanlife community, all of us truly appreciate that we have each other. Through Instagram and social media, we connect with each other when we're on the road. We share

stories and you even link up with people much more than you'd see your friends at home. You find adventurous people that say 'let's go to Yellowstone for a few days'. No one says, 'I've got to be back at work on Monday'. Everybody says 'YES'. Having a community of passionate, outgoing people surrounding you is amazing. It's uplifting, it's drama free. Vanlife filters out all of the bullshit of people that don't want to take a risk and are afraid and want to follow the cultural norms. Those people don't get vans and don't do all of this cool shit, so you filter all of it out. I don't have people complaining about how life sucks every day.

This lifestyle is very alternative, so anything non-alternative trying to figure you out, such as a credit score or a bank, is tricky. Banks do a lot of these evaluations and take a bunch of data and score you based on whether or not you're a good fit. My score is considered a good score; however, I've had four mailing addresses in the past couple of years, I have no mortgage because I don't own a home, I have no debt so I'm not paying back any loans and that is all bad news for banks. They want to see a credit history, they want to see a banking history, a stable living in the home, working in the same company for a while. So, all the things I consider benefits of my life, other institutions when they look at the numbers tend to say you're not falling in line with a normal person who we'd usually go with. In that regard, I think it's a little bit harder to convince a bank to loan you money or to do something in the future. That's one thing, I would say, that comes with an alternative lifestyle.

I think debt is what is wrong with our country. Most of our country is in debt and housing is a big portion of that. We kind of all think that we have to buy a house with a white picket fence and live the American Dream and people don't realise these houses are way more than they can afford. They end up getting loans from banks that have way over leveraged themselves, so they're loaning out half a million in loans to people who make \$50,000 per year. If you lose your job, you're screwed. Just like we saw the market crashing in 2007, I think we're actually heading in the same direction and another depression in the States that I think will ripple across the world again. So, my attitude is stop thinking about life the way everyone tells you to, stop swimming in the salmon stream with everyone else. Look outside the realm of possibility and figure out a way to do this on your own. And

Vanlife could be an option. It could be something else. My message is 'you don't have to do what everyone tells you to do'. I was there. I went to the college I thought I needed to go to. I got the degree I thought I needed to get. I got the job I thought I needed to get. I hated everything about it. All these things that people say 'well that's just life' – it doesn't have to be your life! We all make choices.

### **Kathryn and Isaac**

*Isaac was laid off from work and Kathryn was working a high stress job when they discovered it would take them ten to fifteen more years on the workforce before they could comfortably retire. They sat down with their financial advisor and contemplated how to reduce this sentence. Having camped for fun in their motorhome at weekends, they began to question the necessity of their biggest expense: their house.*

It took over our lives, my job. We kind of grew tired of that. We talked to our financial planner. He said you're doing great, just another 10 or 15 years and you can retire. I said yeah, that's not gonna happen, I am not doing another ten or fifteen years of this. I'll die. We called him back and said, what if we didn't have all the expense of owning a house? He called us back and told us we could actually retire now if we didn't have a house. So that was a big realisation for us. What was stopping us from travelling more was our jobs. Our jobs were paying for our house. But if we wanted to travel more, maybe we didn't need a house. It was a circle. We thought maybe this circle doesn't need to work like this.

We adapted our trailer to be more energy efficient and also for us to be able to continue to be connected on the road. We would have signal boosters to get cell phone signal in remote areas. We put solar panels on the roof of our trailer, so we could be energy independent when we wanted to be. We didn't need to be plugged in. Also, we included water saving devices. Being connected internet wise and being energy independent was important for us. We don't have to work full time. Our expenses are about a third of what we spent in San Diego. Which is a huge difference. I work part time in my old industry as a consultant. Probably about ten or fifteen hours a week on average. It goes up and down. As long as I'm connected I can do that. We would never park up for very long if we didn't have a connection. We had to be more conscious of our energy consumption and utilities

generally. We had to be conscious of how much water you use for everything. Everything you buy has to have two purposes, not one, because it takes up a lot of space. Just be a little more resourceful I guess.

Also, it's unbelievably social. When you're travelling like this, you camp next to some people and you'll both probably be there for a few days. You say, 'how are you doing?', 'let's have drinks' and before you know it you're having dinner together, because you know you either have to do it that night or the next one. The other thing on the social aspect, it's amazing, especially when you travel for longer periods, you meet up with people again and again. People kind of do circuits. We've made lots of friends who we've met up with multiple times since we started travelling.

### **Sustainable?**

'Sustainable development' was first defined in the 1987 Brundtland Commission 'Our Common Future', as: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This is usually articulated on a triple bottom line analysis which tries to balance economic, social and environmental needs, in line with the UN after their 2005 world summit (Vehkamaki, 2005: 8; Thakshila Ruvini Herath & Prabodha Subhashini Rathnayake, 2019: 446). However, within a political-economic system which prioritises economic growth, social and environmental concerns often fail to reach the same level of concern in this balancing act (Sneddon et al, 2006). Indeed, the triple bottom line models assume that economic growth can be congruous with environmental protection and social wellbeing. This can subvert attention from capitalism's history and its continued role in maintaining power inequalities which allow small stakeholders to accumulate huge amounts of capital at the expense of other people and the environment (Moore, 2016: 2). This is the logic for considering our current epoch as the 'Capitalocene'. By treating the environment, society and the economy as equal stakeholders in any sustainability model, it is possible to ignore their entwined history of oppression, particularly the harms on the environment and certain members of society that other members of society who profit most from economic gain have enacted.

Since the SMLS community is founded on direct political action against climate change and neoliberal capitalism (Kroon, 2019: 1-2), it seems pertinent to decentre, although not totally discount, economic sustainability where this is equated to profit, wealth accumulation and growth. Therefore, I will assess sustainability primarily through the potential of the lifestyle to promote social and environmental wellbeing.

Within the existing literature, the movements are informed by a minimalist ethos, linked to Thoreau, confronting American consumerism and, by association, advocating environmental preservation (Carlin, 2014; Ford and Gomez-Lainier, 2017). People within the tiny movements own fewer possessions out of necessity, because they cannot fit as much in their home. This is exemplified by Erin and Chris: “It keeps your existence in check. To sift through what’s important and what’s not possession wise... even though we can afford more, you consider what you buy a little more carefully.” By rejecting large scale consumption and accumulation of products, these communities are rejecting capitalist logics; as Mark phrased it, they “stop swimming in the salmon stream with everyone else”. Therefore, the combined tiny movements incorporated in SMLS do operate outside the neoliberal status quo. This opens up space for these communities to also operate outside of the pervasive inequalities which are perpetuated by neoliberal capitalism and have led to increasing socio-economic inequality and global environmental destruction. However, since neoliberal economic logics are bound up in current liberal democracy, the logics of unequal access and inequality are normalised in Western political systems, which may make it difficult for those rejecting capitalism to fully reject all of its forces and mechanisms (Hall and Massey, 2010). Norms can be pervasive in producing certain understandings of the world (Spade and Willse, 2015) and it is a bigger task to dismantle a complete understanding of the world, built on enforced differences of race, gender, sexuality, ability and rhetorics of deservingness and undeservingness, than it is to begin to reject the need for mass consumption and using this as a measure of success.

SMLS provide direct resistance to the capitalist world system which promotes land rights as a weakened form of imperial territoriality. ‘White possessive logics’ have been used since the colonial era to rationalise white people taking land from people of colour who were not using it to its ‘full economic value’, and have created ‘common-sense’

meanings around who can own land, and more broadly who owns the nation (Moreton-Robinson, 2016: xii). By not being formally tied to a single piece of land, which is what retains value and accumulates wealth (Roy, 2017), SMLS could be utilised by those who wish to topple a system built on historical racial inequality. One household I interviewed stated: “[tiny living is] punk rock as hell. This is our ‘fuck you’ to all that, and financial institutions” (Cleasby, 2019: 6). This suggests that SMLS could be one form of ‘imagining otherwise’ for a more just future where wealth accumulation through property and land rights is less prevalent. However, this is a catch-22 because the people who are able to afford a SMLS have historically been successful neoliberal agents. They may not be positioned to deeply mobilise to reject formative land rights compared to communities who experience current housing insecurity as a direct result of these racist housing policies starting with dispossession, spanning through redlining and racial covenants, to gentrification. These housing types have radical political potential but may be financially inaccessible to the communities most in need.

So, if SMLS are not tied to a particular piece of land, *where do they exist?* What is the spatiality of living in a SMLS? There is evidence of SMLS setting up in RV parks, on pieces of land the owners have purchased, in spaces that private owners have set up as ‘Tiny’ communities. More research is needed to assess whether SMLS gather in these spaces due to current legal and financial limitations, or whether these spaces are at the heart of tiny living and their purported socio-economic and environmental benefits. Buying land does not subvert the neoliberal capitalist agenda to the same extent as those who are more mobile, however, those formally tied to a piece of land may have more physical security and still do not invest in the capitalist system as much as a traditional house as they do not have space for frequent, mass accumulation. Zack Giffin at the Global Tiny House Conference (April 2020) suggested that Tiny Houses could be put on existing properties to allow those who are overleveraging themselves with house payments to gain an additional source of income, without spending money on converting their house to create an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU). In this version of events, SMLS have the potential to create affordable and sustainable housing opportunities and can help densify neighbourhoods while keeping original homes and not destroying the historic character of the neighbourhood. Which of

the ranging potentials of SMLS comes to fruition will inherently depend on where they are placed.

Reading both Mark, and Kathryn and Isaac's comments on the lifestyle, it is easy to see how much practitioners appreciate their tiny communities. This was common across several of my interviews. Generally, my interviewees noted that the community was welcoming and there was easy (and free) access to tutorials which allowed people to be self-starters in building or living in a SMLS. In certain cities there are tool libraries, and the members of the community may be around to help you get started if you decide to build your own SMLS. Theoretically, members of the community see this lifestyle as one that anyone could join, with the right attitude. One Tiny House couple in their 20s noted: "I wouldn't say this lifestyle is geared towards certain people, but I would say the community attracts certain people. And it is a community. It is a good lifestyle for people our age. A lot of people still live at home with their parents because their money goes towards paying off their student loans. I think it is most geared towards people who ask 'why?': "Why do I have to buy a big house?", "Why do I have to live this way?". But at festivals, we have met sixty-year-old women who want to spend their retirement this way and people our age and everyone in between. It's not all one demographic". Theoretically, the lifestyle would accept anyone. However, I was not able to secure any interviews with tiny families or people who have different physical abilities. There is scope for further research which assesses barriers to larger families and people with disabilities. These demographics might be extremely vulnerable to economic hardship due to medical bills or childcare and the inability to find flexible jobs which allow them to manage any unexpected events; these demographics need access to affordable housing so it is important to consider how SMLS may, or may not, be appropriate to fill this need.

Inherent in living in a tiny home is environmental sustainability, as consumption is necessarily reduced compared to a more traditional, larger house. There is not enough space for residents to accumulate lots of things. Erin and Chris note: "This allows you to live simply and think about what you're gonna buy before you buy it. You know, can I fit this into my existence? No. We're under 90 square feet of no." Greenhouse gas emission from heating and electricity are reduced because of the smaller space (Carlin, 2014). However,

environmental sustainability varies widely among practitioners. Some, like Erin and Chris, constructed their tiny lifestyle with sustainability in mind and are proud to announce that “everything is sustainable here”, referring to their grey water, composting toilet and onboard systems. However, others, like Mark, choose to forgo some aspects of environmental sustainability to prioritise aspects of their life that they enjoy. Even though he acknowledges how much water is wasted in a regular shower, he is happy to still participate in regular hot showers when he is not managing the water or energy used. Also due to their weight, those that move frequently will have high transportation emissions. Many Tiny House interviewees categorised their homes as moveable but not mobile, whereas people in converted vans and RVs are more geared towards mobility. Tiny living can be broadly categorised as environmentally sustainable, however, planners would have to look at the nexus of relations which create conditions for environmental sustainability, or high emissions to preserve this feature of the tiny lifestyle.

However, there are other ways to assess environmental sustainability which are less material than what I outlined in the last paragraph. As Haraway (2016), in her conceptualisation of the ‘Chthulucene’, reminds us, relationality in and with nature is a key feature of working towards a more just future which encourages social and ecological wellbeing. We need to think with species. Simpson (2017: 75), an indigenous scholar, explains that “Colonialism and capitalism are based on extracting and assimilating”, where land, bodies, plants and animals are all seen as resources to be extracted, thereby removing the meaning behind relationships with these things. SMLS operate in an interesting space here. By rejecting capitalist relations, they simultaneously do work to remove extractivist logics, materially if not ideologically. Although I think many of my interviewees were cognizant of the ways capitalism is deeply harmful to the environment and promote environmental and anti-capitalist practices too. One RV couple suggested that: “Fifty percent of people in this lifestyle are very disrespectful. They use these campgrounds and don’t treat them well, leaving litter and things like that. The other half of us try and preserve the earth by collecting this litter”. The daily lives of many of my respondents put them in direct contact with nature more than most traditional homeowners. In fact, the same RV couple noted that their motivation for going tiny was to spend more time with each other and in nature. Erin and Chris exemplify this as they describe that they start the day by taking

care of their existence. This increased relationality in and with nature, and their anti-capitalist positioning makes SMLS an exciting avenue for imagining otherwise for one iteration of a more sustainable future.

Several respondents across the variations of SMLS in this paper reported improved mental health and social well-being with the transition to living tiny. A Vanlife couple said: “Pursuing Vanlife has shifted our focus to more self-care. I think we’ve both gotten into meditation, yoga, we read more. We look for that sort of comfort in a deeper place now than we used to, I think. Rather than in a house or a front yard or a record collection.”. Similarly, a Tiny House resident noted: “When we moved in, I had anxiety and depression. I don’t know exactly how but they have both improved by living tiny. I guess by owning and thinking about less stuff and if there is a noise in the night, we can sit up in bed and see that there is no one in our house.”. While practices such as yoga, meditation and reading are beneficial for mental health, and owning fewer possessions allows a sense of security, there are wider lifestyle changes that have given SMLS residents both time to practice well-being and that are enabled by owning fewer possessions. SMLS residents are not overleveraging themselves with housing payments which reduces stress and anxiety around making enough money to sustain their lifestyle, which is increasingly difficult for many people in the USA as home prices have risen more than four times as much as income since the 1960s ([Tekin, 2019](#)). Living in a SMLS gives residents the opportunity to change their relationship to work; they work to live rather than live to work. As Weeks’ (2011: 7) asserts, enforcing work and defending property rights are two entwined mechanisms to enforce the post-welfare, neoliberal state. I argue that practitioners improved mental health is derived from a more stable lifestyle which is less easily disrupted by volatilities in the neoliberal state.

However, as Mark notes, it is difficult for the neoliberal state, particularly financial institutions, to understand people in the tiny movements due to their relationship to both work and property rights. They do not have mortgages or loans and therefore often do not have a strong credit score, despite being debt free. Again, following Weeks’ (2011:8), work produces social and political subjects who are disciplined and governable. Working is a socially governed mechanism which transforms subjects of the state into independent individuals in the liberal imaginary. It is mediated through debt, particularly debt which

sustains property rights. Therefore, work is treated as an obligation of citizenship. By not conforming to the same structures of work and debt, SMLS inhabitants are less socially governable by the state, so the institutions of neoliberal capitalism have a hard time computing their realities. This can make it difficult for residents to reintegrate themselves into a capitalist system if they want to buy a more traditional house or get a loan in the future. It is difficult to keep a foot in the door as a capitalist being when you do not conform to one of its key mechanisms: property rights.

On the other hand, if tiny houses are formally incorporated into the housing market, they may undergo a process of 'routinisation' (Bush, 1978). This means that the movements may have to sacrifice some of their revolutionary potential and goals in order to achieve orderly economic and political development. Bush (1978: 203) suggests that this happens to most social movements. SMLS are not exempt. However, becoming routinised would destroy all of the anti-capitalist radical potential of this housing type, and may even destroy their capacity as an affordable housing type. As they become more popular and demand for tiny living increases, prices can surge in a neoliberal market. This will be particularly damaging for people who do not have the time, desire or ability to build their own SMLS. Once again, we reach a difficult juncture where we need this housing type to be acknowledged by the neoliberal state to reduce legal and financial barriers, without the movements becoming so incorporated that they experience routinisation and lose many of their social, environmental and anti-capitalist values.

### **Limitations**

This study has carved additional space for understanding tiny living as a practice and ideology in formalised academic circles. But there are several limitations. I only had data from nine households, which was enough to make preliminary findings about the movements when combined with other available sources. However, it is not sufficient to decisively conclude a handful of universal benefits of tiny living. I was not able to collect data from families or people with varying physical abilities which could have significant implications for alternative understandings of the practice. There also was limited literature to draw upon to robustly understand these movements as a practice. Much more research

is needed on these movements in order to fill the gap and make more informed conclusions about the possibilities for SMLS.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, my work suggests that SMLS provide one viable path of imagining otherwise for a more equitable and healthy future. It is a housing type which could fit in with existing structures, promote increased relationality within nature as Donna Haraway advocates, and provide affordable housing which would allow more people to live healthily and with dignity. They provide opportunities for improved mental health. There are fewer emissions from most tiny lifestyles compared to more traditional, larger homes, and it promotes reduced consumption and living outside of neoliberal logics.

However, there is a paradox between needing the housing type to be recognised, but not formalised into the market economy through routinisation. To be beneficial to most people who need access to affordable housing, legal and financial barriers (to open up legal spaces to park and provide financing options and reduce the upfront costs of purchasing a SMLS) need to be reduced; the neoliberal state has the power to do both. However the benefits of tiny living, such as improved mental health, freedom and flexibility are driven by an altered relationship to work and property rights which are not congruent with the neoliberal capitalist state.

Finally, more research is needed into the nuances of this lifestyle. Are SMLS suitable for everyone, e.g. families and differently abled people? Where do we make space for SMLS? Are most of the residents pursuing an environmentally beneficial lifestyle, or are they prioritising physical mobility? Do any of these households try to do both? How do they rationalise their high emissions? There is huge potential in feminist, black, indigenous and queer analyses of the tiny lifestyle which could be built on some of the foundations that I lay out in this paper. I believe that tiny living has radical political potential, but further analysis could better indicate how much potential and in what direction.

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# Imagining Otherwise: Presenting Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP) as a Case Study in Sustainability

## Abstract

Over the summer of 2020, the Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP) occupied a few blocks in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, Seattle. This space arose in response to the police violence at Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of George Floyd's death in June 2020. CHOP was a police-free zone based around the East Precinct of the Seattle Police Department, where some lived and many protested. This space, and the people involved, were labelled 'terrorists' by President Trump. I argue that CHOP is among one of the best examples of 'imagining otherwise' for a more sustainable future due to the practices and methods of relationality it foregrounded. My fieldwork shows that CHOP centered meeting community needs, health and healing for BIPOC, and anti-racist education. It was common to see free food distributed and people contributing to the community gardens. However, my discourse analysis indicates that CHOP was rarely presented in this way in the media; instead, the focus was on the violence erupting around CHOP's borders. I compare CHOP to another more permanent sustainability landmark located only blocks away, The Bullitt Center. When this building appears in the media, it is always praised for its sustainability through the use of biophilic design. This paper presents CHOP as a case study in sustainability and interrogates why it is not usually presented as such, through comparative discourse analyses of CHOP and the Bullitt Center, placed in context through primary fieldwork. In doing so, I argue for new ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies of sustainability.

## Introduction

For a month in the summer of 2020, the Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP) occupied a few blocks in Capitol Hill, Seattle. This space arose in response to the police violence at Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of George Floyd's death in June 2020. CHOP was often met with negative media coverage, particularly at the national level, with the space and the people involved being labelled 'terrorists' by then-President Donald Trump on Twitter. In fact, CHOP was a police-free zone based around the East Precinct of the Seattle Police Department, where some lived and many protested. While the space was being actively occupied, there were thriving community gardens, a No-Cop Co-op (which distributed food and supplies free-of-charge), and an anti-racist conversation café. There was also space for unhoused people to live free of the fear of being moved on by the police (Shik Kim Jr. and Oron, 2020). In other spatial contexts, these features may be recognized for their social and environmental sustainability (McClintock, 2018; Glenny, 2020; Aiken, 2017; Pol, 2002; Stibbe, 2011), however, this was rarely the case in the media coverage of

CHOP. On the other hand, only a few blocks away, on 15<sup>th</sup> and Madison, is The Bullitt Center, a six-story commercial office structure built to the rigorous sustainability standards of the Living Building Challenge (Leah, 2017). Since it was completed in 2013, this building has been touted as the ‘greenest commercial building in the world’ (Bullitt Center, n.d.). In comparison to CHOP, the Bullitt Center is mostly talked about in terms of its environmental sustainability.

‘Sustainability’, which I am using as synonymous with the linked term ‘sustainable development’, is a chaotic concept defined in many different ways depending on who is using it and the purpose they want it to serve (Lake and Hanson, 2000; Basiago, 1995; Vehkamaki, 2005). A chaotic concept “divides the indivisible and/ or lumps together the unrelated and the inessential, thereby ‘carving up’ the object of study with little or no regard for its structure and form” (Sayer, 1992: 138). In this paper I argue that *both* CHOP and the Bullitt Center conform to existing definitions of sustainability, and that the discourses which apply the term to one and not the other are trying to create divisions within the concept of sustainability where none should exist.

This paper argues that CHOP can and should be understood as a case study for sustainability. The Bullitt Center is primarily used as a comparison to critique normative uses of the term ‘sustainability’ which selectively incorporate examples which can be understood within neoliberal logics. I am not arguing that the Bullitt Center is unsustainable, only that this example conforms to a very specific type of sustainability which needs to be contextualised and critiqued in order to avoid presenting this kind of intervention as a silver bullet for sustainability. In the first section, I define sustainability and introduce my methods. In the second section, I present the case studies of the Bullitt Center and CHOP, drawing on my ethnographic field research, particularly in the case of CHOP. I use these case studies in conjunction with normative sustainability literature to argue for their sustainability, and I work with the concept of ‘utopia’ to present radical new possibilities for the sustainability field that are revealed by placing CHOP as a case study. In the third section, I outline dominant discourses presented about each site as they appeared in news articles. I end with a discussion about the discourses that appear in the media about both sites and outline the limitations and possibilities for sustainable futurity.

## **Defining Sustainability**

Scholars estimate that there are hundreds of definitions of sustainability, thousands of interpretations of these definitions and even more variations of applying the term in practice (Elliott, 2012: 16; Ramsey, 2015). The most commonly cited is from the Brundtland Report 'Our Common Future' (1987) where sustainable development is defined as: "meeting the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs". The Brundtland Commission presented sustainability as a three-dimensional concept incorporating economic, environmental and social considerations (Vehkamaki, 2005: 8). With this definition and the growing sustainability movement in the 1980s and 1990s, the notion of sustainability became increasingly popular, especially when conceptualised as a form of development (Caradonna, 2018: 10; Alhaddi, 2015).

In this paper, I will draw on definitions of sustainability which rely on the three dimensions outlined in the Brundtland Report: economic, social and environmental, since the broad Brundtland definition is already the foundation for many more specific definitions of sustainability and is considered an important temporal marker for the explosion of interest and work on sustainability (Sneddon et al, 2006: 255). I will not argue for one specific definition of sustainability over another since that work is not necessary to make my argument that both CHOP and the Bullitt Center can be read as sustainable within current definitions of sustainability. The disconnect that this paper seeks to address is that while it is rarely presented as such in the media, CHOP can, and should, be analysed as a case study for sustainability.

Many scholars have critiqued normative understandings of sustainability (Ehrenfeld, 2019; Banerjee, 2003; Sneddon et al, 2006). Sneddon et al (2006) document numerous problems, including the lack of attention to power dynamics within the global system and the inherent contradictions between calls for both economic development and ecological preservation within a neoliberal, capitalist global economy. Sneddon et al (2006) also argue that a lack of political will and ineffective institutions ensure that sustainable development is difficult to achieve. Further, scholars acknowledge that ecological scientists are concerned with the anthropocentric nature of sustainable development which fails to overcome false

human-nature dichotomies (Sneddon et al, 2006: 260). Similarly, Banerjee (2003) critiques 'sustainable development' discourses, arguing that they have failed to address current environmental problems, failed to deliver 'freedom' to many people and have even perpetuated imperialism with certain nations that dictate economic and political development policy in the name of sustainability. Indeed, since the publication of the Brundtland Commission's '*Our Common Future*' global economic inequalities have dramatically increased (Sneddon et al, 2006: 254). Sneddon et al (2006: 254) note that the environmental governance goals which were developed at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, following the Brundtland report, still remain in an "institutional incubator" and have not been realized almost 30 years later. This can be understood within the timeline of neoliberal capitalism becoming fully operational as the means of organizing the global system and with the associated rise of "liberal environmentalism" which placed environmentalism as something for states to address through financial logics (Bernstein, 2002, in Sneddon et al, 2006: 258). Ehrenfeld (2019: 106) argues that we must sustain something and in the case of normative definitions, following the Brundtland definition, this *something* becomes growth.

Another critique of sustainability as a term is that due to the variety of definitions, sustainability has become almost a "blanket critique of a particular mode of existence" (Caradonna, 2018: 14). This mode of existence is sustainability's opposite – unsustainability. However, there is no one cohesive narrative in academia or among activists that details the parameters of unsustainability or what we can do to make change. Several scholars characterise this particular mode of existence as bound up in, and made possible by, capitalism (Moore, 2016; Pulido and De Lara, 2018). So, within some definitions of sustainability, the term represents a critique of capitalism, or at least the lifestyles that are made possible within a global capitalist system. The social movements of the 1970s cemented the critique of "capitalism's expansionist logic" as they fought for ecological sustainability (Tulloch and Neilson, 2014: 27). Overconsumption has been the focus of these critiques (Grant, 2010: 10). However, when the focus is on other critiques which are more specifically levied against capitalism, it becomes apparent that there are bigger harms caused by capitalism which are missed when we preoccupy ourselves with only the issue of overconsumption. For example, Melamed (2015: 77) argues that capital can only function when it is accumulating, and it only accumulates by "producing and moving through

relations of severe inequality among human groups”. Capital accumulation requires dispossession, loss, disposability and the unequal differentiation of human value. Melamed (2015: 77) further argues that racism “enshrines the inequalities capitalism requires”. In order to present sustainability as a critique of capitalism, it is important to think broadly, and to incorporate work already done by anti-capitalist scholars.

Given that sustainability can be read as a critique of capitalism, it is peculiar that a lot of the dominant discourses of sustainability uphold the status quo. However, the genealogy of these dominant discourses becomes apparent when we consider the way neoliberalism has co-opted the term. There has been a neoliberalization of sustainability which articulates sustainability within the neoliberal agenda; this has subsumed the radical ecological discourse within sustainability prominent in the 1970s (Tulloch and Neilson, 2014). Tulloch and Neilson (2014: 33) argue that the Brundtland report was the first instance of sustainability becoming neoliberalized because it made economic growth equally important as social wellbeing and ecological integrity and framed the three as mutually interdependent. Neoliberalization of sustainability means that any changes made in the name of sustainability must be made within the confines of capitalism and market logics. Returning to Melamed (2015), within the neoliberal version of sustainability there is no space to address the dispossession, loss and unequal differentiation of human value that are central to capitalism. These things must be addressed in order to address the social justice aspect of sustainability, which is sometimes presented as ‘equity’ (Basiago, 1995). This could well explain why the Bullitt Center is often presented as sustainable, it is readable within neoliberal logics, whereas CHOP is usually not cited for its sustainability.

In particular, I argue that CHOP is one of the best examples of “[imagining otherwise]” (Lawson and Elwood, 2018) for a more sustainable future. This argument is grounded in Munoz’s (2009: 97) idea of queer utopia as a “horizon of possibility”, an ideal which can and should mobilize us to work towards a world which is not quite here. Munoz (2009: 99, 111), through an example of the punk scene, demonstrates that utopia is a spatial and temporal possibility where people can rehearse alternative versions of themselves. In the case of the punk scene, it exists as a space of possibility for queerness to come into being, in the case of CHOP, it offers a glimpse of one possible performance of sustainable

futurity. While this reality, and the identities developed in conjunction with it, are fleeting, they offer a glimpse of what could be. Individually, many of the components of CHOP can be understood as sustainable within current definitions of the term, but when combined, we also get a view of a world which could be where new relationalities based on equity, justice and accountability are centred. Many of these qualities are notable features of sustainability within numerous definitions (Basiago, 1995; McLaren, 2002; Sze et al, 2018).

## **Methods**

Both case studies I engage with are geographically linked through their sites in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, Seattle. They were chosen based on my personal observations and ruminations as I walked home from CHOP almost every day in June 2020 and passed the Bullitt Center. During the earliest walks, I kept thinking about the discrepancies between what the media were saying about CHOP and my own experience in the area. As a scholar interested in sustainability and the context of CHOP as a protest against police brutality with goals of creating better futures, I was particularly interested in notions of sustainable futurity as they applied to both sites. I was already aware of the Bullitt Center and knew of its reputation as a sustainability landmark, having taken a guided tour of the space in 2018. From these initial ruminations, I undertook a more systematic observation of the space, spending several hours at CHOP most days between June 12 and July 1, 2020. As a white person entering a space which was primarily a site for Black Lives and protesting police brutality, I was careful to respond to the asks of white bodies in the space. This took the form of prioritizing People of Color who were using the space, stepping back when necessary, and in other instances stepping up to do work that would be more difficult or dangerous for non-white bodies. Consequently, I used photographs to capture the space and as a reminder of things that I identified as relevant in my ethnographic work, which I did not have time to fully engage with in the moment given the seriousness of the various “asks.”. These photos formed the basis of my CHOP Virtual Tour, which I created for the *Association of American Geographers* Conference in April, 2021 (Cleasby et al, 2021) and I draw upon some of them in this paper.

Within CHOP, there were many spaces that protesters were asked not to photograph, such as the BIPOC healing space and several of the No-Cop Co-op tables. There

were also strong expectations to avoid taking photos of people as far as possible and to avoid capturing any identifying information which could result in legal action against protesters. It was imperative to follow these requests in order to protect the people within CHOP. As a result, my photographs alone are not representative enough of the space to be used for any visual methodologies. Herbert (2000: 550) argues that ethnography is a particularly useful method to discover the processes and meanings that make up sociospatial life. Without people, my pictures are unable to fully capture the processes, practices and acts of meaning-making which contribute to an ethnography of CHOP. They are only effective as a memory aid for the time I spent at the site, which allowed for a richer ethnographic account of the space.

I use this ethnographic account to inform my discourse analysis of CHOP. My experience in each space grounded my reading of the news articles about each site and allowed me to identify areas where the dominant discourses in these news articles did not align with my first-hand experience. I only draw on my experience in each space to identify and highlight gaps in the narrative being told. I incorporate my first-hand experience of each site as an additional mode of discourse where the people making the space have more power to shape the narrative than the news outlets. Multimodal discourse analysis starts from the belief that language is just one of many resources people can draw on to make meaning (Kress, 2012: 38). Discourse alone is not enough to fully understand the meanings of social situations and practices (Kress, 2012: 37). A multimodal approach goes beyond a single mode of discourse, in the case of this research the text within the news articles, in order to avoid over emphasising the importance of the meanings made in one form by one group of people. Thus I did not code the discourses within my ethnography. Instead, I use it as a comparison to the news articles I am analysing for each site in order to more readily identify the discourses present and to question the work of those discourses within the space of the media outlets.

In order to find out how the terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable' are being differently deployed across media sources between the sites of The Bullitt Center and the Capitol Hill Organized Protest, I undertook a comparative, multimodal discourse analysis of both sites. Critical discourse analysis is a useful method because it both describes and

evaluates existing realities to see how they line up with values (Fairclough, 2012: 9). Within the context of this work, I looked at how each source described the site and evaluated the value laden narrative they present about each space in order to compare how the concept of sustainability is incorporated or ignored. I chose these two places because they are geographically linked through their sites in Capitol Hill, and because both exhibit different features of sustainability, however, they are very differently portrayed within news articles about each site. Normative culture allows dominant discourse to present the Bullitt Center as a 'good' example of sustainability, while CHOP is not considered as an example at all.

I compared the discourses of sustainability, or lack thereof, in news articles written about each site. These articles were chosen by searching 'about the Capitol Hill Organized Protest' and filtering the date to June 8, 2020 to July 31, 2020 to ensure that the articles selected reflected discourses about CHOP in and around the time it was operational. I then selected the first seven articles with titles that indicated a description of CHOP. I engaged with significantly more sources about each site during the course of my data collection. However, I determined seven sources for each site was appropriate for analysis because clusters of similar themes emerged in each set of articles. Choosing articles from June and July, 2020 allowed me to focus on the practices that took place within the zone. Within the context of CHOP, I made sure to engage with sources that discussed the practices I identified as key features of the space within the context of its sustainability: specifically community gardening, mutual aid and education. These articles were each several pages long and were predominantly descriptive, to ensure there was enough material for analysis. For the Bullitt Center, I also searched 'about the Bullitt Center, Seattle' (to avoid confusion with articles referring to Bullitt county, Kentucky) and selected the top seven articles with titles indicating a description of the site, again to focus on the key features of the space. Again, similar information and themes emerged, allowing me to determine that this was an appropriate number of sources. However, for these sources I did not limit the dates of publication as the Bullitt Center has had a constant presence since it was finished in 2013. As an unobtrusive method, undertaking a discourse analysis of texts allows me to reduce the burden, impacts and harms on the communities who spent time in CHOP and the Bullitt Center. There will always be limitations for the accuracy and validity of this type of method as it is impossible for one researcher to engage with all discourse on a given subject.

However, this limitation does not undermine the value of my research because even a limited engagement with the discourses surrounding each site is enough to highlight key trends about how each site is understood from the perspective of dominant discourses within articles written by large mass media sources.

For both sets of news article sources, I coded the manifest content (what is written) to see how many times the terms 'sustainability' or 'sustainable' are used in reference to each site. I then compared the number of instances of these terms for each site, to prove that there is a disconnect in the way the concept of sustainability is deployed, often depending on the broader context of the site in question. I further coded each source for its latent content (underlying meanings) to analyse the key discourses which *do* emerge in relation to each site. I use these data to consider why the terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable' are only used in particular instances when, by definition, the terms are very broad and could be applied to many other case studies. The latent content allowed me to consider each media source as a whole and understand the overall message the piece is trying to convey.

### **Welcome to Capitol Hill**

I invite you to join me in Capitol Hill, a central neighbourhood in Seattle, located east of downtown so that you can learn about each site. As a resident of Capitol Hill, both sites hold meaning for me as I grapple with the personal and political considerations of and for being more sustainable. But as I argue here, these sites can also be used to look at broader questions around the ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies of sustainability. However, in writing about these sites, I must acknowledge that I am representing places which I had no hand in creating and that their place in Capitol Hill rests on unceded Duwamish territory. I am a White, British international student which leads to complicated relationalities to imperialism, my community and privilege which all frame my understanding of sustainability, its goals and my role in achieving them. Within this context, I do not claim to possess or represent a full understanding of either place, nor Capitol Hill. I only put forward each case study within the context of sustainability, the discourses already published about each site and my ethnographic field work, particularly in the case of CHOP.

### *The Bullitt Center*

The Bullitt Center, which was completed in 2013, is an example of regenerative architecture, something designed to both support its own needs and enhance the surrounding environment (Fahmy et al, 2019). It is a high-performance urban office with a minimal environmental footprint. Fahmy et al show that through biophilic design, it consumes 83 percent less energy than a similar building type and it offsets all of its emissions. These design features include solar panels, an efficient ground source heat pump, solar shading, passive cooling and the collection of rainwater. It is still considered the “greenest commercial space in the world” almost eight years after being completed (Bullitt Center, n.d.).

The Bullitt Center was designed to meet the rigorous standards of the Living Building Challenge (Peters, 2017: 28). This challenge encourages “revolutionary transformation” in building practices so that “together we can continue to forge ahead on our path towards restoration and a Living Future” (International Living Future Institute, 2012: 6). There are seven areas for design consideration, known as “Petals”: site, water, energy, health/happiness, materials, equity and beauty (International Living Future Institute, 2012: 7). Each of these Petals have up to twenty more specific imperatives which must be incorporated, unless they are not applicable or compromise other design needs. Next, I want to highlight *some* of the ways the Bullitt Center meets these design imperatives which I will continue to draw on throughout this comparative case study. I will not interrogate each imperative, as this level of granularity is not necessary in order to consider why the Bullitt Center is regularly understood as a case study in sustainability, and CHOP is not.

The site on 15<sup>th</sup> and Madison previously hosted a one-story bar and paved parking lot. The Bullitt Center team considered the site well in advance and worked with the city to ensure as many materials as possible from the demolition of the existing structure were recycled and salvaged (International Living Future Institute, n.d.). Many of the materials used were locally produced and procured after a strong vetting process to reduce the presence of harmful materials. The site is centrally located, and the neighborhood has well established public transport links. According to the International Living Future Institute, to further reduce the use of cars, the designers also included a bike garage and showers into

the design. Within the building, occupant health was prioritized. The central placement of the staircase with views of the Olympic mountains was designed to encourage exercise. The abundance of natural light at each workstation is intended to give occupants a strong connection to their environment. Finally, the choice of finishes with low, or no, levels of volatile organic compounds (VOC) led to incredibly healthy air quality for occupants. To comply with the equity standards, the Bullitt Center's goal is to promote green building through community outreach, education and public tours (Fahmy et al, 2019).

Other large considerations were water, energy and waste. Before the Bullitt Center, there was no precedent for onsite composting and greywater treatment in Washington state (International Living Future Institute, n.d.). The team for this project worked to develop rainwater collection and onsite waste treatment systems with the state, county and city to meet the Living Building Challenge standards for net zero water and contributing to local ecosystems (International Living Future Institute, n.d.; Peters, 2017: 28). The composting toilet system creates a usable fertilizer which is processed off-site at a secondary facility and then used to restore a native wetland elsewhere in Washington state (International Living Future Institute, n.d.). The greywater from the building is filtered and then treated to city and state approved levels in the wetland constructed on the second story. The photovoltaic cells, alongside the efficient heating and cooling systems, mean that the building produces more energy than it uses, feeding the excess energy back to the city (Peters, 2017: 28). The Bullitt Center also prompted the City of Seattle to create the Living Building Pilot Program to encourage further performance based, green design (International Living Future Institute, n.d.).

### *CHOP*

Unlike the Bullitt Center, the Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP) was not a space heavily designed or planned in advance. CHOP was also not a permanent feature of the neighborhood; it only existed in June 2020, erupting as a response to police violence as protestors marched in support of Black Lives Matter (Nagesh, 2020). Following George Floyd's murder in police custody on May 25, 2020, protests erupted around the world. In Seattle, protestors took to the streets and were met with police using tear gas, flashbangs and pepper spray (Savransky, 2020). On June 1, as Seattle protestors tried to march east

from Downtown to Capitol Hill, they found their way blocked by barricades around Seattle Police Department's (SPD) East Precinct at 12th and Pine. This led to a tense seven-day stand-off with protesters and, on June 8, the police vacated the East Precinct in an attempt to de-escalate the violence.

Protesters repurposed the barriers, which previously protected the East Precinct, to form the borders of an autonomous, police-free zone, pedestrianizing a six-block area and ensuring the police could not easily return. This space quickly became known as the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone but was renamed the Capitol Hill Organized Protest on or around June 13th, in order to reflect the goals of the space and draw attention to the protesters' demands. These demands included: defunding the Seattle Police Department by fifty percent; funding Seattle's Black communities and freeing all protesters (see Figure 1). Many refused to leave CHOP until these demands were met (Savransky, 2020). However, on July 1<sup>st</sup>, Mayor Durkan issued an executive order for protesters to leave and police moved back into the area (Carlton and Wernau, 2020). In this section, I will provide an account of several different elements of CHOP, from the community gardens to the mechanisms for education, which I will draw upon throughout this piece as I show the logical imperative for naming CHOP a case study in sustainability. This account is influenced by my first-hand experience in CHOP, where I spent several hours most days between June 12th and July 1st, 2020.



*Figure 1: A photo depicting some of the demands of the CHOP protestors, taken on June 25, 2020 by Ellie Cleasby.*

The East Precinct site was significant for meaning-making within both the space itself and the context of Black Lives Matter. When the initial proposition for East Precinct was proposed in 1977 for a location in the Central District, it met with resistance particularly from the Black community and later the gay community (Seattle Public Library, 2020). The Central District is a historically Black neighbourhood within the city of Seattle. So, instead a new location on 12<sup>th</sup> and Pine, in Capitol Hill was suggested which ultimately became the current site of the East Precinct. A speaker at CHOP on June 13<sup>th</sup> argued that the new location in Capitol Hill was chosen to be as close to the Central District as possible to still allow the neighborhood, and the Black community who largely resided there, to be policed. The precinct became a central focus of CHOP where activists reiterated their demands to defund the police and fund communities with their voices, their bodies and their artwork. A huge tarp sign reading “THIS SPACE IS NOW PROPERTY OF THE SEATTLE PEOPLE” was hung

from the East Precinct and captured the overall message that our communities and institutions should serve all the people in the area.

Some consider CHOP “a radical experiment in self-government” (Scruggs, 2020). The practices that emerged as the police vacated the area have been described as “a diverse flowering of self-activity” and a “variegated patchwork of mutual aid projects, support, care and action that reflected the full diversity of the movement’s politics and people” (Reagan, 2020). Sarah Tornai, whose regular presence made them a leader within the space, had a vision for CHOP which centred around the question of “how we can more compassionately organize our city”, they imagined “education initiatives, programs to address homelessness and building a community movement where unarmed police are designed to de-escalate” (Bush, 2020). All initiatives within CHOP were grassroots and community-led due to the origins of the space as a site of resistance which emerged, without planning, in response to the state-sanctioned violence of the preceding protests. While CHOP has been criticised by some for its lack of strong leadership (e.g. by the Black Rose Anarchist Federation, 2020), it created a space where many people separately organized key features of the site such as a community garden, No Cop Co-ops for mutual aid and opportunities to learn through the Conversation Café and Pay the Fee Library. I describe each of these initiatives in the remainder of this section.

The community gardens started with Marcus Henderson planting some basil. Henderson is practised at using “guerrilla gardening” to consider how land is currently being used and how it can best serve people (Weinberger, 2020). Guerilla gardening is a political practice in public space where people “unlawfully transform the environment through the planting of fauna” (Adams and Hardman, 2013: 1103-1104). From the initial basil plant the garden grew, volunteers were able to participate and bring compost, plants, seeds and get their hands in the dirt. There were signs which told people visiting the space that the garden is for Black and Indigenous folks because historically Black and Indigenous people of color have been excluded from farming and access to the land (see Figure 2). The purpose of the garden was to give space and resources to communities who are overwhelmingly excluded from farming and gardening (Gilbert and Williams, 2020; Goldstein, 2018). Within the context of Capitol Hill and the nearby Central District this is a particularly acute problem

which can be understood more broadly as who has access to the space or neighbourhood rather than just access to practices of gardening or farming. Seattle is the third most quickly gentrifying city in the USA which has changed the demographics of many neighborhoods (Fogel, 2020). In particular Capitol Hill and the Central District, as house prices and rents have increased, less wealthy people have been forced to move to cheaper areas of the city (Fogel, 2020). Creating a space enabling Black and Indigenous people of colour to access land from which they have been historically dispossessed, particularly in the context of farming or gardening, radically recenters relationalities among people and between people and their environments. These relationalities have not been possible within a settler colonial, capitalist world system.



Figure 2: A photo of the CHOP community garden taken on June 23, 2020 by Ellie Cleasby.

At community meetings for a new Cal Anderson Park Project since CHOP ended, Henderson continues to argue that the community gardens need to remain to combat the gentrification in Capitol Hill and to provide a healthy space to interact with unhoused

people, especially those suffering from mental illness (Keimig, 2020). The practice of community gardening allowed new relationalities amongst diverse members of the community and those community members to the land in their neighbourhood. Understanding the community garden within the framework of land as pedagogy, as put forward by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, provides a useful lens to fully grasp the benefits of this new socio-spatial phenomena. The opportunity to learn from the land allows people to observe and learn skills and then use their own creativity to form new solutions to problems they actually encounter (Simpson, 2014). In Simpson's case, she details land as pedagogy within the context of her Indigenous community's teachings, or Nishnaabeg intelligence. People in CHOP were not actively practicing or pursuing Nishnaabeg intelligence. However, key elements of her argument for learning from the land can be extended to an interpretation of CHOP. Within these experiences each individual can, and as Simpson argues *must*, learn skills and knowledge to ensure their own safety, but they also have the opportunity to learn that their survival and prosperity is dependent on relationships of "reciprocity, humility, honesty and respect with all elements of creation" (Simpson, 2014: 9-10). Land as pedagogy allows people to learn the needs of their community and the possibilities of the beings and spaces which make up that community. In the context of CHOP, the garden allowed residents of Capitol Hill to engage with protesters, unhoused people and those who were displaced from the land that the neighbourhood rests on. There was an opportunity for everyone to learn who they were sharing their neighborhood with and to have ownership over a small piece of it.

The second initiative were the No-Cop Co-ops that existed throughout the space while it was operational, giving out food free of charge to anyone who wanted or needed it (Guarente, 2020). This was one of the most radical, yet also relatively simple, examples of a way to take care of the community. By making it easy for people to meet their basic needs, there was more scope to focus on wellbeing, education and making change. Such "survival work", to use Dean Spade's term, when practiced in the name of transformative change is called "mutual aid" (Spade, 2020). It produces spaces where people grow new solidarities by creating systems of "care and generosity that address harm and foster well-being" (Spade, 2020: XX). People practising mutual aid recognise that conditions in which we live are

unjust; in response, practices of mutual aid must directly address peoples' survival needs and provide material benefits in real time (Spade, 2020).

Third, the Anti-Racist Conversation Café (see Figure 3) was another site of education and growth. Accompanied by a 'Pay the Fee Library', there were opportunities for activists and locals to engage with curated works written by BIPOC scholars, BIPOC community members and anarchists. Education in CHOP was voluntary and informal. Activists were given the means to learn on their own through the library, and the space to reflect on, and discuss what they learned in the conversation cafe. The benefits of education are well documented within development discourse (Psacharopoulos and Woodhall, 1985; Alexander and Mohanty, 2012 [1997]). Often these benefits are articulated with economic growth in mind. For example, a document published by the World Bank in 1985 begins with a statement which acknowledges that investment in education is key to the development process; it can contribute to economic development and "raise the incomes of the poor just as much as investment in physical capital" (Psacharopoulos and Woodhall, 1985: 3). However, education has also been held up as a mechanism for decolonisation by feminist scholars, such as Alexander and Mohanty (2012 [1997]: xiii) who argue that "education [is] a key strategy of decolonization... education [is] always linked to the political practice of service to community and to nation". In the case of CHOP, this education was part of a broader political practice to undo the settler colonial, racist state, in favor of the community the protesters wanted to see realized. The benefits of education in CHOP were not in service of economic development, but were more aligned with Alexander and Mohanty's (2012 [1997]) call for decolonisation through education.

The Pay the Fee Library gave people a chance to understand the genealogy of the struggle that was taking place in CHOP, the conversation café gave them a chance to place their current experiences, to understand the struggle that led to CHOP's creation and analyse pre-CHOP realities against their experience in CHOP. A coalitional space, such as the Conversation Café, is not easy. It has to bridge differences in world views and experiences. These spaces of coalition politics and education are necessary because they are the "only way you can figure you can stay alive" (Reagon, 1998: 242). They are "a means of understanding and moving the world" (Matsuda, 1996: 61). The difficulties were reflected in

the 'Conversation Café Circle Agreements' which promoted centring people of colour, listening compassionately and sharing the space equitably, amongst other things (see Figure 3).

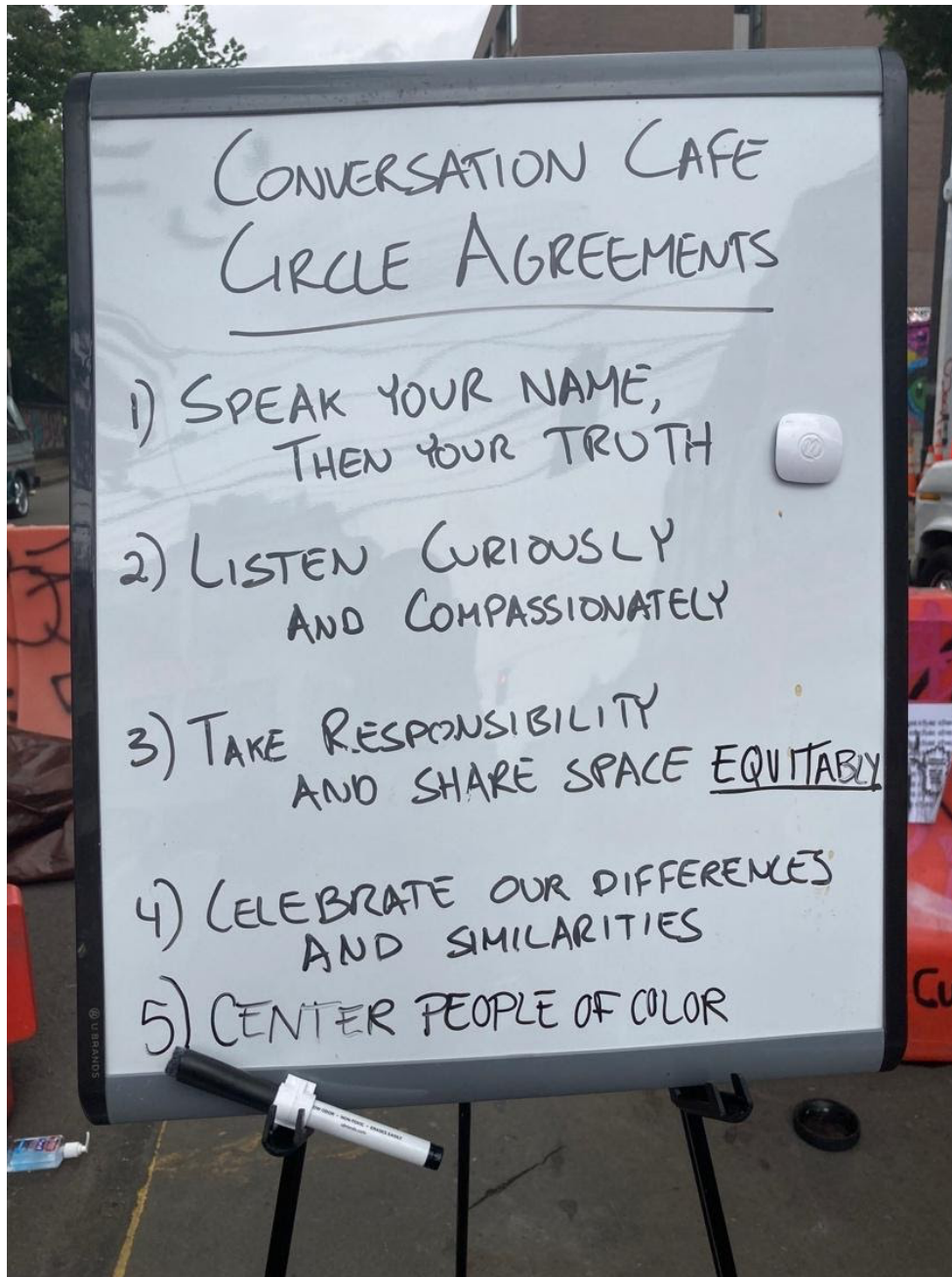


Figure 3: A photo depicting the Circle Agreements, or rules of engagement, for the Anti-Racist Conversation Café in CHOP. Photo posted to Twitter by Julio Rosas on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2020.

Tweet is accessible here:

[https://twitter.com/Julio\\_Rosas11/status/1271903872164835328](https://twitter.com/Julio_Rosas11/status/1271903872164835328).

## **Sustainability: The Bullitt Center and CHOP**

In this section I will outline the sustainability literature which places both the Bullitt Center and the Capitol Hill Organized Protest as case studies for sustainability. It is widely acknowledged that the Bullitt Center fits into existing normative understandings of sustainability. The Living Building Challenge can be understood within the Brundtland triple bottom line framework (Brundtland, 1987; Elkington, 1997), which balances social, economic and environmental factors into any definition of sustainability. This is 'systems-thinking' which focuses on "the ways in which human societies have conceptualised, dealt with, and responded to the relationship between the natural environment, human wellbeing, and economic systems" (Caradonna, 2018: 11). Additionally, key features of the Bullitt Center are widely found within sustainability literature such as renewable energy (Rosen, 2009; Hernandez et al, 2019), equity (Basiago, 1995; Sze et al, 2018) and ecosystem restoration (Aronson and Alexander, 2013; Blignaut et al, 2014). Key features of the Capitol Hill Organized Protest can also be found within normative sustainability literature, for example community gardens (McClintock, 2018; Glenny, 2020); creative forms of education (Stibbe, 2011) and community support (Pol, 2002; Aiken, 2017). Since key features of both sites can be found within dominant discourses of sustainability, it is important to look at the broader contexts of both sustainability discourses and of each site, in order to discover patterns which may account for the differences in application of the term sustainability to each site.

It is not difficult to place the Bullitt Center within understandings of sustainability. The project was developed based on particular theories of sustainability, such as the triple bottom line. Crucially the triple bottom line framework (Elkington, 1997) is genealogically placed in the same lineage of sustainable development thought as the Brundtland Report (Brundtland, 1987); it attempts to articulate sustainability within market logics, the 'bottom line' (Peredo, 2018: 376). Systems for waste and water management and renewable energy production are considered environmentally sustainable. Community education and outreach allow the project to claim to be socially sustainable for the community and not just those who enjoy the health benefits of working in the building. Finally, the building is individually understood as an economic success as it is cheap to run and produces an excess of solar energy which it sells back to the city (Peters, 2017: 28). Crucially, this kind of

sustainability project is attractive to the capitalist state because it promotes the development of more buildings with similar features. Capitalism can be operational because it relies on a perpetual search for surplus value and space to extract this value from (Harvey, 2013: 5). In demonstrating the capacities of the innovative technologies which make up the Bullitt Center, new markets for sustainability emerge as a site for profit. Within this framing we can see that the initiatives which serve to address the social sustainability bottom line such as community outreach and education, actually act in service of creating this new market, rather than directly serving the wider Seattle community.

As I have already suggested, key features of CHOP do also appear in normative sustainability literature. For example, McClintock (2018) acknowledges the role of urban farming in food justice, rights to the city and in sustainability. Charlotte Glenn (2020) articulates this link between urban agriculture and sustainability within the context of Seattle's P-Patches (regulated community gardens across the city). This proves that the precedent for urban gardens in the name of sustainability exists; it is even prevalent within the city of Seattle. Consequently, it becomes logical to ask why the community gardens in CHOP were rarely praised for their sustainability? CHOP also featured sites for education, mainly through the Conversation Café and the 'Pay the Fee' Library. Scholars such as Arran Stibbe (2011) are vocal in advocating for new forms of education which equip students with the skills they need to thrive in climate changed worlds. Education has also been upheld as an integral component in the neoliberalization of sustainability (Tulloch and Neilson, 2014: 28). Tulloch and Neilson (2014: 28) argue that education is used to circulate and enforce new forms of citizenship which promote "sustainable citizens". While the education spaces at CHOP focussed more on anti-racism and decolonisation, they were still involved in creative education to prepare those involved for future worlds, as Stibbe advocates for, and in doing so, they were attempting to build new understandings of citizenship through less harmful relationalities among communities. Finally, notions of community support in achieving sustainability are well-documented in sustainability literature (Pol, 2002; Aiken, 2017). Within CHOP this primarily took the form of mutual aid; people took initiative to meet the needs of everyone in the community. McCarthy (2006) has argued that introducing communities into environmental politics and decision making can subvert neoliberalism and gives the community greater control over local resources and

environments, allowing them to benefit more from them. Although he is referring specifically to the case of community forestry, these broad arguments illuminate the sustainability within CHOP: a local community of diverse activists working on bottom-up notions of justice and ownership within their local space. While these practices may individually be linked to normative literature of sustainability, they do not allow us to read CHOP broadly as sustainable.

In the case of CHOP, other definitions of sustainability may need to be deployed to make the space readable as sustainable because, when combined, the various interventions within CHOP do not fit neatly into a triple bottom line analysis. One example is Bookchin's (1978-79) social ecology, which was part of the pre-neoliberal, more radical ecological discourses formed in the 1960s and 1970s (Tulloch and Neilson, 2014: 29-31). Tulloch and Neilson (2014: 30) argue that despite many articulations of these traditions, they can all be categorised within a discourse of survivalism, which is significant for opening a space to critique capitalist economic growth. These scholars argued for the incongruity between economic growth and social and environmental sustainability. Social ecology focussed on power relations; Bookchin (1978-79) argued that domination between humans and between humans and nature are the root of environmental problems and called for a utopian vision premised on balanced relations between humans, and with nature (Bookchin, 1978-79; Tulloch and Neilson, 2014: 30-31). According to Tulloch and Neilson (2014: 30-31), social ecology was particularly concerned with the social harms caused by capitalism and was bound up with social movement discourses of the time such as human rights, poverty, the development of the 'Third World' and women's rights. Critically, Bookchin's framing is anti-capitalist because under capitalism both humans and nature become commodified. A social ecology read of sustainability makes CHOP more recognisable as an example because it necessitates a focus on relationality, pays attention to the effects of power, is tied to other social movements and is fundamentally anti-capitalist.

### **'Imagining Otherwise': Why Utopia?**

I argue that CHOP is one of the best examples of 'imagining otherwise' for a more sustainable future and I frame it as a utopian space. The notion of utopia is important because this framing makes visible the work people are doing to practice other ways of

being and doing for a more sustainable future, while also enacting these sustainable futurities in the present (Munoz, 2009). However, the scale of utopia necessitates an understanding of the space as a whole because it is founded on relationalities between people and the places where they are enacting practices of sustainable futurity.

Breaking CHOP down to its practices uncovers the links between these practices and normative definitions of sustainability, as demonstrated above. This shows that naming the site as a case study in sustainability is a logical intervention. However, scaling up and analysing CHOP as a whole, made up of all of these practices and mediated through diverse members of an engaged community, uncovers the various socio-spatial relations to power which are at work in the space. These power relationalities informed discourses which surrounded CHOP as they mediate the normative ontologies of both CHOP and sustainability.

As discussed earlier in this piece, normative sustainability literature does not adequately uptake issues of power dynamics, consequently many of the definitions of sustainability or sustainable development do not critically engage with the subjects' relationality to imperialism, racism or the global capitalist system (Sneddon et al, 2006; Banerjee, 2003). Presenting CHOP as a utopian case study for sustainability creates an opportunity to reiterate these critiques and overcome them, working towards new ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies of sustainability. A lack of attention to systems of power which reproduce harms and inequalities allow sustainability to exist within a neoliberal frame. Tulloch and Neilson (2014) argue that this began with the UN tasking themselves with defining sustainability and placing economic profit on an equal footing as environmental protection and social justice, which was understood as eradicating poverty. The authors critique the Brundtland Commission's work for depoliticising the task of sustainability and making it appear as if the task of sustainable development is not about any particular form of economy (Tulloch and Neilson, 2014: 33). To do this the Brundtland Commission had to ignore the local contexts and the specific histories of power relations to colonialism and the global capitalist economy which will inform how sustainability work is enacted on the ground. Consequently, ideologies of economic and social development become neutralised within normative, neoliberalized understandings of sustainability

(Tulloch and Neilson, 2014: 33). This particular framing of a politically and ideologically neutral project of sustainability cannot be applied to CHOP because the main message of the site as an anti-racist and decolonial space for protesting police brutality is both value laden for the people involved and heavily politically motivated. But, viewing CHOP as a whole as a case study for sustainability allows new ways of being and doing sustainability which are politicised and outside of neoliberal market logics.

Utopia can be taken up for sustainability but that is not its only use. More broadly, it is about futurity and creating places and people that allow mutual flourishing. In *Rebel Cities*, David Harvey (2013: 4) argues that “the kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be” and what kind of relationalities we want to have with other people and nature. So, to be sustainable people, we need to be engaged in acts of world-making that create spaces that allow us these possibilities, which will be founded on particular relationships with people and nature. We need to create the socio-spatial possibilities for living sustainably. Other theories of utopia could be employed to demonstrate the socio-spatial ruptures which give us glimpses of alternative world making. One example is Lefebvre’s heterotopia which suggests that there are constantly alternative articulations of meaning-making in the city which may appear as people go about their daily lives rather than from conscious planned action (Harvey, 2013: xvii). However, I favour Munoz’s (2009: 6) formation because it speaks to ‘vast lifeworld[s]’ of relationalities and potentialities within these quotidian acts of alternative world making. Crucially, for Munoz (2009: 99) the possibility and hope imbued in notions of utopia stand in opposition to capitalism’s dominant narrative that ‘there is no alternative’. Munoz’s utopia unearths the possibilities that CHOP created, both for futures without police brutality (which was the intention of the space) and for sustainability outside of neoliberalized and institutionalized formats.

**“Inside Seattle's autonomous zone where residents are trying to 'enact change' 'in a new way'” (Shapiro and Gutman, 2020)**

While I frame CHOP as a utopia for sustainable futurity, other discourses about the site present a variety of different narratives. Others, such as Shapiro and Gutman, questioned the effectiveness of CHOP as a means to enact change. Globally people engaged

with discourses of CHOP in June 2020 as part of a larger conversation about police brutality. While other autonomous zones in response to police violence emerged following Black Lives Matter protests in summer 2020, none lasted as long as CHOP (Nagesh, 2020). Consequently, CHOP was a site of heightened attention. With most people stuck at home quarantining in response to COVID-19, few people outside of Seattle could visit the space. A small number of news sources with writers on the ground became the definers of discourses of CHOP. The information in these articles was then taken up and used to inform further articles and narratives about the space.

I studied these discourses to assess what narratives of CHOP were put forward around the time it was operational. Then I compared the discourses to those of the Bullitt Center. I used a google search, switching to the 'news' tab in order to find these articles and selected the first seven descriptive articles for each site for data analysis. Since many people, both in the US and globally, search for their news on the internet, this seemed like an appropriate means of data collection. For CHOP, I looked at news articles written by Shapiro and Gutman (2020); Scigliano (2020); Read (2020); Weinberger (2020); Reeve and Guff (2020); Nagesh (2020), and Burns (2020). For the Bullitt Center, I used articles written by jseattle (2020); Luderman Miller (2019); Luthman (2020); Golden (2018); Connelly (2018); Margolies (2020) and Bhatt (2015) for my data analysis.

I found that the terms 'sustainable' and 'sustainability' were only mentioned in relation to CHOP in one of my selected articles. The term 'sustainable' or 'sustainability' only needed to appear once in the article in relation to the site to be counted as associating CHOP with sustainability. Some may attribute this to the fact that CHOP did not have the explicit goal of sustainability. It was, of course, primarily a site for Black Lives Matter protests calling for defunding the police. However, the one instance where the term sustainability was used to describe the site, specifically the community garden, shows that there is a precedent for thinking through other readings of the space above and beyond understanding CHOP only as a site of protesting the police.

Further, all of the practices within CHOP which I have named in this paper were mentioned in most or all of the articles about the site. The community garden and free

resources (food, medical care or both) were mentioned in all of the articles; education and communication appeared in six of the seven articles. I have already demonstrated that these practices can be understood as sustainable within normative framings of the term, so it is interesting to note that sustainability was not part of the manifest or latent content in six of the seven articles used in this analysis, even as a side remark.

Other themes that emerged in the material content of the pieces on CHOP were: violence, which appeared in six of the articles; the need for change, which appeared in five of the seven articles; community which appeared in four articles; and the mellow nature of the space, which appeared in three articles. The most present theme 'violence' stands in clear opposition to the following three themes 'change', 'community' and 'mellow'. The presence of all of the themes can be better understood when we consider the format of each article as a whole. Turning to the latent content of the articles, the common theme across most of the articles is the depiction of both positive and negative experiences in CHOP. While a balanced view may appear helpful for readers trying to understand an objective 'truth' about CHOP, this formatting had the effect of making CHOP seem like an untenable solution to the need for change, despite having many good attributes and good intentions. This suggests that within the context of the neoliberal, settler colonial state, CHOP is not a project they want to continue in the future. However, 'imagining otherwise' uncovers futures beyond current hegemonic power structures, making it well placed to frame CHOP as a case study for sustainable futurity.

The article that stands apart here is "*In Seattle's CHAZ, a community garden takes root*", which shares an interview with Marcus Henderson who began the CHOP community garden. This article is the only one that does not detail any of the violence or negative aspects of CHOP. It is also the only time that the term 'sustainability' is used in relation to CHOP from the articles I analysed. In presenting a focussed view on one person who was involved in one practice, a different discourse of CHOP emerges where we can see the potential of this space to influence future activism in the name of sustainability and change making more broadly.

In contrast, the terms 'sustainable' and 'sustainability' are used to describe the Bullitt Center in five of the seven articles about it, with the associated term 'green' appearing in all seven articles about the Bullitt Center. The only other frequently occurring theme which appeared in material or latent content or both was success/innovation. Using success and innovation as a framing for the space, serves to position the Bullitt Center within neoliberal logics of progress, which privileges top-down notions of success over autonomous grassroots efforts to enact meaningful worlds. The small number of frequently occurring themes also suggests that there is one cohesive and accepted narrative about the Bullitt Center within dominant discourse. This could signal a lack of meaningful critique of the strengths and weaknesses of the Bullitt Center, particularly in its role as a sustainability landmark. Overall, this means that everyone who engages with the Bullitt Center discursively or materially, already 'knows' of its sustainability.

Before moving into further analysis of these findings, it is worthwhile to draw attention to the different sets of discourses presented about each site. CHOP was characterised as both 'violent' on the one hand, and 'mellow', 'a site for change' and as having a 'strong community' on the other hand. The site was only considered as sustainable in one instance. Indeed, based on the definition of sustainability that emphasizes longevity, the latent discourse of the articles would indicate that CHOP was not sustainable at all. Yet, many of the practices which can be understood as sustainable were described in most or all of the articles about CHOP. However, the Bullitt Center has a cohesive narrative with strong discourses of 'sustainability' and 'innovation' or 'success'. We can conclude that the term sustainability is differently applied to each site.

### **Understanding Divergent Discourses**

Divergent discourses in the articles about CHOP which present the space as both having positive goals, but negative consequences – namely violence – subtly tell the reader that an autonomous zone is not a successful way to enact change, let alone change in the name of sustainability. This is likely due to the fact that CHOP existed outside of the logics and power of the state and the market, so it had to be upheld as an impossibility to ensure the stable continuity of both powers. Earlier notions of sustainability such as Bookchin's

(1978-79) social ecology, make a space, such as CHOP (which does not reproduce neoliberal economic relations or imperial state relations) readable as sustainable. While Bookchin's framing did pay attention to power, capitalism and other social movements at the time, I want to think generously with this theory when applying it to CHOP as Bookchin does not take up an explicitly anti-racist or decolonial approach that is needed for this case study. I would also argue that an anti-racist and decolonial discourse of sustainability is needed more broadly. Tulloch and Neilson's (2014: 33) critique of the depoliticization of sustainability by the UN, highlights how it resulted in a false narrative of the project of sustainability being politically and ideologically neutral. Banerjee (2003: 144) makes similar arguments, particularly noting that policies of sustainable development continue to be informed by colonial thought. Presenting CHOP as a case study in sustainability necessitates an understanding of sustainability which is politically charged, decolonial and anti-racist. Acknowledging that the work that the activists did in June 2020 can be considered sustainable even if that work went against the neoliberal state, creates opportunities for alternative ways of knowing, being and doing in the name of working towards sustainable futurity.

I am not suggesting that the violence presented in these articles did not occur, nor am I suggesting that the violence should be considered sustainable. During my time spent in CHOP, admittedly only during daylight hours, I only saw one instance of violence which protesters successfully and quickly deescalated. I also never saw any guns, although I was notified of their presence. I am arguing that the violence is strategically deployed in these articles to reinscribe hegemonic power structures. In fact, the violence needs to be placed within the context of the spatial-temporal realities. One news article I analysed did begin to do this work. In Reeve and Guff's *'They envisioned a world without police. Inside Seattle's CHOP zone, protesters struggled to make it real'*, there is an acknowledgement that protesters felt they had been left to deal with society's most difficult problems, especially high instances of homelessness and severe mental health issues which has developed over time in part due to a lack of services from the city to ameliorate these problems (Reeve and Guff, 2020). Alongside other protesters who were interviewed about CHOP, I argue that the pre-conditions for violence in and around CHOP were stoked by the lack of caring

infrastructure from the neoliberal state, rather than being characteristic of CHOP itself (Nagesh, 2020).

On the other hand, discourses around the Bullitt Center demonstrate that this is a successful or desirable way to enact sustainability. The overwhelming appearance of innovation and success in these articles fits into discourses of development and progress. As I have already detailed, Tulloch and Neilson (2014) are critical of the neoliberalization of discourses of sustainability, which articulates solutions within capitalism and the markets, which is exactly what the Bullitt Center achieves. This finding strengthens my earlier claims that the Bullitt Center serves to create new markets for sustainable architecture. Banerjee (2003: 148) is critical of this sort of “designer environmentalism” which posits that the world’s environmental problems can be solved by buying ‘green’ products. Following Banerjee (2003) and Tulloch and Neilson (2014), I argue for caution in accepting the benefits of sustainability projects that are articulated within market logics. Sustainability needs to incorporate the critical work of decolonial scholars and those pursuing anti-racist work, particularly in the context of racial capitalism. This is not to dispute the environmental benefits of the Bullitt Center. The building does have many material environmental benefits when it is compared to other buildings, and is worthy of praise. However, the Bullitt Center allows the status quo to be maintained. It does not disrupt hegemonic power relations which an abundance of scholars have presented as key components of unsustainability (Tulloch and Neilson, 2014; Banerjee, 2003; Moore, 2016; Pulido and De Lara, 2018).

Comparing the discourses of sustainability for each site proves that the term is differently applied to the two examples, based on how well the intervention fits into hegemonic power structures. My interest is the politics of naming in sustainability. This research demonstrates that we need to be critical in our engagement with case studies of sustainability and be vigilant for other world making possibilities which may not be labelled as sustainable but deliver on promises of freedom, equality and new relationalities with nature which are not overly extractive. There is scope to argue that there is a disconnect in discourses of sustainability when CHOP is not presented as sustainable. However, this is explained by an understanding that dominant discourses primarily only draw on neoliberalized understandings of sustainability. So, when we employ CHOP as a whole as a

case study in sustainability, a rupture is created which creates possibilities for new definitions of the concept.

You may wonder, if CHOP can already be understood within normative sustainability discourses, why is it important to present the space as a form of utopia for imagining otherwise for sustainability? Harvey (2013: xvi) argues that “political struggles are animated by visions as much as by practicalities”. In presenting CHOP, as more than a sum of its individual practices, as a case study in sustainability, opportunities arise for imagining alternative ontologies (ways of being), epistemologies (ways of knowing) and axiologies (ways of doing) for sustainability. CHOP becomes part of the vision for sustainability, effectively expanding current imaginations for sustainable futurity. A new overarching, politicized understanding of sustainability becomes both necessary and possible. It is important to characterise this work as sustainability, rather than developing a new concept or using a different term because, despite all of the critiques of the term, it has been taken up widely within large institutions such as the UN, governments and by activists. One possible method of achieving a sustainable futurity that speaks to our needs is to further co-opt the term sustainability and redefine it in decolonial and anti-racist forms, while continuing to call for sustainability work from our governments and institutions.

## **Conclusion**

The goals of this project are fourfold. Primarily, I want to show that CHOP is a great case study for those pursuing sustainability work and activism, particularly within the context of North America. As a whole space, CHOP employs a version of sustainability which is not imagined when employing normative definitions due to the anti-racist, decolonial and anti-capitalist goals of the space. However, if we work from the individual practices, naming sustainability becomes a logical imperative. Additionally, at the scale of CHOP itself, we can understand it as a utopian space for sustainability, especially when we employ older, more radical ecological definitions of sustainability, such as Bookchin’s (1978-79) social ecology.

More broadly, I have aimed to contribute to creating new ontologies of sustainability, new epistemologies for sustainability and new axiologies of sustainability work. These are three

separate, yet deeply interconnected tasks. Thinking beyond the neoliberal paradigm, which is pervasive in normative framings of sustainability and thinking with more radical anti-capitalist traditions, allows us to go beyond dominant discourses which present sustainability as something to be articulated within economic terms. I hope to displace ontological assumptions that there is no other alternative than capitalism when it comes to achieving sustainability. We need to acknowledge the role of colonialism, racism and capitalism in shaping realities for people globally and create epistemologies for sustainability that directly engage with decolonisation and anti-racism. Finally, we need to think of new ways of doing sustainability work which realises these ontologies and epistemologies, rather than reproducing dominant discourses which maintain hegemonic power relations and do not work to change the systems which are causing harm and social and environmental unsustainability in the first place.

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