

COMMUNITIES OF THE DISPOSSESSED OR TECHNOCRATIC HOUSING  
NONPROFITS? POLITICAL LOGICS ANIMATING COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS  
ACROSS THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the

SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In the Graduate College

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2025

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA  
GRADUATE COLLEGE

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## Acknowledgements

I am profoundly grateful for my fellow graduate students, who provided the intellectual community and deep engagement that made grad school feel not just worth it, but exciting. In particular, I want to thank those who took the time to share their writing, insights, and provocations in my various lab and writing groups: Kitty Burgess, Tara Prendergast, Charlie Pollard, Peter Ore, Nina Conrad, John Powell, and Sione Pili Lister. Likewise, this project would not have been possible without Sydney Beckman and the other members of the Academic Fissures group. Learning to be in right relations as researchers, relatives, and community members is a lifelong practice and I am eternally grateful that I got to spend some of that journey with you. Finally, thank you to Madie Armstrong, who introduced me to abolitionist thought the first week of grad school and then gave me the script to ask out my now-fiancée a year later; I'm excited to keep learning from you for years to come.

My non-grad community was also essential. Victoria Luizzi's spectacular cooking, sense of humor, and love nourished me through-out these incredibly challenging years. Thanks also to Audrey Moss, Sav Fuqua, Michael Spaeth, Eleanor Dickinson, and Caroline Brewer for your friendship. You made me laugh, kept me sane, and provided some much-needed perspective. I am also deeply thankful for my parents—Sarah Peasley, Tim Sisk, and Andrea Sisk—for their unconditional support and encouragement. Thank you for taking me to the library and answering my endless questions when I was a kid; you fed my curiosity and gave me the tools to thrive. Thanks also to the Tucson Alliance for Housing Justice and the Barrio Neighborhood Coalition, for welcoming me to Tucson and the endless work of striving for justice.

This dissertation would not have been possible without my committee. Thank you to Dr. Joe Galaskiewicz, my advisor, for your unflagging support, guidance, and advocacy. This project went through many evolutions and setbacks and your encouragement and availability made it feel possible to make it work. Likewise, thanks to Dr. Corey Abramson and Dr. Brian Mayer for providing me with the insights and methodological tools I look forward to using for decades to come. Your contributions made this project better in every way.

There were many other faculty members who contributed to my growth as a scholar and member of the academic community. Thanks to Dr. Reid Gómez and Dr. Jenny Carlson for classes and meetings that challenged me and expanded my horizons. You gifted me with the tools to formulate and pursue the questions most important to me. Likewise, thank you to Dr. Brooke Macnamara and Dr. Shannon French for encouraging me as an undergrad. Your sage guidance and support made grad school feel possible.

Most of all, I am indebted to my participants. Thank you for taking the time to share your knowledge and experiences with me. This project really, truly could not exist without you.

Finally, the Sonoran desert sustained me throughout this project and I am eternally grateful for it. This project was conducted on the stolen lands of the Tohono O'odham and Pascua Yaqui; I hope that this work contributes in some small way to building more just systems for living in right relations with land, place, and each other. Land back now and forever.

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# Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation investigates the political goals, frameworks, and practices of Community Land Trusts (CLTs) across the Southwest, in order to contribute to ongoing scholarly conversations about the potential cooptation of the CLT movement.

Community Land Trusts are community-led nonprofit organizations that remove land from speculative commodity markets and hold it in trust for community purposes; in this project, I focus on CLTs that create permanently affordable housing. Recent research suggests that the recent popularity of the model—especially among policymakers—has resulted in a number of CLTs that neglect community control and embrace the marketized aspects of the model (Davis 2010; DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019; Kruger et al 2020; Stromberg 2016). However, there are also a number of CLTs that are earnestly pursuing community control and political transformation (Bunce 2016; Hawkins-Simons and Axel-Lute 2015; Ramírez 2020; Sumner and Hughes 2021; Williams 2018). These seemingly disparate findings prompt vital empirical and theoretical questions: How should we make sense of the trajectory of the CLT field as a whole? Should the CLT model still be understood as a potentially useful tool for those seeking to address social problems and create alternative systems for distributing resources and power in the city?

In this dissertation, I contribute to conversations around the trajectory of the CLT movement by providing a framework for making sense of the diverging political logics<sup>1</sup> that animate organizations across my sample of CLTs in the American Southwest. In Chapter 5, I

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<sup>1</sup> Political logics are sets of narratives, values, frames, and practices that define problems and help actors coordinate collective action with others. Political logics operate at both the individual level—as actors consciously and unconsciously draw upon them to guide and understand their work—and organizational level, through organizational culture, mission statements, goals, and organizational practices (Armstrong 2002; Nelson 2021).

describe two dominant political logics that shape the mission and activities of CLTs: an asset-based welfare logic that aligns with the hegemonic approach to poverty governance in the United States and a politically transformative redistributive/collectivist logic. In Chapter 6, I analyze CLTs in the Southwest with close ties to the state, as well as those that frequently rely on the asset-based welfare political logic. In doing so, I identify an area of possible cooptation that has been largely un-examined in prior scholarship—the core CLT value of stewardship—and explicate increasingly divergent understandings of the core CLT value of community control. Finally, in Chapter 7, I highlight CLTs that primarily operate on the redistributive/collectivist political logic. I argue that these organizations are both pursuing mainstreaming (Wittmayer et al 2021) *and* facilitating direct, collective local control among tenants at risk of immediate displacement. I analyze how this subset of CLTs navigate possible coopting pressures by pairing the CLT model with housing co-operatives—allowing CLT staff to pursue community control and the cultural work of decommodification in their daily housing provision activities—and by anticipating and strategically managing tensions that incentivize conformity. Ultimately, I conclude that experimentation with the CLT model is not leading to straightforward cooptation of the CLT model but rather yielding a diverse array of organizations and a robust field of CLTs.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2018, after decades of housing insecurity, Jocelyn Foreman finally found an affordable rental in a suburb outside of San Francisco: a tan, three-bedroom home with a yard and garage (Solomon 2021). Despite working two jobs, the Black Berkeley native and her children had endured twenty long years of housing insecurity, living out of her car and couch surfing with relatives (Baldassari and Solomon 2021). At long last, Jocelyn and her children moved into the home in Pinole, a move she saw as an opportunity “to break the homeless cycle, for me and my children” (Baldassari 2021).

But less than two years later, Jocelyn returned home to find a foreclosure notice posted on the front door. Her landlord, a Black woman who inherited the house from her father, had been struggling to make payments on the home (Baldassari and Solomon 2021). The foreclosure auction was eventually won by Wedgewood, a national real estate investment corporation that would later reach a \$3.5 million settlement with the state of California over its alleged practices of harassing and unlawfully evicting tenants (Barmann 2021; Baldassari and Solomon 2021). When asked if Jocelyn would be able to remain in the home, Wedgewood CEO Greg Geiser told reporters over email: “All we know is, we bought a house and it is occupied” (Baldassari and Solomon 2021). He added in another interview, “it sounds like this woman is in a special situation, and we will deal with her” (Baldassari 2021).

Stories like Jocelyn’s are playing out across the United States. A record-breaking 50% of renters are cost-burdened (i.e. paying more than 30% of their income on rent and utilities) and homelessness and housing insecurity are accordingly high (Joint Center for Housing Studies 2024). Housing inequality is deeply racialized; Black, Native American, Hispanic, and Asian households are far more likely to be housing insecure than white households (Cornelissen and

Hermann 2025; Momono N.d.). Moreover, those facing housing insecurity in the United States have few options for support or aid: rental assistance funding is only available for a quarter of households that would be qualified to receive it, leading to years-long waitlists and most families receiving no support at all (Acosta and Gartland 2021).

Jocelyn's story, however, has an unusual ending. She was able to stay in her home, which will remain permanently affordable, thanks to a new California law (SB-1079) and Northern Community Land Trust (NCLT). Senate Bill 1079 gives tenants, qualified nonprofits, and local governments a 45-day window to match the winning bid if their home goes to a foreclosure auction. Determined, but unsure how she would match the \$600,000 winning bid, Jocelyn reached out to the Sustainable Economies Law Center, which in turn connected her with NCLT. Thanks to donations from Jocelyn's broader community, bridge financing, and other grants, NCLT purchased Jocelyn's home in 2021. (Baldassari 2021). This purchase provided Jocelyn and her family with long-term stability and the opportunity to purchase the home herself, but it also preserved the long-term affordability of the home for future residents. The CLT will retain ownership of the land, making the home a community resource for decades to come.

The story of Jocelyn and her family home in Pinole illustrates both the status quo that community land trusts (CLTs) seek to transform and the promises of the CLT movement. Jocelyn and her family were marginalized by a political economic system that makes shelter and stability contingent on access to capital. Moreover, Wedgewood's foreclosure auction purchase and detached awareness of Jocelyn's tenancy is a stark illustration of the financialization of housing. Financialization involves regulators and market actors (including flippers like Wedgewood, private equity firms, and regulators) treating housing primarily as an opportunity for private profit, rather than shelter (Aalbers 2017; Kahrl 2017). The CLT's acquisition of the home—and

the state regulations and community donations that made it possible—are instances of the promises of the CLT movement. In this case, NCLT’s intervention addressed both Jocelyn’s short-term need for stable, affordable housing and provided a framework for a new system of collective decision-making that prioritized the use value of land and the emotional and cultural meanings of land and place.

The CLT model emerged out of experimentation with alternative systems for making decisions about—and relating to—land and place. CLTs treat housing and land as a social, collective matter and seek to buffer marginalized communities from the externalities of the speculative real estate market. However, prior research suggests that their politically transformative goals may fall by the wayside as they become increasingly integrated into the existing affordable housing field (DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019; Kruger et al 2020; Stromberg 2016). In this dissertation, I contribute to conversations on how the model’s growing popularity is shaping CLTs’ publicly espoused political goals, missions, and practices. I investigate what political logics are present across CLTs in the American Southwest, identifying elements of both a neoliberal asset-based welfare logic and a redistributive, collectivist logic.

## Overview

In Chapter 2, I review relevant prior research on Community Land Trusts. Existing literature documents the increasing popularity of the model in the last 30 years but comes to different conclusions about the implications of this growth for the movement. Empirical investigations consistently find that CLTs are profoundly beneficial for residents; CLTs are the only path to ownership for many residents and CLT homeowners experience many of the benefits of traditional ownership, with insulation from the risks of traditional ownership (Dwyer 2015; Schneider, Lennon, and Saegert 2023; Temkin, Theodos, and Price 2010; Thaden 2011; Wang et

al 2019). CLTs may have community-level benefits as well, including stabilizing neighborhoods at risk of gentrification and preventing displacement of long-time residents of those neighborhoods (Ali and Raviola 2023; Choi, Van Zandt, and Matarrita-Cascante 2018).

However, CLTs' ability to enact political transformation and provide a meaningful alternative to the market is less clear. CLTs' growing popularity, especially among policymakers and established nonprofits, has sparked familiar debates over the benefits and pitfalls of seeking mainstream recognition and integration. Much of this work focuses on the risk of CLTs losing their politically transformative goals and neglecting the potentially politically transformative elements of the model. Indeed, prior work finds evidence of a number of CLTs that primarily or solely pursue technocratic<sup>2</sup>, politically affirmative purposes (DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019; Kruger et al 2020; Stromberg 2016; Lowe and Thaden 2014). However, there are also numerous, high-profile instances of CLTs that seek and enact grassroots, contra-market control of land and housing (Bunce 2016; Cahen, Lilli, and Saegert 2022; Engelsman, Rowe, and Southern 2018; Fernando 2017; Gray and Galande 2010; Axel-Lute and Hawkins-Simons 2015; Williams 2018). This review thus ends with the question that animated this project: how should scholars and practitioners make sense of these disparate findings?

In Chapter 3, I present insights from research on other social movements and on the hegemonic institutional field that CLTs are joining; together, this research provides a theoretical framework for the dissertation. First, I discuss scholarship from the sociology of organizations and social movements on cooptation, or the ways in which powerful institutions seek to maintain stability by diffusing and controlling attempts at transformational change (Baur and Schmitz

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<sup>2</sup> Technocratic governance is a system of governance that relies on appointed experts (aka technocrats; King 2017). The most relevant aspect of this governance here is the belief that decisions are best by made primarily by formally educated professionals, rather than those with lived experience.

2011; Coy and Hedeem 2005; Eriksson 2018; Holdo 2019; Selznick 1949). This work illuminates the contextual factors and traits that may shape cooptation, the stages that characterize the process, and how cooptation shapes both parties. Second, I review literature on the hegemonic institutional field that CLTs are joining (and thus at risk of being coopted by): the bureaucratic field of third-party welfare provision. Scholarship on poverty governance provides a framework for making sense of the goals of this poverty governance: shaping and managing marginalized populations and shaping welfare recipients into idealized citizen subjects (aka “subject-making”; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Foucault 2008; Wacquant 2009). In doing so, it illustrates the logic and goals that CLTs are at risk of adopting as they seek to become mainstream. Third, I review the literature on the delegated welfare state, to provide key background on the ways in which poverty governance is actually enacted in practice and how this shapes the institutional field that CLTs join. Finally, I examine how poverty governance and the delegated welfare state have been enacted through homeownership-promoting welfare programs in the United States. This section of literature review describes the programs and policy tools that are commonly used to create affordable housing in the United States, and thus the competitors (or colleagues) for CLTs seeking mainstream recognition.

In Chapter 4, I describe the methods employed in this project, including my sampling procedure, interview recruitment and protocol, content analysis procedure, and participant demographics. Findings from this project are based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Southwestern CLT staff and leadership (participant N = 40; organization N = 33), as well as content analysis of organizational materials and news articles and supplemental participant observation. The full interview schedule is available in Appendix A. To capture both individual and organizational level logics, I triangulated data across participants within an organization

(when possible) and across data sources, pairing organization-level documents and individual interviews to make sense of the political logic(s) present within a given CLT. Interviews were transcribed and coded abductively (Saldaña 2014; Timmermans & Tavory 2012). Initial codes were generated through an in-depth literature review of research on housing and property law in the USA, racial capitalism, and transformative projects. Throughout analysis, coding categories were adjusted in response to emergent findings.

In Chapter 5, I present findings on the CLT field in the American Southwest. I compare two political logics that shape the mission and activities of CLTs. The first, which I term an *asset-based welfare logic* (ABW), aligns with the hegemonic approach to affordable housing and poverty governance in the United States. CLT practitioners and organizations operating on the ABW logic make sense of their work through individualistic causal stories (Goffman 1974; Snow et al 1986; Stone 1989) and solutions. That is, in their view, the CLT exists to address individual poverty—which they understand as an accidental result of natural events—by helping deserving individuals increase their personal wealth and move into the protected, valorized category of “owner”. This framing accompanies politically affirmative political goals, as their solution does not require transformative, large-scale political change. By contrast, organizations and practitioners operating on a *redistributive, collectivist logic* employ a “social world” causal story (Stone 1989). They view poverty and precarity as systemic problems that arise from long-standing political policies based on racialized extraction. Consequently, they seek political transformation and new systems of collective, local governance that prioritize shelter and security for all.

The two political logics were associated with different dispositions and housing models. Practitioners and organizations that employed the ABW logic took a formalized, distanced

approach to acquiring new units and placing residents; they prioritized efficiency and scalability above all else. In doing so, they adopted the market-style view of housing and land as fungible (interchangeable with other objects of the same financial value). These values predisposed them to housing unit acquisition and resident placement strategies that mirrored that of the traditional market: the CLT acquired empty units (often single-family homes) and placed residents in them based on waitlists and other pragmatic concerns. In contrast, the redistributive/collectivist logic's problem statement and political goals lead some participants and organizations to seek transformative political change in ways that balance the emotional and cultural elements of housing and land with its other functions. These organizations thus engage in implementing the cultural aspects of decommodification through their work to prevent the displacement of at-risk renters and through legislation. CLTs operating on a redistributive/collectivist logic often acquired occupied multi-family units and worked to ensure that the current residents remained housed there. The CLT then pursued its goals of community control and self-governance by supporting the development of housing co-operatives in purchased buildings. Despite these different framings, political goals, and values, all of the CLTs in my sample removed housing from the traditional market, affirming its use value over its exchange value—which is a notable divergence from the mainstream asset-based welfare approach (see Chapter 3).

In Chapter 6, I present further findings on CLTs that predominantly operate on the asset-based welfare logic. As cooptation theory and prior research on CLTs predict, many of these organizations had close ties to the state (e.g. were founded by a municipal government, worked closely with the local public housing authority, etc). I describe the ways in which these CLTs were embedded in—and embraced—the delegated welfare state. Next, I identify an area of cooptation (in the sense of practitioners adopting the goals, frames, and practices of the dominant

field) that has been largely omitted from prior scholarship: the core CLT value of stewardship. The term stewardship typically refers to a CLT's perceived obligations to stakeholders and the land they hold (e.g. through ensuring permanent affordability, supporting resident stability). As other scholars have observed, I find that the value of stewardship encourages CLTs to function as brokers who guide low-income beneficiaries through the purchase process and ownership, reducing the cultural capital they need to independently bring to successfully buy and keep their home. However, I also find evidence that the core CLT value of stewardship is, at times, formulated in ways that reinforce the notion of CLT residents as investor-subjects in the making, in need of training, surveillance, and discipline. This stewardship takes the form of homeownership training that emphasizes personal responsibility and financial knowledge, as well as monitoring and enforcement of aesthetic standards. Future research must investigate how widespread these neoliberal conceptualizations of stewardship are among CLTs, how they manifest *in situ* in trainings and CLT-resident interactions, and how CLT residents experience them. Finally, I present findings that demonstrate that some organizations are outright rejecting the ideal of community control, while others are adopting a neoliberal communitarianism approach to it (i.e. presuming that place-based populations have homogenous, universally-shared interests which need only social relationships and individual gains to be met; DeFilippis 2008). In light of these findings, I call for clarified definitions of the term community control, which is used at times to refer to ongoing political organizing and democratic governances *or* the pursuit of static goals developed over the course of political organizing/governance.

In the final empirical chapter, Chapter 7, I present findings on a set of Southwestern CLTs that retain the radical political goals of the movement while engaging with the state and established affordable housing field. I analyze their work through the sustainable transitions

literature framework of “mainstreaming”, which outlines the channels through which politically transformative social movements organizations may pursue institutionalization. The CLTs highlighted in this chapter are embedded in ongoing, politically radical social movements (e.g. tenants rights) and pursue the cultural work of decommodification and community control through a hybrid CLT/housing co-operative model, wherein the CLT acquires existing buildings and supports tenants in creating housing co-operatives. In doing so, the CLT facilitates collective, local control among tenants at risk of immediate displacement. Second, I describe how these—and other—CLTs are seeking state-oriented institutionalization as they pursue subsidies and policies that formalize the values of decommodification and community control. Finally, I demonstrate that practitioners are aware of the pitfalls of cooptation (e.g. adopting the goals and frames of neoliberal, technocratic housing provision) and describe two ongoing efforts to build collective resilience to cooptation pressures.

In Chapter 8, I summarize the findings of the project and propose future directions. Ultimately, I argue that my findings suggest that prior work both understates the extent to which neoliberal logics have infiltrated the classical CLT model—shaping organizational missions and practices far beyond the loss of community control—and overestimates the threat this phenomenon poses to the CLT movement as a whole. Future work must investigate the ways in which neoliberal paternalism has infiltrated CLTs’ frames and practices beyond the loss of community control and transformational political goals. My findings suggest that some CLTs are actively framing their work as stepping stones into the market, reifying the commodification of housing and importance of individual wealth. However, I also find far less reason to fear the destruction of the CLT movement. My findings on the established and growing network of politically transformative CLTs demonstrate that there are a number of CLTs still committed to

the foundational values of the movement. Moreover, the hybrid CLT/housing co-op model represents experimentation with the CLT model leading to new formulations of the classical model that allow practitioners to more easily pursue the ideals of non-market housing and self-governance in their daily activities.

This study has limited ability to speak consequences of the political logics identified here, as I did not collect data on CLT residents, broader communities, or CLT outputs. Future research should investigate how CLT residents experience the diverse subject-making practices (e.g. trainings) identified in this study, as well as investigating how different political logics may lead CLTs to serve different demographics (e.g. more or less market-ready populations) and have different impacts on gentrification and housing insecurity in their service area. Furthermore, though preliminary findings suggest that mission drift within CLT is relatively uncommon, these conclusions are based on one-time interview data and content analysis of currently available documents. Subsequent research should investigate changes over time through a more systematic analysis. Finally, though my data suggest that political logics are partially patterned by CLT staffs' professional networks and organizational ties (e.g. in the tenants right movement or in the mainstream affordable housing field), I did not collect systematic network data. Additional research is needed to more rigorously assess what organizational and professional fields CLTs operate within and how these ties shape practitioners' culture and practices.

Despite these limitations, my findings suggest that the trajectory of the CLT movement—at least within the American Southwest—appears to be one of increasing diversity and mainstreaming through a variety of channels, rather than a straightforward decline towards cooptation. The presence of technocratic, politically affirmative CLTs are not an existential threat or a sign that more politically transformative CLTs are being replaced or threatened, but rather

indicative of the growth of the field in general. Furthermore, despite their politically affirmative goals, the organizational *practices* of these CLTs are still removing land and buildings from speculative market and framing affordable housing as collective good that must be committed to long-term. Though future scholars and practitioners should investigate the ways in which their work may be replicating or shoring up neoliberal notions of individual ownership through commodity markets, in light of the current political climate and prior research on how social movements survive long-term (e.g. Staggenborg 1988), the presence of professionalized, technocratic CLTs may facilitate the survival of the CLT movement in the coming years.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Community Land Trust Literature

#### Abstract

In this chapter, I review the relevant literature on Community Land Trusts. First, I introduce the three features of a classical CLT: decommodification of land, long-term stewardship, and community control. In other words, CLTs remove land from traditional markets permanently in order to use it for the collective good, as understood by people in the CLT's service area. I then review the organizational and legal structures that CLTs typically use to enact long-term, community-led decommodification: the dual ownership model, a resale formula, a tripartite board of directors, and a general corporate membership. In the subsequent section, I review the history of the CLT model, which emerged out of Civil Rights era experimentation with models of land tenure and ownership by activists and intellectuals seeking alternatives to racialized market-based systems. I trace the CLT movement through its increasing urbanization and growing popularity. Today, there are over 314 CLTs in the United States (Wang et al 2023) and abundant literature on the benefits of CLTs for CLT residents and communities. However, there is also evidence that some contemporary CLTs distance themselves from the political origins of the model, disavowing community control and embracing expert-led affordable housing provision. I review the mixed literature on the impacts of the growing popularity of the CLT model, including those that engage in technocratic affordable housing provision *and* instances of CLTs that still pursue community control and political transformation through community organizing. Finally, I introduce the present study, including the theoretical and empirical questions raised by the seemingly disparate findings on the implications of the increasing popularity and institutionalization of the CLT model: How should we make sense of the trajectory of the CLT

field as a whole? Should the CLT model still be understood as a potentially useful tool for those seeking to address social problems and create alternative systems for distributing resources and power in the city?

## Introduction

Community Land Trusts (CLTs) are place-based non-profit organizations that hold land “in trust” for community needs, removing it from traditional commodity markets by selling and/or renting at below-market prices. Though the model was developed to support a wide range of community needs, most contemporary CLTs in the US prioritize creating long-term affordable housing (Wang et al 2023). There are three key features of a classical CLT: decommodification of land, long-term stewardship, and community control. That is, a CLT must permanently remove land from traditional markets and use it for the collective good, as defined by people in the CLT’s service area. For many, the appeal of CLTs lies in their potential to help local, place-based actors resist both immediate social problems in their community (e.g. homelessness, housing insecurity, cultural and political changes that contribute to displacement) and the socioeconomic systems that generated those problems (Medoff and Sklar 1994; Schneider, Lennon, and Saegert 2022; Thompson 2015).

Local actors have few tools for addressing the precarity, injury, and death caused by the financialization of housing and racial capitalist cycles of disinvestment and reinvestment (Rucks-Ahidiana 2021). Most of the tools that are available require ongoing support by the state (which is vulnerable to election turnover) and/or indefinite, sustained political mobilization (which is often challenging among volunteer-based organizations). For instance, Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs) are often invoked alongside CLTs as a tool for ensuring equitable

development practices and mitigating the harms of gentrification. CBAs are legal contracts—between a place-based community (usually in the form of one or more community-based organizations) and a developer—that, in theory, ensure large developments which receive public investment in turn provide some benefits to those who live and work in the area they are developing (e.g. requirements that the developer hire local residents, pay employees a living wage, contribute to funds for community services, and/or create public infrastructure; Parks and Warren 2009; Salkin and Lavine 2008). However, CBAs require immense, sustained political mobilization and organizing, including a lengthy negotiation process to develop the CBA *and* post-signing monitoring and enforcement of the developer; such sustained mobilization is often challenging for local volunteers (Parks and Warren 2009; Salkin and Lavine 2008). Though there are best practices that can mitigate some of these challenges, these limitations highlight the benefits of the CLT model: it provides a legal and organizational model for setting the use and market value of a place long-term. Though CLTs also require ongoing effort and depend on state and private market actors, they arguably do so less than the alternatives available to local state bureaucrats, nonprofits, and activists.

In contrast to the familiar binaries of public/private sector and state/market provision, CLTs create a third option: a legal structure for fixing the non-market use of land long-term (Schneider, Lennon, and Saegert 2022). CLTs are arguably a part of what Polanyi (1944) considered the inevitable emergence of opposition to the commodification of land. Rather than depend on a developer or municipal government, as CBA parties must, founders of a CLT can enshrine permanent affordability—and other requirements—in the property relations of CLT land. Among Indigenous CLT founders in the US and Canada, CLTs provide a legal framework for returning

land to Indigenous stewardship through collective ownership (Fernando 2021; LaDuke 1993; Low 2025; Ramírez 2020; Sumner and Hughes 2024).

In the following section, I discuss the organizational structures typically used to enact these three core features of a CLT. In the rest of the chapter, I review the development of the classical model CLT model over the past 60 years, the recent burst of popularity the model is experiencing, empirical findings on the efficacy of CLTs, and a growing body of research that raises concerns about the dilution of the model in light of its growing popularity.

## Organizational Structure of CLTs

The dual-ownership model, which separates ownership of land and buildings, is a key innovation of CLTs. In the case of affordable homeownership, the homeowner buys the building from the CLT or previous resident and rents the land beneath it through a long-term ground lease (typically a 99-year lease). Though ground leases have a long history outside of the United States and are somewhat common in commercial arrangements, in the US, ground leases that separate ownership of land and building are rare in residential arrangements outside of manufactured housing. The dual ownership model provides a legal tool for CLTs to remove land and housing from traditional markets (in addition to the more conventional approaches to providing affordable rentals and simply setting rents at below-market rates).

The dual-ownership model is grounded in both ideological values and pragmatic concerns. Ideologically, the dual-ownership model reflects a way of thinking about value, land, and communal resources that animates the CLT movement. Inspired in part by John Stuart Mill's notion of the "social increment", this framework asserts that the appreciating value of land is largely created by the economic growth and public investment of the surrounding society, rather than the investment or labor of individual landowners (Davis 2014). For most CLT homes, there

is also a literal public investment in the form of a subsidy that allows the CLT and/or homeowner to purchase the property. As John Davis—a scholar, city planner, and long-time proponent of the CLT movement—put it, the CLT model: “locks this socially-created value in place, turning residential property into a permanent repository for subsidies invested and gains deposited over time by the larger community” (2010: 263). Because the land is no longer bought or sold on a commodity market and the value of the house is fully or partially separated from market values, this is referred to as “decommodification”. Moreover, this framework emphasizes the social, environmental, and emotional use value of land<sup>3</sup> over its exchange value (aka monetary price in a market; Logan and Molotch 1987). Pragmatically, the dual-ownership model allows CLTs to remove land from commodity markets and provides a legal mechanism that ensures the land is used for the intended community purpose. Moreover, since land typically accounts for a significant percentage of the cost of purchasing a home, this separation also intrinsically reduces the purchase price of homes. sideline

Another key feature of CLTs is their long-term commitment to the land they hold, their residents, and the broader community they serve (often referred to as “stewardship”, although the meaning of this term is broad and varied, as discussed in Chapter 6). Unlike other common models for affordable housing provision in the United States, CLTs pursue permanent affordability. CLT rental housing is typically made affordable through the conventional method of tying rents to residents’ income (e.g. setting housing costs at no more than 33% of the resident’s income).

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term “use value” fairly broadly in this dissertation, including both direct functional values (e.g. shelter) and more intangible values (e.g. sentimental and cultural value). This broader definition is appropriate because market systems obscure and, at times, marginalize these aspects of land and value. Moreover, as I describe in Chapter 5, some CLT practitioners explicitly seek to re-center these features of land.

Homeownership, however, is made affordable long-term by the dual-ownership model, which ensures that CLT homes are never sold at market value, and a resale formula, which determines the price of the home. The first owner of a CLT home pays a price for the building(s) set by the CLT, typically based on what is affordable to a certain median income level in that area (e.g. 80% Area Median Income). The price when they sell the home is dictated by the resale formula, which is embedded in the ground lease. CLT homeowners receive 100% of their *equity*—the money they directly invested in the property, typically in the form of a down payment and mortgage payments<sup>4</sup>. However, they receive only a portion of the *appreciation*, or the increase in value over time (which, as described above, comes from a combination of factors mostly out of the homeowner’s control). As a result, CLT homes are definitionally sold for less than market rate. Unlike the shared appreciation model, wherein the home is sold for market rate and the appreciation is split between the owner and a nonprofit or other entity, CLTs typically do not receive any portion of the sale proceeds. Some resale formulas tie the home’s resale value to the market, providing CLT homeowners with a limited percentage of appreciation (e.g. 25%). Other formulas link the resale value to changes in the area median income or to the length of time the CLT resident spent in the home (e.g. 3% per year). CLTs must strike a balance between the interests of the community (affordable housing) and the interests of residents (for whom a higher sale price means greater wealth and possibly greater mobility); the resale formula formalizes this balance.

Finally, the classical CLT model was initially designed as a vehicle for community control—that is, democratic, local control of land and buildings for non-market purposes—as a

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<sup>4</sup> Some homeowners may invest in home renovations or other direct improvements to the home. Different CLTs handle this differently, depending on their priorities (e.g. keeping the home affordable by limiting substantial additions; encouraging weatherization or ecological improvements to the land; GSN 2018).

counter to the profit-driven racial capitalist cycles of disinvestment, reinvestment, and displacement that typically guide urban development and land use. At the most basic level, community control means that a CLT's mission and pursuits should be dictated by the place-based community they serve. In practice, however, the term "community control" refers to a fairly wide range of activities and roles, including: ongoing political organizing and empowerment of residents and locals; democratic decision-making about collectively-held land (the commons); or simply making decommodification and development decisions based on the founders' perception of local needs (Aguilar and McNeil 2018; Bunce 2016; Gray and Galande 2011; Hosfeld 2018; Moulden and Huron 2018; Williams et al 2018). Throughout this dissertation, I argue that the muddiness of the term community control is partially caused by the fact that many CLTs are the product of grassroots organizing, but there is no consensus about whether CLTs are or should be responsible for *continuing* that grassroots organizing (see Chapter 6 for an in-depth discussion of this issue).

Practitioners and scholars typically ground community control in two governance structures required by the classical CLT model: a tripartite board and a corporate community membership. A tripartite board is a board of directors composed of three categories of people (often, but not always, in equal proportions): residents of the CLT, non-CLT-resident community members, and a third category that is less clearly defined. Different sources variously define the final third of the board as "professionals" (Schneid 2025), "housing industry stakeholders... often real estate and business professional, and public staff stakeholders" (Lowe, Prochoska, and Keating 2022), and "public members (typically representatives of government or public agencies)" (Lowe and Thaden 2016). In theory, the tripartite model ensures that the interests of all three of these groups (low-income households, the broader place-based community, and

public and private sector experts concerned about subsidy use and efficiency) are protected, because board members will pursue and protect their respective self-interests (Lowe and Thaden 2016). I discuss critiques of this assumption in the penultimate section of the chapter.

The tripartite board structure is a significant divergence from the status quo among nonprofits. One recent report found that only 28% of nonprofits surveyed considered “membership within the community served” a high priority in board recruitment (BoardSource 2021a). This priority is reflected in board demographics; another report found that nonprofit boards are typically highly unrepresentative of the demographics of the communities they serve (membership of the target population or community was not reported; BoardSource 2021b). CLT boards may still be demographically unrepresentative of residents or the community (e.g. if white, wealthier CLT residents and community members are the ones most likely to serve as board members), but the tripartite board structure explicitly includes (some) leaseholders in decision-making about the land they live on and the broader CLT’s activities.

The classic CLT model also includes a general corporate membership composed of CLT residents and dues-paying members, often but not always limited to residents of the organization’s service area (GSN 2018). Members may attend an annual meeting, establish or alter membership dues, elect the board of directors, approve the sale of land, or approve changes to the CLT’s resale formula or bylaws (Swann 1973; GSN 2018). Effective governance through these structures, of course, requires ongoing efforts to organize, inform, and engage board directors and general members (GSN 2018). In theory, these governance structures allow CLTs to exert democratic community control over the land they hold, placing power over the urban built environment and place in the hands of those who live there.

In the following section, I describe how the classical CLT model was formed and how it has been adapted (or, some would argue, diluted and co-opted).

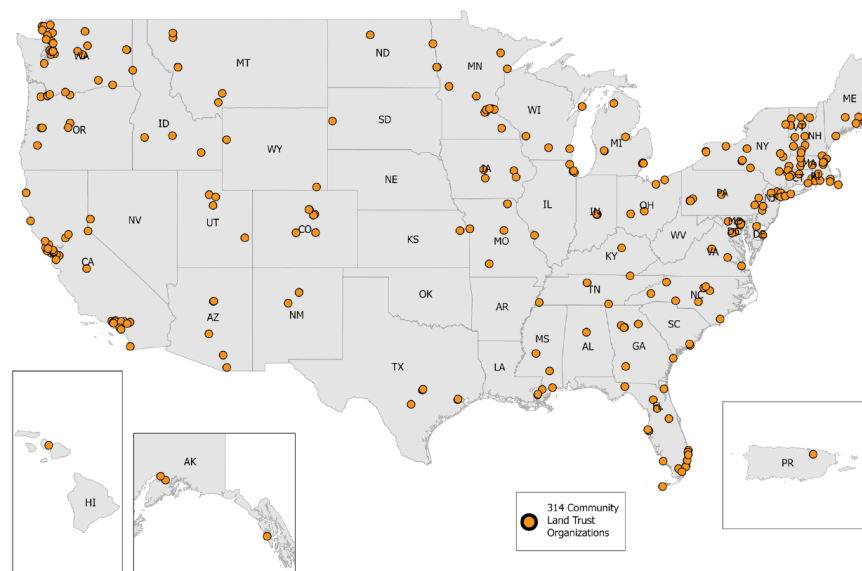
## History of CLT Model

The dual-ownership model emerged out of a long tradition of experimentation with models of land tenure and ownership by activists and intellectuals seeking alternatives to racialized market-based systems (Davis 2014; Meehan 2014). The first recognizable contemporary CLT—New Communities, Inc.—was created in 1970 by a group of activists seeking mechanisms to ensure political and economic autonomy for Black Southerners. Inspired by the Gramdan model of rural development and agricultural communities created by the Jewish National fund on Palestinian land in pre-state Israel—a colonial root largely downplayed by the contemporary CLT movement in the US—this predominantly Black group of activists sought to create a network of agricultural cooperatives developed on lands leased from a community-based nonprofit (Davis 2014; Meehan 2014). CLTs were founded as “vehicles for making land a resource base for the poor” and political transformation in rural areas through the 1970s. With the support of a new, national community development organization (the Institute for Community Economics), CLTs became an increasingly urban phenomenon throughout the 1980s (Meehan 2014).

There are now over 300 CLTs in the United States as of the 2022 CLT Census – a nearly 30% increase since the 2011 national survey (Wang et al 2023). Together, these organizations hold over 40,000 units of housing in 44 states, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico (Wang et al 2023). Though much of the CLT literature focuses on single-family homeownership, over 50%

of CLTs in the US hold units with other tenure types (e.g. rentals, cooperatives, manufactured homes, etc.; Wang et al 2023: 68). Moreover, the popularity of CLTs is not limited to the US. Though the United States still has the highest density of CLTs, established CLTs can be found in Belgium, Canada, England, France, Honduras, Kenya, and Scotland (see [the International Center for CLTs’ map and directory for a comprehensive list](#); Bunce and Aslam 2016; Moore and McKee 2012; Moore 2018; Midheme and Moulaert 2013; Reddin 2021; Skerratt 2013).

**Figure 1: Map of CLTs in USA in 2022, created by Wang et al 2023**



A map of the 314 CLTs in the USA, per the 2022 CLT Census; map created by Wang and co-authors (2023: 5)

There are a number of forces behind the rapid growth of the CLT field. John Davis identified four forces that “accelerated the pace of experimentation” with CLTs, contributing to their growing popularity: decentralization, diversification, regionalization, and municipalization (2014: 54). First, the slow dissolution of the Institute for Community Economics led to a wide, decentralized field of support organizations for CLTs. This field now includes national associations, regional coalitions, private consultants, and large CLTs that provided technical assistance to emerging CLTs. Second, Davis argues that this field creates an equally wide set of

definitions of what a CLT is and what it should do. Likewise, the term “CLT” was applied to an increasingly diverse array of organizations (“diversification”), including those that held traditional affordable rental projects, condos, and non-housing uses (e.g. community farms).<sup>5</sup> Third, regionalization refers to the phenomenon of CLTs serving relatively large service areas, beyond an inner-city neighborhood or rural town. Today, many CLTs serve one or more counties, an entire metro area, and, in some cases, an entire state (Wang et al 2023: 19). Finally, Davis used the term municipalization to refer to the increasingly active role the state played in the life of a CLT, which he feared would limit the grassroots, confrontational organizing that a CLT may engage in. State and local government support for CLTs—funding, access to mortgage loans, legal recognition, etc.—began in a limited capacity as early as the 1980s, for the same reasons that CLTs appeal to state agents today (Meehan 2014). Indeed, though a rare phenomenon, municipal governments were founding CLTs as early as 1984 (Burlington CLT in Vermont; Meehan 2014). However, CLTs were far from a household name, even among housing policy experts. Though this is arguably still the case, CLTs are becoming a tool in the toolbox of housing policymakers, as I discuss further in Chapter 6.

CLT’s popularity has been bolstered by research suggesting that they have numerous positive benefits for their residents and broader communities. In the following section, I review research on the tangible and intangible outcomes of CLT’s work. I begin by summarizing literature on the many positive benefits of the CLT model for residents and the communities they operate in. I then describe the more mixed research on CLT’s ability to enact community control and collective political empowerment.

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<sup>5</sup> Some scholars argue that this multifaceted, non-housing work is in fact a long-standing, central component of the CLT movement and that a myopic focus on housing provision limits CLTs’ political potential (DeFilippis et al 2018).

## CLT Outcomes and Impacts

Empirical research suggests that CLTs have overwhelmingly positive effects on their residents. Research suggests that CLTs make homeownership possible for those who would not otherwise be able to access it and that residents experience many of the benefits of traditional ownership (Temkin, Theodos, and Price 2010; Wang et al 2019). For instance, a recent study compared 216 CLT owners with comparable renters (N=130) and market owners (N=140) in Minneapolis, Minnesota and Portland, Oregon (Schneider, Lennon, and Saegert 2023). Though all participants had attended the same homebuyer education and counseling classes before purchasing their homes, the researchers found that CLT owners were older, less likely to be white, and more likely to be women-headed households than those who became traditional market owners. CLT owners experienced higher levels of financial wellbeing and housing stability than renters, comparable to those of the market rate owners (Schneider, Lennon, and Saegert 2023). Other studies have found similar benefits: CLT residents are more stable than demographically similar non-CLT renters or homeowners, in terms of lower foreclosure rates and fewer moves (Temkin et al 2013; Thaden 2011; Wang et al 2019). CLT residents have also reported that their time with the CLT reduced financial stress, greater feelings of control, and greater freedom to pursue personal goals (Hackett et al 2019; Martin et al 2019; Schneider, Lennon, and Saegert 2023; Skobba and Carswell 2014). The vast majority of CLT residents experience an increase in wealth far greater than comparable renters—even in periods when the housing market is in crisis—but the affordability of their units is maintained for both initial and subsequent buyers (Acolin et al 2021; Temkin et al 2013; Wang et al 2019). CLTs could thus be

understood as stabilizing forces in both “hot” and “cold” markets, mitigating the skyrocketing housing prices of a housing boom and the foreclosures and precarity that accompany a bust.

Prior research suggests that the benefits of CLT homeownership cannot be attributed to affordable housing costs or ownership alone; CLTs provide residents with a level of pre- and post-purchase support that contributes to their financial stability, sustained homeownership, and ontological security (Cahen et al 2022; Hackett et al 2019; Kruger et al 2020; Thaden 2010). Scholars and practitioners have documented both formal and informal support practices, including HOA and co-op development, homebuyer counseling, foreclosure prevention funding and counseling, and funding for home repairs (Cahen et al 2022; Hackett et al 2018; Kruger et al 2020; Thaden 2010; Wang et al 2023). Seventy-eight percent of CLTs in the 2022 National CLT Census reported providing some form of residential support (Wang et al 2023). Informally, CLT staff serve as brokers with key gatekeepers in the homebuying process. For instance, staff at City of Lakes CLT (CLCLT) in Minneapolis, MN built long-term relationships with mortgage lenders and other nonprofits; these relationships allowed CLCLT to quickly identify residents falling behind on mortgage payments and provide them with emergency loan funds and foreclosure counseling and prevention (Cahen et al 2022). In some cases, CLTs are party to residents’ mortgages, with a durable right to cure any default that may occur; this puts them in a legal position to directly intervene before a foreclosure (Thaden 2010). Beyond financial stability, this level of personal, relationship-based support provides a safety net that stands in stark contrast to the atomized precarity and discipline that characterizes poverty and welfare in the US (Cahen et al 2022; Hughes 2019; Kruger et al 2020; Thaden 2010). This level of support and brokering may effectively reduce the cultural and social capital that prospective homeowners need to bring to the homebuying process, reducing a barrier to homeownership and its benefits.

Research on the collective benefits of CLTs is likewise positive. A recent study of CLT units across the United States found evidence that CLTs may stabilize neighborhoods at risk of gentrification (Choi, Van Zandt, and Matarrita-Cascante 2018). Case studies of high-profile, established CLTs present similar findings; CLTs create significantly lower building values, vacancy rates, and foreclosure rates than surrounding properties (Dwyer 2015), which is associated with lower surrounding housing values and the probability of a household moving out of the neighborhood (Ali and Raviola 2023). Though the extent of CLTs' community-level impacts have not been studied extensively, as noted above, there are few other tools available to local actors seeking to prevent displacement associated with gentrification. Without CLTs, gentrification is thus likely to proceed apace. Scholars and practitioners have also framed CLTs' use of subsidies as a collective benefit, arguing that the preservation of subsidy across each successive CLT owners makes CLTs "responsible and efficient stewards of public and private funding" (Schneider, Lennon, and Saegert 2022: 5).

The theorized political and cultural effects of CLT model—political transformation that includes re-framing housing and land as a collective matter (rather than a private economic one), empowering historically dispossessed and excluded groups, and grounding urban decision-making in residence, justice, and the collective good—have been studied less than the tangible benefits for residents. The available evidence is mixed and has led some scholars to express concerns that the movement is, broadly speaking, on a trajectory of decline towards conformist, politically affirmative housing provision. In the following section, I review the ongoing conversations around the trajectory of the CLT movement.

## “The Fight for the Soul of the CLT”

The growth of the CLT field has, without question, led to the existence of a number of CLTs that do not hew to the classical CLT model or values. The 2022 census of CLTs across the US found that only 54% responding organizations designated at least one board seat to residents (N=164 for this question; Wang et al 2023: 25). Only 42% of responding organizations (N=210) reported having a corporate community membership (Wang et al 2023: 26). Furthermore, only sixty percent of CLTs reported engaging in community-building activities (Wang et al 2023) and a study of CLTs in Minnesota found that CLT homeowners did not feel a strong sense of community with other CLT residents (Kruger et al 2020). Scholars have documented a number of CLTs that downplay or outright deny politically transformative aims, emphasizing instead the marketized aspects of the model (e.g. moving low-income people into the valorized class of “owners” and individual wealth generation; DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019; Kruger et al 2020; Stromberg 2016).

The perceived depoliticization of the CLT movement is typically attributed to various aspects of institutionalization, or the formalized nature of CLTs as non-profit organizations (Davis 2014; DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2018; Stromberg 2016; Williams 2018; Williams 2019). Though some scholars have argued that the roots of depoliticized nonprofit housing provision were present in the classical CLT model from the beginning—e.g. noting that the “idea of individual wealth creation through homeownership supports deeply rooted ideological traditions” (Engelsman, Rowe, and Southern 2016, referencing Stone 2006)—most scholars attribute perceived cooptation to CLTs’ need for professional expertise, political influence, and external funding.

This narrative about the pitfalls of institutionalization is common across various subfields of the social sciences. Organizations research on other affordable housing models refers to the

phenomenon as “decoupling”: weak linkages between social goals and pragmatic survival imperatives lead to organizations with more robust formalized practices for business (e.g. processes for revenue growth, risk management, asset preservation, etc.) than for resident empowerment, community wellbeing, or neighborhood stability (Read and Sedgewick 2024). Likewise, an influential line of social movements research studies (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Piven and Cloward 1979) theorizes that transformative political mobilization is likely to stagnate once formalized organizations are created. This stagnation occurs because those organizations will be strongly incentivized to “align themselves with the elites who control access to both practical and political resources” in order to pursue their work and ensure their own survival (DeFilippis et al 2018: 757; see also Stromberg 2016; Gray and Galande 2010; Williams 2019).<sup>6</sup> To pursue its interests, the organization becomes less politically radical or confrontational; in the case of CLTs, this means pursuing affordable housing provision in line with technocratic ideals and neglecting the communal, multifaceted, empowering elements of the model (DeFilippis et al 2018). That is, the interests of the organization begin to diverge from the interests of the broad, place-based population they serve (as arguably occurred with community development corporations, see Stoecker 1997 and DeFilippis 2004; Stromberg 2016).

In the CLT literature, scholars typically gesture at this theoretical narrative by adapting the term professionalization<sup>7</sup> to refer to organizations prioritizing the inclusion of staff and board members with professional expertise in real estate, law, development, and the professional nonprofit sector (rather than those with experience in community organizing or community

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<sup>6</sup> Cooptation theory, discussed further in the following chapter, frames this as a deliberate strategic decision made by the hegemonic field or organization, which seeks to control and limit the extent of change (Selznick 1949).

<sup>7</sup> The notion of professionalization was first used in resource mobilization theory, where it referred to the phenomenon of long-time social movements actors becoming career professionals (e.g. full-time advocates or activists) as funding became available (Staggenborg 1988). Usage of the term in the CLT literature, on the other hand, often presumes that the professionals in question are *not* deeply rooted in the CLT movement or its values.

members with no pre-existing expertise) in response to the technical demands of securing funding and acquiring land (Crabtree 2008; Gray and Galande 2010; GSN 2018; Hawkins-Simons and Axel-Lute 2015; Thaden & Lowe, 2014; Williams 2018). Though few studies have directly investigated the professional backgrounds of CLT practitioners, CLT technical guidance has long acknowledged the need for this expertise (e.g. Swann 1972). Recent scholarship suggests that newer CLTs are less committed to pursuing community control and more interested in positioning themselves as professional nonprofits (aka “expert collaborators with measurable outcomes”; Thaden and Lowe 2014: 17; see also DeFilippis et al 2018 and DeFilippis et al 2019 on CLTs in Minnesota).

To my knowledge, there are few studies that directly and systematically investigated how funders think about CLTs or what forces pressure to conform to technocratic housing provision may take. However, a study of CLT leaders in Minnesota found that most leaders anticipatorily emphasized “workforce” housing and downplayed politically transformative intentions (DeFilippis et al 2018), in line with a line of policy-oriented research on the CLT model that omits the collective, community control elements of the model (e.g. Temkin, Theodos, and Price 2010). This study also found evidence that public, private, and nonprofit funders in Minnesota emphasize subsidy retention, scale (number of housing units), and efficiency, without recognizing or valuing the other aspects of the CLT model (DeFilippis et al 2019). However, without a systematic, comprehensive analysis of policymaker-oriented materials across the US, it is unclear how widespread this omission is outside of Minnesota. Moreover, findings from this dissertation suggest the issue is further complicated by divergent definitions and uses of the term “community control.” A recent guide to CLTs for local governments, for instance, touts CLTs’ subsidy retention and wealth-building potential alongside their potential to “preserve community

control of land, reduce absentee ownership and resist processes of gentrification and displacement” but later frames wealth-building and lasting affordability as intrinsically empowering (NLC and GSN 2021: 7). I discuss findings related to this issue in Chapter 6.

Pragmatic needs for funding, partnerships, and purchasable units may also drive CLTs to serve broader geographic areas (regionalization). Some scholars argue that regionalization makes meaningful community control more challenging—or even impossible—because it increases the population CLTs serve and thus the resources and time needed to build relationships and facilitate democratic decision-making within that population (Davis 2014; DeFilippis et al 2018). Other scholars, however, note that many of the purported challenges of larger service areas—e.g. diverging interests within the community—are present at any scale and that small service areas may exacerbate place-based inequalities (Axel-Lute 2021). The breadth and depth of community control that a CLT enacts thus likely depends primarily on their commitment to democratic decision-making and capacity for organizing, regardless of the size of their service area. Moreover, practitioners are likely to be aware of the challenges of larger service areas. There is some evidence that practitioners that espouse a commitment to community control are adapting their governance structures accordingly: increasing board size; creating committees, advisory groups, or even local chapters, to create more opportunities for participation; or partner with existing community-based organizations (Axel-Lute 2021). The success of these adaptations is an empirical question that should be investigated in future research.

Finally, recent scholarship has also questioned the presumption that the mechanisms CLTs’ employ (the dual ownership model, a tripartite board) sufficiently establish accountability to residents and the broader community (DeFilippis 2003; DeFilippis et al 2018; Thaden and Lowe 2014; Williams 2018). Researchers have argued that the tripartite board structure is necessary but

not sufficient for enacting community control, noting that board meetings may be structured in ways that disempower and intimidate CLT residents (DeFilippis et al 2018). In Chapters 6 and 7, I contribute to this discussion. I first present findings supporting the theory that some CLTs are adopting a community development corporation-style approach to community control (e.g. shallow tokenism and engagement) and that even CLTs that publicly commit to community control may have few organizational tools to ensure democratic practices or community control in practice. In Chapter 7, however, I describe a population of CLTs that are facilitating meaningful self-governance and democratic, collective decision-making through a hybrid CLT/housing cooperative model.

Evidence of technocratic, depoliticized CLTs has understandably led some scholars to pessimistic conclusions about the future of the CLT movement, particularly its ability to foment meaningful community control. These scholars argue that the CLT movement faces “strong momentum pushing practitioners and advocates away from the movement’s formative ideas and toward the more technically practical (and less politically challenging or transformative) aspects of the model” (DeFilippis et al 2018: 764). Likewise, Kruger and co-authors argue that the “community” in the majority of their case CLTs (N=8) should be understood as “mostly a residual label, rather than a centrally motivating concept” (2020: 652). Though they acknowledge some high-profile, established CLTs that fit the classical CLT model, these scholars largely frame the field as a whole in terms of decline towards political affirmation.

Another school of thought, however, presents a more optimistic picture of the future of the CLT movement, placing the technocratic, depoliticized CLTs in the context of the broader CLT field and hegemonic social systems. These scholars and practitioners acknowledge that many CLTs are incentivized to shift to less confrontational measures (e.g. organizing protests) in order

to maintain relationships with funders and gatekeepers in the state, but see this as reconcilable with politically transformative goals, including community control (Bunce 2016; Engelsman, Rowe, and Southern 2018; Gray and Galande 2010; Hawkins-Simons and Axel-Lute 2015; Williams 2018). Bunce, for example, calls for greater recognition of the necessity of strategic operation within larger neoliberal and market-based structures; she argues that a simple narrative of cooptation neglects—and devalues—activists’ long-term pursuit of common spaces and political transformation (2016). Other studies suggest that even organizations that disavow politically transformative goals and do little to cultivate community or political consciousness among residents may be contributing to the reframing of housing as a collective, social matter. For instance, the study of CLTs in Minnesota discussed above—which found little evidence of community feelings with fellow CLT homeowners—also found that CLT residents felt a solidarity with the imagined future owners of their home (Kruger et al 2020).

Moreover, prior studies have found ample evidence of the existence of CLTs that still pursue community control and political transformation through community organizing (Engelsman, Rowe, and Southern 2018; Hawkins-Simons and Axel-Lute 2015; Williams 2018). Others find evidence of CLTs that are embedded in—and acting on behalf of—broader social movements (Bunce 2016; Gray and Galande 2010; Hawkins-Simons and Axel-Lute 2015). For instance, Hawkins-Simons and Axel-Lute argue that we should understand CLTs as enacting a *spectrum* of community control based on their analysis of six CLTs that either implement a community vision developed in pre-CLT organizing and base-building or act as focused technical organizations that grassroots partners could rely on for real estate expertise and development (2015).

## The Present Study

As described above, prior research has documented numerous instances of CLTs that engage in technocratic, politically affirmative housing provision and preliminary evidence that the field as a whole may be moving away from community control and radical political change (DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019; Kruger et al 2020; Stromberg 2016). However, there are also a number of CLTs that are earnestly pursuing community control and political transformation (Bunce 2016; Hawkins-Simons and Axel-Lute 2015; Ramírez 2020; Sumner and Hughes 2021; Williams 2018).

These seemingly disparate findings prompt vital empirical and theoretical questions: How should we make sense of the trajectory of the CLT field as a whole? Should the CLT model still be understood as a potentially useful tool for those seeking to address social problems and create alternative systems for distributing resources and power in the city?

In this dissertation, I contribute to conversations around the trajectory of the CLT movement by providing a framework for making sense of the diverging political logics that animate organizations across my sample of Southwest CLTs. I find evidence that neoliberal logics are infiltrating CLTs' frameworks and practices more deeply than prior work has documented—particularly in terms of stewardship and community control—but also that these logics pose less of an existential threat than research on other regions of the US may suggest. Given evidence of CLTs that are pursuing politically transformative ends with a hybrid CLT/co-op model and coalitions with other established movements, there is reason for considerable optimism about the present and future of the CLTs. These organizations are experimentally developing practices and organizational structures that help them balance the tensions inherent in their work. In doing so,

they are actively removing land from the market, directly preventing displacement, and scaffolding self-governance among residents.

In order to make sense of the risk of co-optation and the consequences of professionalization, we must clarify which hegemonic system CLTs are joining and thus the logics and practices that CLTs are at risk of adopting. Towards that end, in the following chapter, I review research on the delegated welfare state and affordable housing.

## Chapter 3

### Review of literature on cooptation theory and poverty governance

#### Abstract

In this chapter, I review the theoretical framework for the dissertation as a whole. First, I introduce cooptation theory. This framework from organizational sociology describes a common consequence of social movement institutionalization: hegemonic actors strategically include social movement actors who are seeking radical change, in a way that allows the dominant institution to retain control over the processes of change. Cooptation theory provides a framework for making sense of the risks of CLT mainstreaming. Second, I clarify the hegemonic institutional field that CLTs are joining as they professionalize: the bureaucratic field of racialized welfare provision and poverty governance. Third, I review the literature on how poverty governance is enacted in practice: the “delegated welfare state”, aka a complex network of public and private actors that emerged from neoliberal, marketizing reforms. Finally, I discuss the homeownership-promoting programs that have emerged in response to neoliberal dissolution and transformation of the welfare state.

#### Introduction

As described in the previous chapter, much of the literature on Community Land Trusts (CLTs)—by proponents and skeptics alike—focuses on their potential to enact community control and create alternatives to racialized, market-based systems for allocating resources (Choi, Zandt, and Matarrita-Cascante 2018; Schneider, Lennon, and Saegert 2022; Thompson 2015). Another line of research expresses concern about the increasing institutionalization of CLTs, arguing broadly that the field of CLTs is moving away from community control, citing the

absence of community control in mission statements and identifying high-profile instances of CLT founded by the state as technocratic, top-down affordable housing programs (DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019; Sumner and Hughes 2024). In this dissertation, I argue that prior research on CLTs both understates the extent to which neoliberal logics have infiltrated the classical CLT model—shaping organizational missions and practices far beyond the loss of community control—and overestimates the threat this phenomenon poses to the CLT movement as a whole. In this chapter, I discuss the theoretical framework underlying these arguments, clarifying the hegemonic institutional field that CLTs are joining as they professionalize: the bureaucratic field of racialized welfare provision and poverty governance (Wacquant 2009). Situating CLTs within this field is an essential step for CLT research because it clarifies *which* hegemonic logics and professional practices are most likely to be inadvertently adopted as CLTs become mainstream—and the logics they may be best positioned to challenge or transform.

## Cooptation Theory

Cooptation theory provides a framework for making sense of the risks of CLT mainstreaming, explicating a common fate of social movements. Cooptation theory emerged out of research on organizations in order to make sense of the ways in which powerful institutions seek to maintain stability by diffusing and mitigating attempts at transformational change (Baur and Schmitz 2011; Coy and Hedeem 2005; Eriksson 2018; Holdo 2019; Selznick 1949). Cooptation occurs when a powerful organization strategically includes or incorporates actors who are seeking radical change; this inclusion allows the dominant organization to retain control over the processes of change (Baur and Schmitz 2011; Eriksson 2018; Holdo 2019; Selznick 1949). When successful, the included actors adapt—and even adopt—the goals, logics, and

frameworks of the dominant organization (Baur and Schmitz 2011; Coy and Hedeem 2005; Eriksson 2018; Holdo 2019; Murphree, Wright, and Ebaugh 1996; Selznick 1949).

The notion of cooptation has been primarily used at the organizational level, to make sense of dynamics between a powerful organization and less powerful actors (often members of a social movement). The term was first coined by Philip Selznick based on his observations of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA; 1949). Selznick documented the increased specialization and delegation of authority in government projects (a phenomenon discussed below) and identified the (incomplete) inclusion of local farmers in TVA projects as a mechanism to minimize external accountability pressures and increase legitimacy (1949). Subsequent work has applied the notion of cooptation to a wide range of contexts—including municipal mental health services, hazardous waste site remediation projects, and fair trade coffee certification—and highlighted the agency of social movement leaders, identifying cases wherein incorporated representatives resist cooptation or are coopted but interrupted by social movement peers (Eriksson 2018; Murphree, Wright, and Ebaugh 1996; Jaffee 2012).

In this project, I apply the concept of cooptation at both the organizational level (in terms of resident involvement within individual CLTs) and the field level (in terms of CLTs' inclusion in the affordable housing nonprofit field). Cooptation theory provides a theoretical framework for making sense of evolving goals, conflicting theories of change, and the relationship between social movements and the broader systems they seek to challenge or change. Throughout the dissertation, I draw on scholarship that argues that cooptation should not be understood as the automatic loss of autonomy among incorporated social movements actors; rather, scholars and practitioners should attend to the extent of self-determination that actors are able to maintain

within the boundaries of necessary participation in existing institutions and systems (Eriksson 2018; Katzenstein 1998; Staggenborg 1988).

To understand the institutional field that would be coopting CLTs, we must turn to scholarship that theorizes the delegation of state responsibility for social services in general and for housing in particular. In this chapter, I review literature on poverty governance and asset-based welfare, theorizing CLTs and their mainstreaming in the context of state projects to manage and discipline the poor and the two-tiered system of housing subsidy in the United States. In the section below, I articulate the goals of poverty governance (punishment, the cultivation of cooperative citizen subjects, and, at times, preservation of life) and then review the literature on how poverty governance is enacted in practice (through a complex network of public and private actors as a result of neoliberal, marketizing reform; the “delegated welfare state”). Finally, I discuss the homeownership-promoting programs that have emerged in response to neoliberal dissolution and transformation of the welfare state.

## Poverty Governance

Scholarship on poverty governance investigates how state actors shape and manage marginalized populations and, in doing so, (re)produce marginality by unequally exposing or protecting some lives to injury, violence, and death (biopower; Foucault 1990; Foucault 2008). The goal of poverty governance is rarely to end poverty; instead, the state seeks to “manage low-income populations and transform them into cooperative subjects of the market and polity” (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011: 2). Sociological research on poverty governance has traced how state programs and actors deploy both punishment and paternalistic discipline to punish deviance, exclude or remove “undesirable” populations, and cultivate the poor into “independent, individually responsible” citizens (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Wacquant 2009). Research

on this system has spanned a wide range of institutions, including the criminal legal system (e.g. Haney 2010), medical care provision (Seim 2020), the child welfare system (Woodward 2021), and public housing agencies (McCabe 2023; Rita, Garboden, and Darrah-Okike 2022). This chapter focuses primarily on the welfare state, as this is the field that CLTs are increasingly embedded in.

Scholars have theorized three, typically co-occurring, modes through which poverty governance unfolds: a punitive mode, which focuses on punishing the governed for perceived violations (Wacquant 2009); a paternalistic mode, wherein actors seek to reform perceived deviant subjects into ideal citizen subjects (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011), and/or the palliative mode, wherein actors attempt to mitigate institutional failures and simply keep the poor alive through stopgap, minimalistic maintenance (DiMario 2022). Poverty governance has wide-ranging consequences for the governed; in many cases, it determines whether and when the governed can access sufficient food, medical care, or shelter, as well as the stigma and suffering they must face in order to meet those needs.

Poverty governance is deeply racialized and gendered. Race and gender operate as both social structures which organize politics and markets and as mental structures that political actors draw upon to make decisions (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Historically, people of color were outright denied access to welfare on the basis of race, either through statutory exclusion of individuals or through *de facto* exclusion achieved through seemingly race-neutral industry- or place-based discrimination (Gordon 1994; Quadagno 1996; Ward 2005). For instance, following the welfare rights movement of the 1960s, racialized accusations of waste, fraud, and indolence led to a rollback of welfare concentrated in areas with Black populations (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Hunt 2005). Today, conceptions of race and gender influence what conduct is deemed in

need of state management, what type of intervention would be appropriate, and the goals of that intervention (Constance-Huggins 2011; Haney 2010; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Wacquant 2009; Ward 2005).

Delegation through market-type relationships and disciplinary uses of welfare expanded following World War II, then intensified dramatically as a result of neoliberal paternalist reform that followed a brief period of liberal welfare expansion in the 1960s. Scholars have argued that delegation was politically expedient for post-war legislators, who faced contradictory public demands for social services without government expansion and a uniquely powerful, yet easily stymied legislative branch (Morgan and Campbell 2011). Delegation to private actors provided an avenue for public programs to exist with far less direct government staffing or administrative responsibility (Morgan and Campbell 2011). Moreover, the incorporation of private interests facilitates coalition-building, fundraising, and the need for reliable voting constituencies (Jackson and Orr 1997; Marwell 2004; Morgan and Campbell 2011). State responsibilities were further delegated under the neoliberal movement, beginning in the 1960s. This movement was characterized by an initial selective retraction of welfare programs and market regulations (in the 1960s and 1970s), followed by a restructuring of the state around market principles and extending its reach through public-private collaboration (Harvey 2019; Salamon 1993; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Stoesz 2000; Wacquant 2009). This shift towards market orientation, monitoring, and measurement was part of a broader, global shift in governance institutions; in other contexts, it is sometimes referred to as New Public Management (Askheim 2017; Bislev and Salskov-Iversen 2001; Eriksson 2018).

Neoliberal paternalists reformulated long-standing discourses around making poor people into better systems, adopting the language of personal responsibility and “work first” (Soss,

Fording, and Schram 2011). Neoliberal reformers framed marginalized people as disorderly and dysfunctional, casting welfare providers in the role of a correctional officer who monitors recipients, incentivizing good behavior and punishing bad behavior (Foucault 2008; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Welfare providers were tasked with the goal of shaping the poor into the model citizen subject, which under neoliberal governance is an economic subject, “an entrepreneur of himself” (Foucault 2008: 226). The model citizen subject performs self-governing acts of restraint and control, embracing their responsibility to seek entry into property ownership (Foucault 2008). This reconceptualization of welfare was bolstered by the weakening of public support for welfare programs, a trend driven in large part by white racial animus in the wake of desegregation and affirmative action (Gilens 2009; Omi and Winant 1994; Katz 2002; Wright 1977).

## Delegated Welfare State

Ultimately, neoliberal paternalist reforms facilitated the devolution of authority and responsibility for social service provision to private actors, creating a sprawling, byzantine network of institutions in which street-level agents—with varying degrees of proximity to the state—wield moral authority and supervisory discretion over the poor, with the mandate of shaping them into self-sufficient, responsible, savvy citizen-subjects (Morgan and Campbell 2011; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Understanding the agents involved in poverty governance thus requires an expansive view of “the state”. The American state<sup>8</sup> functions less like the Weberian ideal-typical state—directly exerting authority through centralized, hierarchical public bureaucracies—and more like an elaborate Rube Goldberg machine, with private actors

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<sup>8</sup> Though the United States was not alone in this trend—Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and the UK have all enacted similar market-based reforms—its regulatory apparatus is uniquely weak, and its embrace of consumer-choice reforms and profit-making firms is unusually enthusiastic (Morgan and Campbell 2011).

largely responsible for the administration and provision of social services (Clemens 2006, as cited in Morgan and Campbell 2011). Scholars have applied numerous terms to describe this phenomenon: privatization, marketization, devolution, the hollow state, third party government, and the delegated welfare state. In this chapter, I primarily refer to the “delegated welfare state” (Morgan and Campbell 2011) because it most closely hews to the aspects of this phenomenon that apply to CLTs (a focus on redistributive programs and the question of whether nonprofits may better enact community control).

The question of accountability lies at the heart of arguments both in favor of and against delegating responsibility for social service programs to for-profit and/or nonprofit non-governmental actors.<sup>9</sup> Three broad models of accountability are at play: traditional democratic accountability of the state to the public (in its newest iteration of participatory governance), the neoliberal market-style accountability of a company (private service providers) to its customers (social service recipients), and the neoliberal regulatory accountability of a contractor (private service provider) to a general contractor (the state, who monitors and oversees service provision). In this section, I review the literature on these models and connect this literature to the perennial question of community control in CLTs. Throughout this dissertation, I explore how these different models are invoked, adopted, and challenged by CLT practitioners. The experimentation and growing popularity of the CLT model has led to a wide range of answers to the questions these models of accountability pose: whom an organization is responsible to, what form that responsibility takes, and how that responsibility should be institutionalized and enforced.

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<sup>9</sup> For this project, I follow the definition of accountability that Mark Bovens outlines in his widely-cited 2007 conceptual framework: accountability is “a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and justify their conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences.” (Bovens 2007: 450).

State actors are, at least in theory, accountable to the voting public; they have an obligation to serve public interest and to be transparent to the public through processes embedded in a clearly defined hierarchy led by elected officials who will be voted out if they fail (Morgan and Campbell 2011; Norris 2014). Critics from across the political spectrum have, unsurprisingly, identified a number of problems with this system in practice: the public's interests and preferences are heterogenous to the point of contradiction; the state has a monopoly on services and thus no organizational incentive for good performance; state service providers are typically hired or appointed staff with no direct accountability to the public; the state was founded to support white settler colonialism and defines "the public" accordingly; and the state's notion of "public interest" is easily captured by wealthy or otherwise influential interest groups. In response to these issues, two new models of governance have emerged: the participatory model, an evolution of the state model which re-affirms the ideals of transparency and democratic decision-making but pursues them through new processes of democratic decision-making, and the neoliberal delegated welfare state model, which blends market accountability (which depends on forces like competition and customer satisfaction) with bureaucratic state oversight (which theoretically holds private actors accountable through performance systems that rely on supervision, quantitative benchmarks, and financial incentives).

Participatory governance is an international movement that proposes a collaborative, experimental, and iterative approach to policymaking and implementation (Chhotray and Stoker 2009; see also new governance theory, e.g. Norris 2014). This model embraces the proliferation of civil society organizations, arguing that, under the right conditions, nonprofit and volunteer organizations can increase civic participation, educate individuals in how to become good citizens, and serve as arenas for democratic problem-solving (Gaventa 2002; LeRoux 2007;

LeRoux 2009; McCambridge 2004; Jackson and Orr 1997). Much of the research on nonprofit governance defines responsibilities in terms of legal and fiduciary obligations of the governing board to donors and funders and the practical work of ensuring the organization's survival and mission alignment (Stone and Ostrower 2007).

Research suggests that the actual participation of service recipients in nonprofit decision-making and direction is often limited and infrequent; as a result, researchers and practitioners have called for deeper, more equitable relationships among nonprofit actors and the communities they serve (LeRoux 2009; McCambridge 2004; Newport 2003; Stone and Ostrower 2007). The gap between the promise and reality of nonprofits serving as incubators of grassroots democracy is, in part, the result of the effects of neoliberal performance assessment systems and the practical consequences of participation in the delegated welfare state, which drives nonprofits towards efficient, quantifiable objectives (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Stone and Ostrower 2007). Moreover, organizations that receive contracts and funding from the state to provision social services have a strong interest in maintaining or expanding that funding, in addition to any ideological motivations to sustain delegation (e.g. Hackworth 2010). In other words, they become actors within the bureaucratic field or social space where the definition of distribution of public goods are contested (Bourdieu 1994; Wacquant 2010). Participation in this field requires that organization workers seek access to funding and clients, enact entrepreneurial approaches to service delivery, embody practices that appeal to funders and other gatekeepers, and prioritize well-funded niches of need (Bourdieu 1994; Dart 2004; Maier, Meyer, and Steinbereithner 2016; Wacquant 2010; Woolford and Curran 2013).

The neoliberal movement successfully introduced a third, hybrid model of accountability which relies on a blend of market forces and state oversight. The market model prioritizes

efficiency and grounds accountability in customer choice and financial consequences, rather than notions of democratic control or transparency (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Proponents argued that private service providers would be incentivized by financial risk and potential profit to use their greater flexibility to provide efficient, high-quality service (Hanke 1985; Hodge 2018; Smith and Lipsky 1993; Winston et al. 2002). They could be held accountable by government bureaucrats, who (directly and indirectly) set financial incentives and oversee service provision to ensure that private actors meet certain standards (Milward and Provan 2000). Moreover, providers could be held directly accountable by service recipients, who are placed in the role of customers: if service quality was poor, recipients could simply seek service elsewhere (“exit”), threatening service providers’ bottom line, or contest poor service provision (“voice”; Hirschman 1970; Morgan and Campbell 2011).

However, market accountability for delegated state authority relies on a number of conditions (Morgan and Campbell 2011; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). First, the government in question must be able to meaningfully measure and assess the quality of service provided. Second, if such measurement is possible, the government must have sufficient administrative capacity to screen, monitor, and regulate private contractors to ensure compliance. Third, market benefits require a critical mass of vendors to compete in a free market. And fourth, service recipient “customers” must have sufficient alternatives, freedom, time, knowledge, and political consciousness to seek other providers or mobilize against bad service.

Empirical research suggests the conditions for neoliberal accountability through market forces and government oversight are rarely met in real-world social service provision. In practice, measuring the quality of complex welfare provision is challenging and can shape service providers’ behavior in unexpected and disadvantageous ways (Brogaard and Petersen

2022; Hefetz and Warner 2012; Hodge 2018; Milward and Provon 2000; Petersen et al 2018). Vendors rarely compete in a free market scenario, leaving service recipients with few alternatives (Hodge 2018; Slyke 2003). Moreover, service recipients, like most people, are rarely capable of behaving as expert, economically rational actors (Morgan and Campbell 2011). Lack of competition, the systems used to monitor performance, and financial incentives strongly incentivize private agents of the delegated welfare state to cut corners, avoid serving the most needy, and discipline recipients into idealized market actors (Morgan and Campbell 2011; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; but note that similar financial incentives and political logics can act similarly on state actors, see McCabe 2023 and Brodtkin 1997). These actions disproportionately affect people of color and those who most need social services (Quadagno 1996; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

Critics of the delegated welfare state and privatization in general have argued that delegation—regardless of who authority is delegated to—blurs the boundaries between public and private, fundamentally obfuscating lines of authority and accountability (Milward and Provan 2000; Morgan and Campbell 2011; Metzger 2003; Smith and Lipsky 2009; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Delegation shifts the locus of decision making from governments, who are equipped to devote significant time and knowledge to key decisions, to providers and individuals (Morgan and Campbell 2011). In the context of Medicaid plan selection, for instance, individual choice has significant negative consequences for service beneficiaries; seniors selecting prescription plans are overwhelmed by the number of options and tend to use selection criteria that result in higher out-of-pocket costs and worse coverage (Morgan and Campbell 2011). Finally, delegation shifts discretion over a number of consequential decisions from state agents to private sector employees; non-profit and for-profit contractors become the street-level

bureaucrats who determine whether, when, and how people receive social services. Unlike the old system, under which a single entity (e.g. a state Department of Children and Families) was responsible for each step of policy implementation, delegation creates a complex network of organizations involved in service delivery; each of these organizations has strong incentive to shift blame for failures or harms (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

These debates over accountability are echoed in conversations around CLTs. Advocates argue for CLTs typically adopt the participatory governance (or nonprofit) model of accountability, arguing that CLTs are more in-tune with local community needs; “community control” is a core tenant of the classical CLT model. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, community control is typically institutionalized in the form of CLT residents and local non-CLT residents on the nonprofit’s board. In this dissertation, I advance the conversation around CLT accountability and community control by documenting both organizations in which community control has ceased to be a priority and organizations that are facilitating collective democratic governance as the most foundational level. In the following section, I review the history of housing subsidy in the United States, providing context for the particular niche of the delegated welfare state that CLTs are increasingly joining.

## Housing Welfare

Housing is an important domain in which poverty governance is enacted. Housing is a necropolitical infrastructure, in the sense that policy decisions, power exerted by the state, and power exerted by market actors shape people’s access to stable housing and that one’s health and well-being directly depend on that access (Foucault 1990; Mbembe 2003). By shaping access to housing, the state and other powerful actors exert power over which populations and types of people are able live and thrive (Foucault 1990; Mbembe 2003). CLTs that focus on affordable

housing enter the conditions created by the delegated welfare state: a vast, unmet need for affordable housing, local governments starved of housing funding, and a deeply short-sighted governance logic. In this section, I briefly trace the history of housing welfare in the United States, from the New Deal-era policies that began the contemporary pattern of invisible homeownership subsidy and visible, contested rental subsidy to more recent neoliberal policies that facilitate individualized wealth building in lieu of a social safety net. The parallel systems for housing welfare reflect the bifurcated nature of the state across domains in the United States: the state is small and largely unobtrusive for the white upper classes but sprawling and deliberately intrusive for people of color and the poor (Wacquant 2009).

The Wagner-Steagall Housing Act of 1937, along with other New Deal housing legislation, created a “two-tiered” system of housing welfare in the U.S.: a highly visible, underfunded, contentious system of rental subsidy and a robust, largely invisible system subsidizing homeownership (Radford 1996). Understanding this system is critical for understanding the landscape of “affordable housing” that CLTs join today. I begin with the second, lower tier of housing welfare in the United States, the tier most people think of as “welfare”: support for affordable rentals through highly visibly, chronically underfunded, and contested subsidies (Schwartz 2021; Vale 2018; Venkatesh 2002).

Early public housing projects (1933 to 1940) were created as a result of Progressive Era reformers campaigns to address “slums” and overcrowding in the country’s growing cities; these early projects were well-appointed compared to comparable units, with desirable amenities like electric refrigerators and reliable heat (Vale 2018). Following World War II, Congress reinstated public housing funding, despite an onslaught of negative public opinion driven by real estate interests; public housing survived only because it facilitated the clearing of inner-city

neighborhoods for more profitable purposes (Hunt 2005). This post-war public housing was explicitly intended to shore up racial segregation (Hunt 2005). Between 1949 and 1968, nearly 800,000 units of public housing were built; the number of public housing units in the USA peaked in 1994 (Schwartz 2021: 126). Since its inception, operating costs for public housing have been consistently underfunded, leading to local public housing authorities (PHAs) to depend on rental incomes for maintenance and administrative costs (Friedman 1996; Radford 1996). Dependence on rents meant that early public house was intended for market-ready populations, as a stepping stone into the middle American dream (what Lawrence Friedman termed “the submerged middle class”; 1996). As Federal Housing Authority (FHA) mortgage insurance made homeownership possible for working-class white families, the median income of public housing residents fell dramatically and the proportion of Black residents rose (Friedman 1996; Schwartz 2021; Venkatesh 2002). Between 1974 and 1998, Congress passed several contradictory laws regarding public housing, both trying to ensure that public housing served those most in need (below 50% of area median income) and to prevent concentrated poverty (Schwartz 2021). In 2009, only 17% of public housing residents made more than \$20,000, well below the federal poverty line (Schwartz 2021: 130).

The neoliberal reforms described in the previous section were enacted in housing welfare in a range of subsidies, the most prominent of which are 1) Housing Choice Vouchers (also known as Section 8), which allowed the state to delegate the ownership, administration, and maintenance of affordable housing to private market landlords and 2) the Lower Income Housing Tax Credits, a tax subsidy which facilitates the delegation of affordable housing development and administration to private market developers (Goetz 2011; Schwartz 2021).

Advocates for the housing voucher system (in which an eligible household seeks housing on the traditional rental market and pays the difference between market rate and the voucher's value) follow the neoliberal market arguments described above: vouchers provide greater choice for the recipients, potentially allowing them to live in wealthier neighborhoods or better-maintained units. In practice, the program is deeply underfunded; in 2022, Congress budgeted about \$24 billion for the Section 8 program, enough to support only 25% of likely eligible households (Acosta 2024; Schwartz and McClure 2020). Moreover, even if Congress fully funded the program, a number of challenges are created by this program's dependence on the traditional rental market. An estimated 30% of households who currently receive a voucher cannot find a suitable home with a landlord willing to accept the voucher—in most places, private landlords can and frequently do refuse to accept vouchers (Cunningham et al 2018). Even when landlords accept vouchers, high market-rate rents and insufficient housing stock force many clients into high-poverty neighborhoods and/or more expensive units than they can afford (the PHA pays 70% of “fair market rent” and the client pays the difference between this and the actual rent; Cunningham et al 2018; Dawkins and Jeon 2018). In light of these constraints, the processes used to assign and redeem vouchers favor households that are most equipped to navigate the traditional rental market (McCabe 2023).

The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) is a subsidy created in the 1986 Tax Reform Act to provide financial incentives for the development of low-income rental housing; most beneficiaries are for-profit developers (NLIHC and PAHRC 2018; Schwartz 2021). LIHTC now accommodates more households than public housing and a comparable number of households as the Housing Choice Voucher program (Schwartz 2021). The program allows investors to reduce their federal income taxes through a fairly convoluted process; in exchange,

the units developed must be affordable for at least 30 years or longer, depending on the state and type of credit received (Phillips 2020; Schwartz 2021). When the affordability requirements expire, units can be converted to market-rate rents at the owner's discretion. Though various municipalities have extended this requirement to 55 years or even permanent affordability, this practice is not widespread, and the expiration of old contracts is a serious issue given the limited funding available for affordable housing (Phillips 2020).

The three most prominent methods of funding affordable rentals—public housing, housing choice vouchers, and LIHTC—are connected by a consistent pattern: insufficient funding to develop new units of affordable housing and functionally no systems to ensure the preservation of existing units (Duong 2022; Reina 2018; Jayachandran 2024). This problem may come to a head in the next 10 years. Existing public housing units are projected to need at least \$26 billion to address deferred maintenance (likely a significant underestimate) and, by 2030, nearly 500,000 LIHTC-funded units will reach the end of their mandated affordability period (Duong 2022; NLIHC and PAHRC 2018; Reina 2018). An additional 710,000 units (funded by Section 8 project-based rental assistance or HOME financing) are likewise at risk of becoming market-rate units due to the end of contract or funding periods (Reina 2018). Though many administrators of these properties will likely opt to renew their subsidy or apply for new subsidy to maintain affordability and address maintenance, it is unclear how many units will remain affordable or what consequences residents will face. LIHTC operators, for instance, are typically not required to provide residents with advance notice of the end of the affordability period, nor are residents entitled to vouchers or relocation assistance, putting them at risk of displacement or homelessness (Duong 2022).

In contrast to the controversial, underfunded system for affordable rentals, the first tier of the housing welfare system supports homeownership for the middle class through a sprawling and largely invisible system of tax expenditures and support for the secondary mortgage market, as well as some means-tested programs (e.g. the mortgage tax deduction, down payment assistance programs; Howard 1999; Schwartz 2021). The growth of the hidden welfare system that supports homeownership was fueled by the settler colonial linkage of property ownership as the centerpiece of democratic society and (white, male) citizenship (Bhandar 2018; Howard 1999; McCabe 2016). Twentieth century pro-homeownership reformers reified the centrality of property ownership by linking homeownership and civic participation in pro-homeownership campaigns, constructing ownership as a social good (McCabe 2016). The federal government still spends over five times more on homeownership tax subsidies than rental tax subsidies (\$400 billion as opposed to \$72 billion; Novogradac 2018) and subsidizes nearly twice as many homeowners as renters (15 million owners as opposed to 8 million renters; Schwartz 2021). Most of these tax benefits go to households with incomes over \$100,000 (Schwartz 2021).

Though much of the federal subsidy for homeownership benefits the middle class, there are some homeownership programs (e.g. the Housing Choice Voucher homeownership program, downpayment assistance programs) that are means-tested or targeted at a particular lower-income segment of the population. These subsidies are increasingly common as a result of an ideology that fits with neoliberal focus on individual responsibility and the cultivation of competent of investor-subjects through state discipline: asset-based welfare.

## Housing Asset-Based Welfare and CLTs

Though early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, pro-homeownership campaigns lauded homeownership as a means of “forced savings” through equity, the recent emphasis on wealth-building through

appreciation did not emerge until relatively recently (McCabe 2016; Toussaint and Elsinga 2009). Asset-based welfare is an approach to social policy that emphasizes individual ownership of assets (e.g. savings or housing) as the path to security, in place of a social safety net (Doling and Ronald 2010; Prabhakar 2019). This approach has been a key response to the absence of redistributive social spending programs internationally, as states attempt to manage ageing populations in light of neoliberal welfare retrenchment (Conly and Gifford 2006; Doling and Ronald 2010).

As housing has financialized, or become increasingly significant as a market commodity, states have increasingly made housing a cornerstone of the new welfare state, expecting citizens to re-imagine housing as a liquid asset that will secure their financial futures (Doling and Ronald 2010; Malpass 2008; Watson 2010). That is, the logic of asset-based welfare reflects the broader neoliberal devolution of responsibility for welfare to individuals, such that households must use private assets to meet financial needs that arise due to age, unemployment, or disability (Doling and Ronald 2010; Foucault 2008; Nethercote 2018; Watson 2010). Asset-based welfare redefines the model welfare recipient, disciplining recipients into savvy saver-investor subjects who participate in market ownership as a moral good and responsibility. The idealized citizen subject operates as a hedge fund manager who manages a portfolio of risk managed through finance literacy and prudence in order to access goods previously treated as a right (e.g. housing, education, health care; Bryan and Rafferty 2014). Discipline is partially enacted through the inculcation of fear of a deeply uncertain future, with no safety net (Foucault 2008); a fear that is, in light of a fraying social safety net and growing precarity, not unfounded. This fear and uncertainty transform individualized life course risk management and market participation into “something that individuals should do and also want to do, to reflect the duties they have to

themselves to secure a comfortable future existence” (Watson 2010: 416). Notably, this logic casts homeownership as a moral imperative and path to security even when, in practice, it involves taking on exposure to market volatility, reliance on private financial institutions, and potentially untenable personal debt (Bryan and Rafferty 2014; Watson 2010).

The logic of asset-based welfare is the foundation of the affordable homeownership field that housing-oriented CLTs must join in order to acquire funding, political recognition, and essential partnerships. As explicated in Chapter 5, this logic frames individual wealth-building through homeownership as the solution to the social problem of poverty; adoption of this logic and its aims diverges from the foundational values of the CLT movement, which frame land and affordable housing as collective, social resources.

Though the institutionalization of CLTs has been a topic of discussion among researchers and academics for decades, little is known about how CLTs may either reify or challenge the individualized, investor-subject foundations of homeownership promotion in the United States. In the following chapter, I describe the methodological approach used to answer this question. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, I find that evidence that the logic of asset-based welfare animates Community Land Trusts across the Southwest. These findings echo prior findings that some CLTs pursue technocratic affordable housing provision, downplaying or entirely abandoning the classic ideals of community control and political transformation. My findings extend beyond this work, however, identifying additional aspects of the asset-based welfare logic that these organizations adopt as they join (or, more often, are founded as part of) the bureaucratic field of affordable housing: the valorization of individual responsibility, wealth, and market participation. However, I also find evidence that suggests that these politically affirmative organizations may not threaten the CLT movement as much as prior work would suggest. I document an established

and growing network of CLTs in California that are iterating on the classical CLT model in ways that, I argue, enact community control more directly and effectively. These organizations have pursued state funding and recognition without losing their commitment to political transformation grounded in community control (see Chapter 7).

# Chapter 4

## Methods

To make sense of the political logics present across CLTs in the Southwest and how those logics influenced organizational structures and practices, I paired in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with Southwestern CLT staff and leadership (participant N = 40; organization N = 33) with content analysis of relevant documents and supplemental participant observation. Individuals draw on political logics strategically and in accordance with their own worldview and professional socialization (Armstrong 2002; Nelson 2021; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011); I anticipated variation in beliefs, priorities and narratives within a given organization. Triangulation of multiple data sources and types allowed me to make connections across levels of analysis and confirm if findings are consistent across data types (Small 2011).

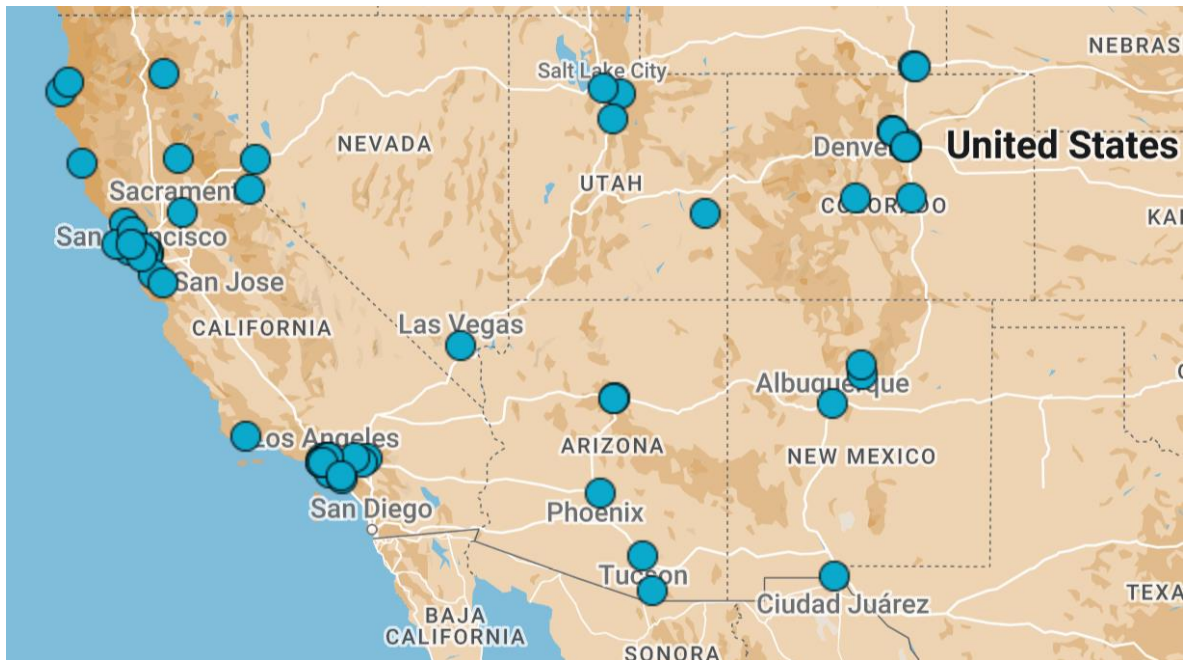
To capture both individual and organizational level logics, I triangulated data across participants within an organization (when possible) and across data sources, pairing organization-level documents and individual interviews to make sense of the political logic(s) present within a given CLT. Interviews generated rich data on the narratives, assumptions, and beliefs that CLT workers used in their daily work, as well as interlocutors they frequently interacted with and their perceptions of other organizations and affordable housing models. Content analysis of relevant documents—CLT websites, legal documents (e.g. ground leases; bylaws) shared by participants, technical documents (e.g. Grounded Solutions Network manuals), and news media report—provided insight into CLT’s missions, founding, relationships, and current portfolios. Bylaws and technical documents also revealed how norms and meanings are formalized through organizational policies. Though mission statements are theoretically the “bottom line” that determines organizational priorities and activities, in practice,

they are politically motivated, dynamic documents (Berlan 2018; Kirk and Nolan 2010). As such, these documents provide evidence on the way(s) that the organization seeks to present itself and the base documents that participants interpret and enact in their daily work (Berlan 2018). I found that the narratives and priorities participants invoked almost always aligned with the narratives and priorities espoused in their CLT's public-facing documents. Finally, I conducted over 50 hours of participant observation at the California CLT Network annual conference, events hosted by CLTs in the sample, public municipal meetings concerning CLTs, and several meetings among CLT staff to which I was invited.

## Sampling and Case Selection

All CLTs in the Southwest United States were eligible to participate in the study (N = 63 in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah). Organizations were initially identified through the Grounded Solutions Network database (N = 58 at the time of data collection); additional organizations were identified through peer-to-peer recruitment and the California CLT Network membership list.

**Figure 2: Map of CLTs in the Southwest**



2024 Map of CLTs in the American Southwest. Source: International Center for CLTs

Investigating CLTs across a region, not one city or state, allowed me to balance the need for both a systematic view of the field (beyond high-profile instances of politically affirmative *or* politically transformative organizations) and a nuanced, qualitative view of each organization. CLTs in the Southwest were selected because these states contain several high-profile “top-down” CLTs (e.g. Irvine CLT in Irvine, California and the Flagstaff city program in Arizona; DeFilippis et al 2018) and includes states with a robust CLT field (e.g. California and Arizona) and states with only a few, emerging CLTs (e.g. Utah). This approach allowed me to capture variation in state-level regulatory and funding environments, population densities, and housing markets. Finally, this region provided a sufficient number of CLTs to capture key variation in organization’s goals, size, age, and professional affiliations (e.g. with local government, partner organizations, etc.).

## Interviews

Eligible interviewees include those who were involved with organizational decisions (e.g. leadership board members, executives), workers who implement those decisions day-to-day (e.g. member-resident coordinators), and consultants (e.g. CLT specialists). Participants were recruited for interviews through email, phone calls, LinkedIn, and word of mouth; response rates were quite low (roughly 10%, though this is an estimate as I did not track each contact attempt).

Several factors likely contributed to the low response rate. First, many CLTs in my sample provided only a general email address, with no contact information for staff and leadership, at times not listing the names of staff. Several participants later noted that their organization's general email address was not monitored or that it was not clear who, if anyone, was responsible for it. The lack of contact information also required me to seek other publicly available contact information (per IRB guidelines); when this was available, it was through channels that participants may not check regularly (e.g. LinkedIn.com profiles). The response rate was higher when participants were recruited through participant observation (e.g. the CA CLT Network conference) or word of mouth. Furthermore, in interviews and participant observation, many participants expressed feelings of overwhelm and broad, ambiguous role responsibilities that may limit their capacity to voluntarily participate in a research study (e.g. "feeling stretched thin", "wearing many hats"). Given this, I am especially grateful to the participants who gave their time to participate in the project. Finally, my sample has a higher proportion of white participants than the population of staff eligible to participate in the project; this may be the result of white participants feeling more comfortable speaking to an unknown white researcher or an artefact of white CLT staffers being more likely to work at large, professionalized organizations where they had clear duties and a more manageable workload.

The table below reports the self-reported demographic information of my sample; through-out this project, I refer to participants using the terms they used for themselves (e.g. Hispanic, mestiza, or African American). I collected data on participants’ title and roles in their organization, then sorted them into one of four categories. “Leadership” refers to participants who were in paid leadership positions (e.g. CEOs, executive directors, business officers) and “staff” refers to participants who were in paid positions below leaders in an organizational hierarchy (e.g. housing coordinator; co-op program manager). Board members are participants who served on the board of directors; “other” includes participants who volunteered with CLT (typically when the organization did not yet have operating cost funding), served on advisory boards, or consulted with CLTs (e.g. providing legal counsel or expert CLT technical guidance).

**Figure 3: Interviewee Demographics (Number of participants by state, race, gender, and CLT role)**

State		Race		Gender		Position in CLT	
Arizona	11	White	29	Man	18	Leadership	18
California	18	Black/African American	2	Woman	16	Staff	13
Colorado	6	Latinx/Hispanic	8	Nonbinary/other	6	Board Member	4
Nevada, Utah, and Other <sup>10</sup>	5	Indigenous/mestiza	3			Other	5
Total	40		42 <sup>11</sup>		40		40

Some interviewees were associated with multiple organizations in the sample and some organizations volunteered multiple staffers or affiliates to participate in the project. Thirty-three

<sup>10</sup> There are very few CLTs in Utah and Nevada, so these are combined to preserve anonymity. The “other” is a California CLT Network participant who works for a CLT outside of the Southwest.

<sup>11</sup> Two participants identified as multiple races and were double-counted.

organizations are represented in interviews. Eight of these organizations were located in Arizona, sixteen in California, five in Colorado, and four in Nevada and Utah. Over a dozen other organizations were represented in participant observation.

Interviews lasted 45 to 117 minutes; the average length was 71 minutes. All but three interviews were conducted over Zoom or a phone call. All interviews were recorded for accuracy, with participants' consent. Interview transcripts were initially created with online transcription service Rev's AI tool, then reviewed, anonymized, and checked for accuracy by me. Interviews, text data, and participant observation fieldnotes were coded in Atlas.ti. In order to preserve confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for both interviewees and organizations throughout this document.

Interviews were structured in four parts: an introduction to the participant and organization, a section on the legal model(s) their organization uses to preserve affordability, a section on co-operatives, and a concluding section on other organizations and models (see Appendix A for full interview schedule). Prior to data collection, the interview schedule was pilot tested and refined with two participants who worked in organizations similar to CLTs (one a grassroots advocacy organization, the other an established affordable housing nonprofit). The project was approved by the University of Arizona Institutional Review board in March of 2023.

Interviews were transcribed and coded abductively (Saldaña 2014; Timmermans & Tavory 2012). Initial codes were generated through an in-depth literature review of research on housing and property law in the USA, racial capitalism, and transformative projects. Coding categories were adapted throughout analysis in response to emergent findings. Themes include normative conceptualizations of housing and property (e.g. individualism; valorizing homeownership), alternative conceptualizations (e.g. rights-based approaches; mutual aid

approaches), and related organizational codifications of these values and narratives (e.g. partnerships with other organizations; acquisition strategies; board composition and other decision-making structures; target population and service area). Throughout the research process, I wrote data collection and analytic memos; these memos provided a space for reflection and identification of emergent patterns, categories, and concepts in the data throughout data collection and analysis (Saldaña 2014).

## Content Analysis

I analyzed over 300 pages of documents to provide context and organization-level data for the interview. I downloaded key pages of CLT websites for all organizations associated with an interviewee; these were coded in Atlas.ti. There was significant variation in the amount and quality of information CLTs provided online; many organizations completely omitted information about staff and Board members, the organization's founding, and the number and type of units they held. When available, I saved and analyzed pages that covered the organization's mission statement, projects, eligibility criteria, and origins. I omitted pages that solely listed Board or staff members, pages that had little text, and FAQ-style pages that explained the CLT model, as these had functionally no variation. These documents were coded for the origins of the CLT (e.g. nature of the founders, initial goals, service region), the mission and activities of the CLT (e.g. expressed goals, type of housing provided, alternative programs, partnerships and coalition memberships), and descriptions of the people and place the CLT sought to serve. When available, I also saved and analyzed news media reports (newspaper articles, videos, etc.) about organizations in my sample; these typically described a recent acquisition or funding success and provided valuable data on the CLT's intended population, funders, and priorities.

I also analyzed technical documents provided by the Grounded Solutions Network and California CLT Network. These networks produce reports and documents intended to support CLT practitioners in their work; for instance, there are documents reviewing the pros and cons of different resale formulas, policy changes that would support CLTs' work, and documents recommending how to explain the model to prospective residents. These documents reflect the aspects of the CLT model that hubs value and expect to be challenging for practitioners, providing "best practices" style guidelines and narratives that CLTs could adopt and adapt. Many interviewees reported relying on these technical documents, particularly in the first few years after the organization was founded; some interviewees asserted that founding the CLT would not have been feasible without access to these resources.

## Participant Observation

I conducted participant observation between 2022 and 2025 at both in person gatherings and remote (Zoom-based) meetings, trainings, and events. Per IRB guidelines, I identified myself as a researcher at these events. I attended the California CLT Network annual conference (a two-day event), trainings conducted by the Grounded Solutions Network, and a variety of events hosted or attended by one or more CLTs. When possible, I also watched recordings of prior events, including trainings and public meetings with municipal officials. I took fieldnotes throughout observation, writing in a notebook during the event when socially appropriate (e.g. during a training when many attendees were taking notes) or during breaks and immediately following the event. This observation allowed me to view how participants described their work to a range of audiences—other practitioners, possible funders, and prospective residents—and how they related to other CLTs.

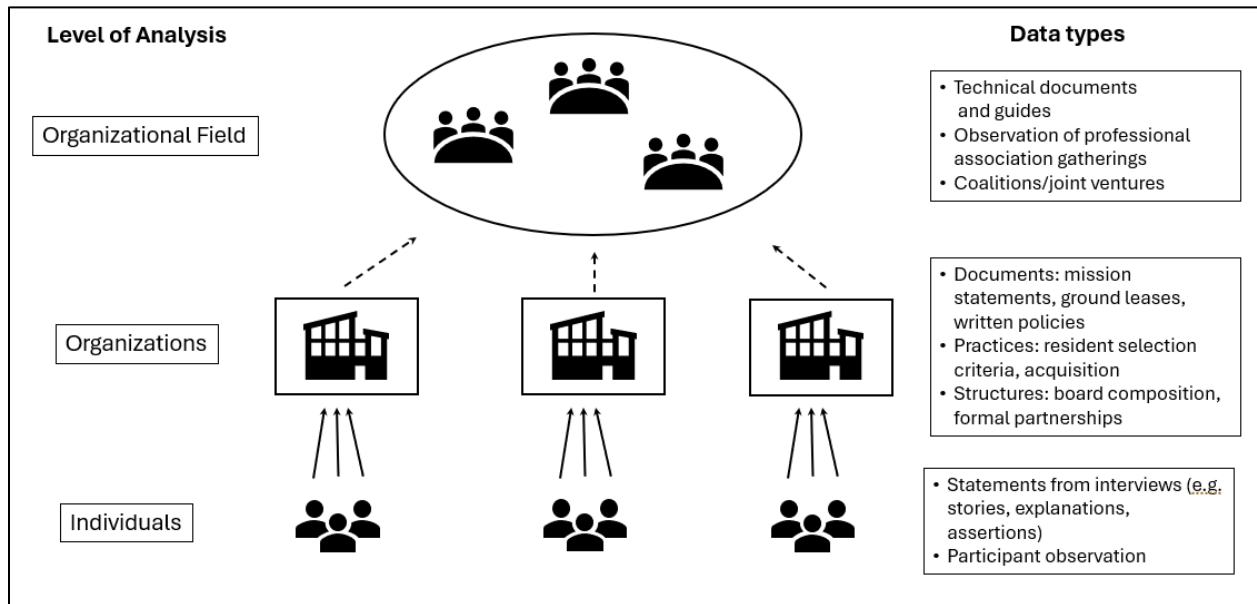
Participant observation was an invaluable method for identifying points of similarity and divergence across organizations; though there were many commonalities in the challenges CLTs faced, conversations among attendees at these events revealed dramatic variation in organizations' political goals, organizational priorities, and participants' professional backgrounds.

## Levels of Analysis and Organizational Categorization

The analysis of organizations—and the political logics present within them—unavoidably generates complications regarding the unit of analysis. Organizations are constituted by people; though discourses, dispositions, and practices may be formalized through organizational structures (such as department structure, role definitions, policies, documents, etc), the organization itself can only act through actual, agentic individuals who interpret and enact those formal structures (Haveman 2000). A comprehensive study of an organization must thus consider both the formal elements of the institution itself and the actors who carry out the daily work.

In this study, there are arguably four units of analysis: individuals embedded in organizations, the organizations themselves (as formal institutions with policies, resources, missions, etc.), an organizational field, and political logics (sets of beliefs, assumptions, practices, etc. that actors both consciously and unconsciously draw upon to guide their actions and coordinate action with others). These levels of analysis are interrelated; formal organizational structures are created and interpreted by individuals within the organization. Likewise, organizational fields are shaped by influential actors who are themselves embedded in organizations. The diagram below illustrates these interrelationships between these levels of analysis and the data used to analyze them.

**Figure 4: Diagram of levels of analysis and associated data types**



As depicted above, individuals (staff, leadership, and volunteers) are embedded within organizations, which in turn make up an organizational field. Political logics, the most abstract unit of analysis, are utilized through-out each of these levels. For instance, the assumption that individual wealth-building is the solution to poverty may be espoused by an individual *and* embedded in an organization’s mission statement and 5-year plan. Likewise, the framing of individual wealth-building as the solution to poverty may be found through-out a particular technical document (e.g. to resale formulas or CLT creation) or guidelines for a policy campaign created by national and state associations.

All organizations in the sample were included in the Chapter 5 analysis of political logics. The subsets of CLTs discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, however, were identified through analysis of political logics at the organizational level, based on organization-level documents and interviews with individuals embedded in those organizations. This analysis was qualitative, not based on quantification of frequency or intensity of political logics. For instance, a CLT would be identified as relying heavily on the asset-based welfare logic if interviewees associated with

that organization consistently espoused the asset-based welfare causal story, political goals, theory of change, and disposition *and* this logic was also present in organizational practices and/or documents (e.g. the mission statement or public story of the CLT's founding).

CLTs were not strictly categorized into a binary of the two logics. Instead, the subsets included in Chapters 6 and 7 should be thought of as clusters on a scatterplot. CLTs were only included in Chapter 6 or 7 when multiple data sources consistently and frequently contained the same dominant political logic; six organizations in the sample were not highlighted in either Chapter 6 or 7. Some of these organizations had elements of both political logics within the multiple data sources. For instance, their website's public, written story of the organization's founding might strongly endorse the importance of individual wealth building to address poverty while also using a social world framework to describe the causes of poverty or housing insecurity. In interviews, a respondent may endorse elements of different political logics, either with awareness of the contradiction or not. For instance, Tom—a director at an established CLT—endorsed the individual wealth-building aspects of the CLT model at some length in his interview, making a pitch for the benefits of CLTs in terms of helping individuals move into the protected class of “owner” and building wealth. However, after a neutral follow-up question from the interviewer (“This may seem like sort of a basic question, but what are the benefits of building that equity and building generational wealth for people? Why is it important?”), he reflected at length and expressed ambivalence about that argument (“I think— I guess... it's part of selling it to the middle class, now that you ask. And like, why am I doing that?”) and expressed elements of the collectivist/redistributive logic (e.g. housing as a collective matter, the need for non-market based alternatives). Tom thus did not clearly favor one political logic over the other.

Finally, some CLTs were not included in Chapters 6 or 7 because the organization was relatively new and did not have a clear primary political logic. In these cases, interviewees drew on elements of both political logics and, at the organizational level, the organization held few or no units of housing in their portfolios and few relevant, formal organizational policies (e.g. rationale for a resale formula or plan for acquisition and resident selection).

## Limitations

Though this study's research design is well-suited to investigating the political logics present in CLTs, my ability to speak to the *consequences* of reliance on these logics is limited because I did not collect data on residents directly and had only limited exposure to CLT staff engaging with the people and place they serve. My data thus cannot speak to the ways that CLTs may be enacting discipline or punishment as they increasingly participate in the delegated welfare state. Preliminary findings from this study suggest some CLT practitioners and guidance documents may view the role of the CLT in terms of shaping residents into idealized investor-subjects under the guise of "stewardship" (see Chapter 6) or into competent collective stewards (see Chapter 7), but these findings are based solely on practitioners' reports in interviews and documents that practitioners used in trainings. Future research on the consequences of CLT diversification should study CLT-resident interactions *in situ*, including observing mandatory pre-purchase trainings for prospective residents, the process of resident application and selection, and post-purchase stewardship.

Likewise, though my data suggests that mission drift<sup>12</sup> among CLTs is rare and that differences in political logics are largely driven by the conditions in which CLTs are founded,

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<sup>12</sup> Mission drift is broadly defined as unintentional or non-deliberate changes in organizations' missions over time, often in terms of a shift away from commitments to social change and towards the pursuit of revenue or organizational survival (Ebrahim, Battilana, and Mair 2014; Grimes, Williams, and Zhao 2019).

time and the scale of this project limited my ability to systematically collect and analyze historical data. CLT staff may be motivated by desirability bias to deny mission drift or may underestimate the extent to which their organization's priorities and daily activities have changed over time. Future research should thus follow organizations over time and/or review internal documents (bylaws, missions, meeting notes, etc.) and activities over time to verify whether and how individual organizations retain their initial intent or, as some scholars have feared, become more politically affirmative over time.

Finally, this dissertation is based on rich qualitative data and a sample of CLTs in the Southwest primarily determined by prospective participant's willingness to participate. As such, findings on the relative abundance and proportion of politically transformative CLTs are not generalizable to other regions or the national population of CLTs. However, the theoretical framework developed in the following chapters will—I hope—provide broadly applicable insight into the political logics and practices that animate the contemporary CLT movement in the Southwest.

## Chapter 5

### **“It’s a Pretty Big Tent”: Political logics in CLTs across the Southwest**

#### **Abstract**

In light of research that documents the growing popularity of the CLT model—and raises concerns about the dilution of its core principles of community control and decommodification—I investigate what political logics are emerging out of experimentation with the Community Land Trust model in the Southwest. Political logics are sets of narratives, beliefs, values, frames, and practices that emerge from social movements, institutional fields, and place-based contexts (Armstrong 2002; Nelson 2021). Political logics are both embedded in organizations—through mission statements, goals, organizational practices, and organizational culture—and used by individuals. Individual actors strategically draw upon elements of political logics—both consciously and unconsciously—to define problems and legitimate, motivate, and coordinate collective action with others (Armstrong 2002; Nelson 2021). I find two dominant political logics that shape the mission and activities of CLTs: an asset-based welfare logic that aligns with the hegemonic approach to poverty governance in the United States and a politically transformative redistributive/collectivist logic.

In this chapter, I analyze the political logics present in CLTs along four key dimensions: causal stories, political goals, theories of change/solutions, and disposition. Causal stories are narratives about what problem the organization exists to solve (e.g. an individualist account of poverty vs a place-based account of systemic marginalization). “Political goals” refers to participants’ beliefs about the extent to which political change is needed to address this problem. The theory of change/solution dimension encompasses narratives about what solution(s) would help address the problem (e.g. individual wealth-building through homeownership vs alternative systems for distributing housing and power). Finally, I use the term disposition to refer to beliefs

about how those solutions should be pursued and practices that institutionalize those beliefs (e.g. bureaucratic, scalable efforts vs relationship-centric, targeted affordability and capacity-building). A fifth dimension, which is shared across all CLTs in my sample, is explored in the following chapter's discussion of stewardship.

These findings speak to long-standing concerns among researchers and practitioners that the growth of the CLT field is leading to the dilution of the model, further clarifying particular ways in which the CLT model may be co-opted. However, I also identify an understudied evolution of the model—wherein CLTs directly prevent the displacement of precarious renters and serve as incubators for limited equity housing cooperatives—that suggests that the results of experimentation with the CLT model are more diverse than existing research suggests.

## Introduction

As described in Chapter 2, the CLT model emerged out of mass movements that experimented with alternative forms of land tenure and collective decision-making, working towards radical goals of racial justice and non-capitalist modes of living. Early experimentation yielded a hybrid organizational model and movement that blended elements of ownership, organization, and operation from a range of social contexts (Davis 2014). Over time, the model's adaptability and favorable contextual factors—growing state support, the decentralization of national technical assistance organizations, etc.—has arguably accelerated the pace of experimentation with CLTs—to mixed reception (Davis 2014; DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019; Rosenberg and Yuen 2012). The professionalization of the CLT movement has unfolded in line with the resource mobilization theory of collective action: as funding became

available, activists became career leaders in the movement, enabling formalization, coalition-building, and the use of institutionalized tactics (McCarthy and Zald 1973; Staggenborg 1988).

Scholarship on CLTs has produced both compelling instances of the potential of CLTs to create more stable residents and community-controlled neighborhoods and evidence that many CLTs are, in practice, politically affirmative organizations that uphold the status quo (Davis 2014; DeFilippis et al 2019; Engelsman, Rowe, and Southern 2016; Gray and Galande 2010; Williams 2019). Much of the optimistic scholarship on CLTs' potential to disrupt the political status quo focuses on emerging organizations (e.g. Thompson 2015) or on high-profile, established CLTs on the East Coast (e.g. the Dudley Street Neighbors in Boston, MA; Meehan 2014). As a result, scholars have argued that the radical potential of CLTs remains mostly in the realm of the hypothetical (DeFilippis et al 2019), joining the numerous sociological studies that document the co-option<sup>13</sup> of attempted reforms to hegemonic systems (e.g. Haney 2010). This increasingly common focus on expert-led affordable housing provision, rather than organizing or collective, democratic governance, is also documented in surveys of all CLTs in the United States. The most recent national survey found that only 54% percent of responding CLTs (N = 166) designated at least one board seat to residents of their housing and only 42% of responding organizations (N = 88) reported having a community membership (Wang et al 2023). In light of these findings, I contribute to scholarly work documenting the growth and dispersal of the CLT model by asking: what political logics are emerging out of experimentation with the CLT model in the Southwest?

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<sup>13</sup>See Chapter 3 for an extended discussion of cooptation theory.

## Findings

Political logics are sets of narratives, assumptions, beliefs, values, frames, and practices that emerge from social movements, institutional fields, and place-based contexts (Armstrong 2002; Nelson 2021). Political logics are both formally embedded in organizations—through mission statements, goals, organizational practices, and organizational culture—and used by individuals. Actors strategically draw upon elements of political logics—both consciously and unconsciously—to define problems and legitimate, motivate, and coordinate collective action with others (Armstrong 2002; Nelson 2021; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). As with any political logic, participants strategically draw on multiple logics depending on their interlocutor, goals, and context; multiple political logics may thus be present within an organization or in one interview. Nevertheless, many CLTs and most participants in the sample favored one or the other logic across interviews, participant observation, and in public-facing written documents.

Through in-depth interviews with CLT staff and volunteers (N = 40 individuals across 33 organizations), participant observation, and analysis of secondary documents, I identify two dominant political logics: the mainstream housing asset-based welfare (Doling and Ronald 2010; Prabhakar 2019) logic and a collectivist, redistributive logic. Political logics shape CLTs' organizational practices, from the types of housing they pursue to their relationships with their residents. The asset-based welfare logic is a mainstream political logic that underlies social welfare policies that promote individual ownership of assets and concomitant cultivation of “investor-subjects” as the core goals of welfare (Doling and Ronald 2010; Prabhakar 2019). In lieu of creating a state-managed social safety net, this strategy places responsibility for meeting welfare needs (e.g. in retirement) with individuals (Doling and Ronald 2010; Prabhakar 2019). The collectivist/redistributive logic, on the other hand, is a manifestation of a logic present in

many political projects and social movements through-out the years, with roots in Keynesian models of welfare (as a social safety net; MacLeavy 2010), Indigenous philosophies of collective ownership (LaDuke 1993), and a range of social movements. Twenty-one participants framed traditional wealth-building as a goal or benefit of CLT residence at some point; thirteen of those used it as a primary framework for making sense of their work. Similarly, roughly half of the CLTs in my sample adopt at least some elements of the asset-based welfare logic, using an individualized framework and supplementing (not challenging) market-based methods for allocating housing and land.

However, there are also a number of CLTs that embody the classic commitments to collective decision-making/community control, attention to land and place, and serving deeply disadvantaged populations. Nineteen participants either never brought up wealth-building or actively challenged it. Indeed, eight organizations in the sample paired two models of shared equity collective ownership: the CLT and the limited equity housing cooperative (LEHC). These organizations, which are scarcely acknowledged in the literature on CLTs, are arguably part of *both* the delegated welfare state *and* embedded in politically transformative, grassroots movements (e.g. tenants' rights; the Zapatistas). Moreover, despite decentralization, new hubs for CLT resources and information-sharing are also emerging; these new hubs reinforce different aspects of the classical CLT model and provide arenas for CLTs to organize city- and state-wide political action (see Chapter 7). These CLT hubs define the boundaries of what counts as a CLT and allow for diverse implementations of the model. As Harlan, a former staffer and longtime resident of a CLT co-op put it, these hubs demarcate the walls of the CLT tent, but “it’s a pretty big tent.” Most participants acknowledged elements of both logics at some point in the interview.

These findings suggest a far more hopeful picture of the results of experimentation with the CLT model than prior academic research might suggest. Some CLTs are indeed taking on the mantle of delegated welfare state affordable housing providers. These organizations affirm politically hegemonic notions of ownership, largely neglect or entirely dismiss community control, and seek to shape beneficiaries into investor-subjects (and, it must be noted, still successfully remove housing units from commodity markets). However, others are pursuing transformative political change and meaningful local control through experimental practices of community control and alternative forms of ownership. I document the differing political logics that animate these divergent manifestations of the Community Land Trust and discuss the implications of these findings for our understanding of CLTs, attempted political transformation, and the delegated welfare state.

**Figure 5: Table of political logics and organizational practices**

	<b>Asset-based Welfare Logic</b>	<b>Redistributive/Collectivist Logic</b>
<b>1 – Causal Stories</b>	Individuals: individuals with few financial resources and without ownership rights are subject to precarity and hardship	Systems: existing systems distribute resources and risks based on racialized extraction, which leads to dispossession and precarity
<b>2 – Espoused Political Goals</b>	Politically affirmative/ “apolitical”, often racially colorblind	Politically transformative, often with explicit racial justice mission
<b>3 – Theory of Change and Solution</b>	Wealth-building through traditional, individual ownership by savvy investor subjects; supplementing market	New system of collective governance, often through limited equity housing co-ops; a social safety net that provides shelter and security as alternative to the market
<b>4 – Disposition</b>	Formalized, arms-length acquisition and placement; affordability defined as anything less than market rate	Place- and relationship-based acquisition and placement; targeted affordability for those at immediate risk of displacement and very low-income earners
<b>5 - Stewardship</b>	Prioritize long term maintenance, ongoing care that physical things—including buildings—require, and a commitment to that care (see Chapter 6)	

### Dimension 1: Causal Stories

As nonprofit organizations, CLTs have shared causal stories, or narratives, around the social problem(s) that their organization addresses; these causal stories are part of the frame they use to construct social problems and their implied solutions (Goffman 1974; Snow et al 1986; Stone 1989). These narratives are a foundational element of the political logic(s) they employed.

The asset-based welfare political logic follows mainstream neoliberal poverty governance narratives by framing individual poverty and insufficient access to traditional markets as the social problem that must be addressed: individuals with few financial resources and without ownership rights are subject to precarity and hardship. In rare cases when the causes of the problem are considered, they are described neutrally as market insufficiency and, in some cases,

the growing activity of corporations and investors edging individuals out of the market. However, this logic largely uses a “natural world” framework, treating poverty as the accidental result of natural events (Nickels and Clark 2019; Snow et al 1986; Stone 1989). The systems that render poverty (and renting) precarious, violent, and racialized are taken for granted; addressing the root causes of poverty or what it means to be poor is not on the table. Instead, the implied solution is to move deserving individuals into the protected, valued category of “owner” and provide them with resources they can draw on when they experience hard times. That is, this framing leads CLTs to what Nancy Fraser terms “affirmative” remedies for injustice: “remedies that intend to correct inequitable outcomes without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them” (Fraser 1995, p82; see DeFilippis et al 2019 for analysis of affirmative CLTs in Minnesota).

In their mission statements, explanations of what they do, and in interviews with leadership, organizations operating on the asset-based welfare political logic identified poverty as the problem and turned to wealth-building as a core or primary solution that CLTs could administer. This approach is exemplified by the following quote from Kathy, a white Latina executive director of a non-California CLTs:

We want to help people increase their net worth. And I feel that home ownership is one of those things that, when there's a crisis in life, if you do not have assets or savings, that's what gets you into trouble. You're less able to weather the storm. So that's why I really feel that home ownership is so important, even in this market. It really is a way for people to stop that cycle of poverty. [Homeowners can] weather those financial [crises] much better than [renters], because [they] have savings. So, I dunno, I think asset building is very important.

Kathy emphasizes individual wealth-building (in terms of “net worth” and savings) and the exchange value of the house, equating ownership with stability. In her view, financial wellbeing is the key determinant in whether a person can successfully endure a crisis in life; absence of

assets or savings are the core problem that creates precarity. She focuses on individual resilience and is disinterested (here and elsewhere in the interview) in analyzing what leads to poverty or why it is distributed unequally. Though Kathy described shelter as a benefit of CLT participation elsewhere in the interview, she often returned to the financial benefits for CLT residents. Nathan, the executive director of a Habitat-affiliated CLT outside of California echoed this emphasis on individual wealth-building, saying the CLT's mission was to "create new affordable workforce solutions to move people from poverty and into the middle class", where recipients could "use wealth to create wealth."

In contrast, participants drawing on a redistributive/collectivist political logic described the social problems they sought to address as moral injustices created by existing socioeconomic systems. They use a "social world" framework (Stone 1989), viewing poverty and precarity as the outcomes of long-standing, man-made cycles of racialized extraction and dispossession. They consequently seek transformative remedies for injustice, which correct inequitable outcomes by restructuring the underlying generative framework (Fraser 1995, p82). Their accounts of the problem the CLT existed to solve were specific, place-based, and often included historical, racialized exclusion. This pattern emerged over the course of the whole interview and in public-facing documents.

The place-based "social world" framework that redistributive accounts used was especially apparent in their accounts of the founding of the CLT and its mission. Those using the redistributive logic would frequently ground the mission of the CLT in stories of redlining, urban renewal, and community movements in the particular neighborhood(s) they serve. For instance, multiple CLTs described a highway construction project that demolished dozens of houses in the neighborhood and created a hazard that divided the remains. These narratives emphasized the

role of the state and highlighted historical and social links between the CLT and the social movements that arose to oppose that displacement. Others described their mission in the context of personal and collective experiences of exclusion and marginalization, naming particular actors and social systems as the cause of this harm. For instance, Elena, a Latina/mestiza staffer at a California CLT, began the interview with the story of her and her family's experiences of displacement from a nearby city: "I'm originally from [large nearby city], grew up there. But tech companies [came] into the region and [drove up rents] and my family had to move [to this city]... Then my mom was able to purchase a home, but it was a subprime loan she was steered into taking. So shortly after that, we lost our home in [this city]." She later contextualized this personal experience in the context of broader trends: "Historically, [this] is a Black city, it's a chocolate city. And, you know, Latinos have moved here in the last 10 years due to displacement pressures from other urban centers." In response to another question, she elaborated on local displacement pressures, naming the expansion of a nearby university and the covid-19 pandemic as key events. Elena's narrative is grounded in particulars of the area she and the CLT serve, connecting her personal experiences of precarity to collective experiences of displacement and particular actors whose actions contributed to displacement pressure. Her causal story about the need for the CLT implicates particular actors and industries, including large tech companies and a local university, and contextualizes the need for the CLT in terms of both individual and collective needs. This is strikingly different from the asset-based welfare approach of briefly referencing "high housing costs" and workforce needs.

#### *Example of Causal Stories: Displacement*

The differing narratives and priorities of these two political logics led participants to approach the same empirical phenomenon quite differently. For instance, most participants cited

low-income people being unable to live in a particular neighborhood or region as a problem that CLTs were well-suited to address. However, the framing and meaning of this problem varied widely across CLTs. These narratives included implicit justifications for *why* people should be able to live in a particular place: the asset-based welfare logic grounded a right to the city in one's economic contributions, while redistributive/collectivist narratives grounded a right to housing and the city in terms of length of tenure and emotional connection to place. As discussed in the following sections, these narratives also shaped the work CLT leadership and staff pursued.

As described above, CLTs who used a redistributive/collectivist logic emphasized the structural forces that led to the problem of displacement or forced moves out of the neighborhood or city, critiquing city programs to “renew” particular areas and developers who flip low-cost housing for a profit. These organizations' websites often feature an account of racial exclusion in the neighborhood(s) they serve, including particular instances of displacement (e.g. a highway or stadium project) and beloved institutions or cultural landmarks that are currently at-risk. The problem they seek to address is not deprivation or lack of capital, but rather the system of decision-making that privileges the desires of those with capital over the needs of people who live on desirable land. Their understandings of who should have a right to participate in collective decision-making were grounded in residence and relationship to place, reflecting a “right to the city” approach (Lefebvre 1968). This approach is exemplified in the following quote from Sam, a white CLT staffer at an established CLT in California.

Interviewer: Why is passing a Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA) important?

Sam: Why is TOPA important? Well, because right now, the power dynamics between tenants and owners are so imbalanced. And there are some protections for people, but it still does not come nearly close enough to stopping massive displacement and abuses. Especially if you're low income, you have so few options to live in a healthy, affordable place. And for many folks, [to live] where they grew up, in the place where they have

lived for generations or raised their family or literally built the city. And so to me, I feel like those folks have a right—much more than I do, I'm not from [this city]—they have a right to live here and stay here. And to know that they're going to be able to stay and have some kind of ownership and control, not [just] in their own housing, but in the way all decisions that get made in the city. I'd say that the way that our housing system works right now is so imbalanced towards people that have money and can really just kind of do whatever they want with property and residents who live there. And it's not a life affirming, or community affirming, model of housing at all.

Sam's response encapsulates the redistributive/collectivist logic's conceptualization of the problem that CLTs can address. He highlights existing power dynamics and rationales for resource allocation (“people that have money... can really just do whatever they want with property and residents who live there”), as well as their consequences (“displacement and abuses”). Moreover, he articulates a broad right to the city: people who have lived somewhere for a long time have a right to stay. This account frames the status quo as fundamentally exclusionary and unjust—access to the system is not necessarily sufficient or even desirable. Instead, as discussed in the next two sections, this problem statement implies the need for entirely different systems for decision-making, development, and distribution of resources.

The collectivist “right to the city” approach that Sam articulates stands in sharp contrast to the narrative employed by the asset-based welfare logic. Participants relying on this logic avoided the term “displacement”—and thus its political implications—altogether. Instead, in line with prior work on affirmative politics in CLTs (DeFilippis et al 2019), participants described people in the “workforce” moving away due to high costs. Emily, a white staff member at a municipal CLT, framed this in terms of “people who work at our banks, people who teach our children... That's also the big loss, when [workers] have to drive an hour or places can't hire because they can't find anyone.” Likewise, James, the white executive director of a large California CLT described the problem his organization exists to address as:

The guy working at, I don't know, a shoe store in the mall can't afford to rent in the county, so he has to live in [a nearby county] and commute just to get a— Well, I'm not going to say menial job, but to get his livelihood. [The CLT model] ensures that you're going to have some housing available for the guy that's working in the restaurant that you're going to at night.

These quotes illustrate how the workforce narrative is used to justify the right to live in an area in terms of people's market contributions and to emphasize the broader benefits to more affluent community members. Moreover, emphasizing the “workforce” allows CLT staffers to implicitly (or explicitly) draw boundaries around who deserves support and who does not, a central and much-studied theme in American policy (Mohr 2014; Patterson 2002).

Some participants who invoked this narrative approached the problem as detached bureaucrats whose role is to create a functioning city. For both Emily and James, CLTs adopt a state bureaucrat's view of the city's economy, seeking to provide a population of laborers for business owners and those seeking amenities. In doing so, they affirm the neoliberal promotion of economic development and emphasis on aesthetic and leisure enjoyment of the upper class (Harvey 1989). Other participants invoked the “workforce” narrative strategically, explicitly noting that they used this framework to avoid wealthy homeowner opposition to affordable housing development. As Nathan, the white leader of a Habitat-affiliated CLT outside of California put it:

We don't say we build ‘affordable housing’ anymore, because affordable has a negative connotation. And it does on the whole spectrum. If you're rich, it means [residents] are poor, and if you're poor, affordable means a stigma. So, we have to just get rid of that [wording] and we just focus on workforce housing. I remind folks that [these] are the same people that we go and trust to cook our food at a restaurant. And we ingest that food and we're willing to take that leap of faith with someone we've never seen. We trust them with our health but we don't trust them in our backyard. And so that's where we spin it in a positive light. We make sure people understand that the folks we're serving are human being that work hard, that have gone through all the steps of the continuum to reach the point of owning one of our homes and then will eventually be self-sufficient, with their own wealth in their pocket.

This quote illustrates that Nathan’s use of the workforce narrative was, in part, a decision not to attempt to engage in political transformation. Rather than attempt to change the connotations of “affordable housing” and those who live in it, he humanizes prospective CLT residents in terms of their economic role in service jobs and frames them as deserving, hard-working, future members of the middle-class.

In summary, the causal stories embedded in political logics shape the daily life of workers and the long-term activities of the organization. These causal stories diverged in dramatic ways. Sam and others who spoke from a redistributive/collectivist framework positioned CLT workers as political actors challenging the primacy of capital in urban development. Their causal story centered place and the holistic experience of racial exclusion and dispossession in their causal story, an account of systemic injustice which implies a need for transformative, systemic change. Those who employed asset-based welfare logics, like Emily and James, acted as bureaucratic service providers who gave deserving recipients the boost they needed to achieve the American Dream of stable homeownership. Their deployment of the “workforce development” narrative brackets the causes of involuntary moves with the simplistic framing of “high costs”, implicitly framing new forms of decision-making or allocation of resources as irrelevant to the core problem CLTs seek to address. Maintaining a keen eye towards the logics and narratives undergirding CLT’s work allows us to better understand the activities they pursue and the cultural discourses and projects they seek to contribute to.

## Dimension 2: Espoused Political Goals

Another key dimension along which the two political logics differ in is their orientation towards political change—whether it’s needed, what it should entail, and how it should be pursued. In this section, I first analyze the asset-based welfare logics orientation to political

change in terms of their politically affirmative attitudes towards the traditional housing market and racial inequity. Second, I explicate the redistributive/collectivist logic's pursuit of political transformation by demonstrating their connections to existing social movements and their commitment to creating an alternative to the traditional rental and homeownership markets. The existence of these redistributive/collectivist CLTs is a critical finding, as it provides evidence of an understudied but robust field of both established and emerging CLTs that are pursuing transformative political change through an adaptation of the classical CLT model. Throughout this chapter, I highlight the importance of participants' espoused political intentions in informing the structure, norms, and practices of CLTs.

CLT staff operating on an asset-based welfare logic formulated an affirmative remedy to unequal outcomes and positioned themselves as apolitical actors, with some actively denying the politically transformative origins of the model. As Scott, a white Board member of an Arizona CLT put it, "We're not trying to replace, obviously, the housing market. We're just trying to create a niche for working families priced out of the market." Bob, a white CLT Board member and founder, echoed this position, asserting that the CLT model "is not a radical, leftist, crazy thing. It's based on conservative thinking and liberal thinking." In both quotes, participants deny intentions to create political change or destabilize existing social arrangements.

Under the asset-based welfare logic, the role of the CLT was to supplement—not challenge, transform, or replace—the traditional market. Respondents relying on the asset-based welfare logic frequently positioned CLT housing as a supplementary "stepping stone" into the traditional market, with little explanation for why the market was otherwise inaccessible to their target populations. As Cody, the Hispanic business officer of a large CLT, put it: "I'm always trying to focus on true home ownership where people get to obtain the maximum appreciation and all the

true benefits of home ownership. However, that's not always feasible. So, there's got to be a starting place, and I feel this [CLT model] is a great starting place.” Cody emphasizes the importance of wealth-building in traditional homeownership and explicitly frames CLT ownership as a way to help people join the traditional market.

But, as described in the previous section, there’s an interesting contradiction in the “stepping stone” narrative. Most CLT staff who emphasized the value of the home as an asset were ambivalent about whether respondents actually moved on to market rate ownership, for both pragmatic and ideological reasons. These staff emphasized that they wanted residents to stay as long as they wanted and to enter traditional market ownership only if they wanted to. As Scott, the white Board member of an Arizona CLT, put it:

I forget where I saw it, but there’s a great graphic that’s like a spectrum of housing tenure. People go back and forth among different types of housing tenure, depending on life’s changes. We’re open to that. We’d love to have somebody get that equity and stability started with the CLT model and then have the opportunity [to buy on the traditional market] down the road. And we’d love to have a family who loves their situation, who’s going to be there their whole lives.

Nikki, a staffer at a non-California CLT expressed similar ambivalence about the CLT serving as a stepping stone to the traditional market (despite working under Kathy, a CLT director who emphasized wealth-building as a core benefit of the program). Nikki said:

Of the [100 or so] homes in our portfolio, we’ve had... I think around 16 or 20 resales. We still have 70 families that stayed there. That’s good too, because that’s family stability, right? The kids went to the same school, they know the neighbors. There’s tons of value in that. I think there’s a range of situations and needs. You can stay there forever if you want to, but it can also be a stepping stone.

Nikki and Scott both emphasize the desires of the CLT resident in these quotes; helping people into traditional market ownership was only one of several possible benefits of CLT participation, alongside stability, community, and building equity (regardless of whether or not they gained appreciation from selling the home). To my knowledge, only two CLTs in the sample formalized

the role of the CLT home as a “starter home” or stepping stone into the market; these organizations required or strongly incentivized residents to sell after a set time limit (e.g. 10 years). This gap between narratives and institutional practices reflects an important ambivalence about residents actually entering the market; despite their discursive emphasis on wealth-building and traditional ownership, in practice, these staffers supported CLT homes serving as a long-term alternative to the market, rather than solely a path into it.

The apolitical, asset-based welfare position was nearly always paired with a racially colorblind (Bonilla-Silva 2013) approach. This approach is exemplified in the following exchange with Scott, a white Board member of a CLT that recruited prospective residents through a home repair program.

Interviewer: Some CLTs focus on providing affordable housing for groups that have historically been left out of the housing market, like Black or Latino members of their community. What do you think of that? Is that a focus of your organization?

Scott: It just is inherent in our community because, I mean... the focus is income level, right? But our community is [just] over 50% Latino. So, for example, the home repair program clients, I would say it would be at least 60:40—if not 75:25—Hispanic community to non-Hispanic community that we serve. But it's not like we start out... We're aware of the inequities, but it's income-level based. And the fact that we're close to a half Hispanic, half non-Hispanic community... The majority of clients we serve do fit into these groups of people who've been left out of the equation a lot.

Scott's statement that the CLT's intention is to serve low-income people, but that this incidentally meant they served people of color, was quite common across participants who relied on an asset-based welfare logic. In line with their narratives about the social problems they sought to address, these respondents viewed their target populations primarily—sometimes exclusively—through the lens of class. Many participants who responded this way also added that they were Fair Housing providers, and thus unable to take race into account when selecting prospective residents. This narrative reflects the asset-based welfare logic's underlying assumption that the racialized inequality produced by existing social structures is incidental and can be effectively

addressed through colorblind class-based redistribution. The politically affirmative, racially colorblind approach present in many organizations represents a dilution of the original values of the model, which emerged out of Civil Rights era farmer independence (Davis 2014; Meehan 2014). Indeed, prior existing research on CLTs in other regions reported little evidence of any “mature and less-widely celebrated CLTs” with transformative political goals, leading to concerns about the co-option of the model (Davis 2010; DeFilippis et al 2019).

However, I found evidence of a robust field of established and emerging CLTs with explicit politically transformative goals. My sample of thirty-two organizations across the Southwest includes nine mature CLTs and three emerging CLTs with explicit politically transformative goals; these organizations have structures and programs in place to enact those goals. Moreover, there were at least 10 such organizations who did not respond to requests to participate via an interview but who endorsed politically transformative goals in public documents and during participant observation. These organizations operate on a redistributive/collectivist logic and pursue political change at many levels, challenging everything from material systems of allocating resources to the American Dream valorization of property ownership. Moreover, they engage in a range of activities beyond facilitating affordable homeownership, an area ripe for future research.

Participants operating on a redistributive/collectivist logic understood themselves to be part of broader social movements, describing work experience and personal relationships within tenants rights activism and the Zapatistas, a Mexican indigenous-rights group. Many of the participants at redistributive/collectivist CLTs in California came to the CLT model by way of tenant organizing; they viewed their work within CLTs as an extension of that work, which allowed them to more effectively intervene in the existing socioeconomic and legal systems that

govern housing. Participants described being “in coalition” and having personal relationships with activists and community organizers in the tenant rights and homeless rights organizations; CLTs partnered with other nonprofits and groups in hosting events, meeting with policymakers or prospective funders, and working on political campaigns.

In many cases, the CLT itself was created by a coalition of existing grassroots, membership-based organizations as an alternative or complement to advocacy within existing political systems. As Elena, a Latina/mestiza CLT staffer, put it: “There was already a relationship with [the tenant rights group] before the CLT officially existed, just because the staff [had relationships]. Our director at the time was a member [of the tenants rights group], we knew the organizers. We were in coalition with them.” This finding is significant both because there is evidence that mature CLTs with explicit, publicly espoused political intentions are present and actively pursuing political change, moving the promise of CLTs from the realm of the hypothetical to the reality, and because it recontextualizes how scholars and practitioners might theorize community control moving forward (see Chapter 3 for an extended discussion of this topic).

One major area of political transformation that participants operating on a redistributive/collectivist logic pursued was the relationship between landlords and tenants. Elena and founders of her CLT viewed the model as a way to codify precarious renters’ right to the city and to housing without depending on state regulation. After describing the relationships among CLT staff and the local tenant organization, Elena said: “California is at a point where we're sort of reaching the limits of tenants rights. We're seeing that displacement can still happen and there's still so much that prevents even more, stronger tenant protections.” Alex, a Latinx staffer at another California CLT, described reaching a similar conclusion: “As I worked to do

more tenant organizing, tenant rights work, the concept of CLTs came up again and again. During a campaign for a rent stabilization ordinance that passed, what I sort of noticed was landlords still own property and were still finding ways to create unjust ways of living.”

These quotes illustrate a common thread among participants who evinced a redistributive/collectivist logic: seeking protections for non-property owners within existing power structures was not effective. Rather than continue to appeal to state regulatory powers, these participants sought to create an alternative system of housing. As Alex said later on in his interview:

Our priority with this CLT is creating a political hub and home. I think what makes CLTs distinct from a traditional affordable housing developer or a traditional tenant rights organizing base is that our campaigns are not about stopping landlord harassment or creating rent controls. Our campaigns are about granting the ownership of buildings to the people who live there and being in right relationship with the land. It's fighting landlords, but not for better care or home. It's, like, actually, we want to remove you from the equation.

Alex’s statement reflects his explicit politically transformative goals, in sharp contrast to the apolitical stance evinced by CLT staffers operating on an asset-based welfare logic. He seeks not to supplement the market-based system, or even to mitigate its harms, but rather to create a robust alternative to that system. Moreover, he and his organization are taking the politically transformative potential of CLTs out of the realm of the hypothetical; this organization has multiple multi-family buildings that are limited equity housing cooperative (LEHC) or are in the process of organizing an LEHC (described more in the following section).

In addition to pursuing political change through education efforts, organizations operating on a redistributive/collectivist logic engaged with the regulations and norms of housing welfare strategically. For instance, though some participants invoked Fair Housing Act anti-discrimination regulations to justify their racially colorblind approach, other interviews and

analysis of HUD Fair Housing Act documents reveal that racial justice practices were more feasible than they claimed. Participants embedded in organizations committed to racial justice identified methods of reaching and prioritizing prospective residents of color that were actively encouraged by those same Fair Housing regulations. These race-conscious recruitment strategies (termed “affirmative recruitment” by HUD) included relying on word of mouth and personal endorsements by people in particular communities. Part of this strategy involved deliberately building trust and relationships with particular community members. As Elena put it, in the context of working with Hispanic communities: “We've noticed sometimes that the way to market to different demographics is different. Some are more word of mouth and having that trust of somebody else that they know saying it versus just seeing it somewhere. Culture and experience inform those decisions.” The CA CLT Network supported this approach through resources that educated practitioners on Fair Housing guidelines (e.g. a report prepared by UCLA law students; Blatteis et al 2021), helping CLT staff navigate potential legal barriers to race-conscious recruitment. Another strategy that place-based and racial justice-oriented organizations used was setting up a points system in their selection process. This system gave additional points to applicants who already lived in the target neighborhood (or had been recently displaced from it); often these were historically predominantly Latinx or Black neighborhoods.

Organizations using a redistributive/collectivist logic also deliberately sought out partner organizations that were connected with the marginalized communities they wanted to serve. For instance, Dale, a board member at a relatively new CLT that is housing two South American families seeking asylum in the US, described how the CLT worked to ensure they served a diverse group:

We reached out to existing organizations that we thought were doing really good work early on and tried to get a couple people on our board. Someone on [partner

organization]’s staff joined our board. One of their activities is on asylum seekers and immigrants who are coming across the border, to help them out, give them a place to land. And so, we’re just part of that larger network.

Because racial justice and housing for precarious members of their community was a priority for this CLT, they deliberately cultivated relationships with existing organizations who were already operating in relevant areas. The strategies of affirmative advertising and relationship-building allowed CLT practitioners to enact a system for resource allocation that aligned with their values and priorities.

In summary, the public political goals of CLT participants were shaped by the causal stories they told and the conditions in which the organization was founded. Those operating on an asset-based welfare logic viewed their work as a supplement to the existing socioeconomic system for distributing housing. In their view, deeper political transformation was not needed to address the fundamental problem they existed to solve. Those operating under a redistributive logic, on the other hand, sought transformative political, economic, and social change. This mission encouraged them to participate in a broader network of organizations seeking transformative change. As described in the following section, it also led them to experiment with alternative forms of tenure and ownership beyond the classical CLT model.

### Dimension 3: Theory of Change and Solution

CLT practitioners’ causal stories and espoused political goals shape the solutions they think are worth pursuing (and, likely, the activities they pursue in turn leads them to frame the impacts and significance of their work in a favorable light). This section is about the theories of change—narratives about how participants’ work addressed the social problem they intended to address—espoused by participants. These narratives are both institutionalized in the structure and activities of CLTs and used by individuals to make sense of their work, its purpose, and its

importance. Nearly all of the respondents in the study cited a wide range of benefits of CLT participation (and thus illustrated a wide range of ways their work was addressing the social problem described in their causal story). This diversity was reflected in the official materials of their organizations, which likewise touted homeownership and their work as promoting stability for individuals and neighborhoods, creating intergenerational wealth, helping people achieve normative markers of successful adulthood, and providing shelter. However, there were consistent patterns to the extent to which CLTs advocated for wealth-building and traditional homeownership as the solution to the social problem they existed to address and dramatic differences in the activities CLTs pursued.

Organizations that relied on the asset-based welfare logic operated on “natural world” causal stories and in turn viewed increased access to traditional, individual single-family homeownership as the solution to the social problem of housing. Providing low-cost housing to deserving individuals was the core—and sometimes only element—of their work; as prior studies have found, the goals of collective governance or dramatic political change were sidelined or lost entirely. Promotion of individual single-family homeownership is in line with the long-standing valorization of property ownership in the United States (DeFilippis et al. 2019; Doling and Ronald 2010).

Participants endorsed the benefits of single-family homeownership themselves, citing space and privacy, but also viewed single-family homeownership as more clearly desirable to potential gatekeepers within the community. Nikki, a longtime staffer at a mature CLT with over 100 units described perceived bias against multifamily homes in this CLT’s target historic Chicano neighborhoods by saying:

[People] want a single-family home, even if it’s small. There’s a history of small homes in these neighborhoods. People say, ‘I’m one of 12 children and we had a two bedroom and

one bath and it all worked.’ So it doesn’t have to be big or fancy, but having your own space, even though it’s small, and having a little bit of outdoor or garden space... Things you wouldn’t see in an apartment building. And if it’s not a single family, it feels like it’s going to be a rental. And if it’s going to be a rental, it’s going to be people that aren’t invested in the neighborhood and don’t care and are going to do bad things and all of that.

This quote illustrates how the asset-based welfare logic affirmed mainstream assumptions about renting and homeownership in the United States, both through participants’ professed views and their perceived views of non-CLT-resident stakeholders. Nikki justifies the CLT’s prioritization of single-family units by describing neighborhood opposition to proposed multifamily projects, wherein non-CLT neighbors both pushed for single-family homes and perpetuated stigma of renters as criminals and transient, non-community members.

Participants who relied on the asset-based welfare logic acknowledged the importance of affordable rental units (Skye: “homeownership isn’t for everyone”), but largely did not pursue providing affordable rentals for both pragmatic and ideological reasons. Pragmatic limitations included the need for continuing subsidy (vs an initial capital infusion and resident to resident transfers) and the perception that rentals required far more involvement from the CLT (e.g. responding to maintenance requests, collect rents, supervising resident turnover). As Mae put it: “I don’t want to be a property manager. I want them to take responsibility.” When asset-based welfare CLTs did operate rental units, they were often the result of an opportunistic acquisition or financing. For instance, James described developing nearly 100 units to sell but said “you can’t do it economically. We have to be given the land for free. So our projects, for the near future, will all be rentals. You get all the money from the state.” Likewise, Kathy’s CLT had acquired several dozen affordable rental units from the municipal government and was in the process of converting them to affordable ownership (“should they become vacant—because we can’t vacate someone, we can’t just say, oh we’ll sell this to you later—but if they become vacant naturally,

then we have the right to sell.”). Kathy’s CLT took responsibility for the units as a way to acquire additional homes but primarily viewed these rentals as a potential stepping stone to traditional homeownership.

Though no participant endorsed the common narrative of renters as criminals, many participants operating on the asset-based welfare logic invoked the narrative that renters are less invested in their community and that homeownership renders someone a better, more politically active citizen. Indeed, these participants generalized the benefits of traditional homeownership far beyond the role of the home as an asset, equating property ownership with freedom, responsibility, successful life course achievement, and civic participation. As Scott, a white Board member of an Arizona CLT, put it: “building that asset, a lot of stability that comes from that... people are more grounded in the community”. Those who relied on the asset-based welfare logic to make sense of their work largely took this for granted, doing little to explain the connection between ownership and civic participation. As described below, those operating on a collectivist/redistributive logic had a very different view, as many of them came from tenant organizing backgrounds where they interacted with a wide range of politically active renters.

Moreover, most participants operating on the asset-based welfare logic equated renting with precarity, irresponsibility, and indignity—even when the CLT was in the position to shape what renting entailed. These participants took these downsides of renting for granted, as fixed, external features of the world; changing the conditions of renting through organized political action or direct action as landlords was so far out of the scope of their work that they did not consider it.

The opposite was true of participants who primarily drew on a redistributive/collectivist logic, whose perspective was well-summarized by Pablo, a Hispanic CLT staffer and former

community organizer: “Ultimately, renting doesn’t have to look how it’s traditionally looked. I think resident input is crucial in shaping how a community looks. And if they don’t come to terms on their agreements as a community, are they really community values?”

Organizations relying on a redistributive/collectivist logic pursued a politically transformative project of creating alternatives to racialized systems of exclusion and dispossession. Many of these organizations sought to codify community control and prevent displacement by acquiring occupied, multifamily buildings and assisting the tenants with organizing a self-governing housing cooperative (though some also facilitated individual single-family homeownership). That is, after acquisition, the CLT ran the building as a rental while assisting the residents with creating a limited equity coop that would eventually purchase the building from the CLT; the CLT engaged in a labor-intensive process of training residents in the financial and social duties of running a cooperative (see Chapter 3 for more on this subject-making process). As Frank, a long-time CLT worker and co-op resident, described it:

The community land trust model has always been about resident control. When we first get a property, we work with residents, gradually engaging them more and more. Simple things, like who sweeps the sidewalks or, if there’s a little community garden or whatever, deciding what they want the space to be. Because you feel like it’s more your home and not just a place you’re perched. We work with them on a democratic decision-making process. Eventually you set up a finance committee and they track rents and all of that. The whole model is about building in that sense of ownership or stewardship. If there’s really enough people that want to move on to the next step, [we have options like a resident owned nonprofit or a limited equity housing cooperative].

This path-to-cooperative-ownership model allowed CLTs to facilitate local control at the most micro level: collective self-governance of residents in the building where they live. Frank’s description illustrates how the CLT facilitates collective decision-making and organizational structures that support resident control.

CLT staffers who operated on a redistributive/collectivist logic viewed collective decision-making as a non-negotiable component of their work and sought to transform both cultural and political norms. Though they acknowledged (and often struggled with) the need to meet short-term needs for shelter, they believed that providing affordable housing units or helping select individuals into the traditional market alone was not sufficient to address the social problem the CLT sought to address.

At the far end of the spectrum, these participants actively rejected the mainstream asset-based welfare model. The following quote from Alex, a nonbinary, Latinx CLT staffer, illustrates the extent of the political aspirations of this participant (which mirrored that of their organization).

Interviewer: One of the things that sort of surprised me was how many CLTs focus on individual home ownership and wealth-building. What do you think about that model?

Alex: I hate it. That's my blind statement. I hate it. I think for me, the CLT model is not for gaining monetary wealth. The wealth that I'm particularly interested in is community wealth and wellness. When someone has a home that is permanently affordable and not at risk of it going anywhere, you can focus-- I've seen [our] residents create like three businesses. Not all of them successful, but because they're paying so [little for housing] and have this ability, they're exploring artistic [pursuits]. They're able to work with their neighbors to do that. They're able to engage in their own advocacy because it's like their concern is not living. They're open to consider other things. I've seen some of our residents get sick and injured where someone else has come in to support them, and I think like. While I recognized communities of color haven't been able to generate wealth from housing, my wish is folks-- is wealth can also be always having a home and being able to be in your community and having community also be at the center of your existence. So, for me, I hate the model of single-family ownership or ownership in general.

This quote illustrates the solution Alex believes is needed—a redefinition of wealth—and the practices he believe will lead to that solution (housing people in a CLT, among other things). A similarly strong rejection of wealth-building came from Mae, the founder of a small CLT in a popular tourist destination, who said flatly:

We invest heavily in these homes and these homes are not here to make the owners money. They're here to give you a place to feel secure when you come from work, or a place to make your art or write your book, but they're not what makes you money. That's not what we're here for.

Alex and Mae's statements reveal a great deal about both the problems they seek to address through CLT work and the solutions they think are appropriate. Both participants frame the issues residents struggle with as not just poverty, but precarity and the emotional and mental burdens of scarcity. They reject the mainstream presumption of financial wealth as the best (or only) path to security and the freedom to pursue creative or entrepreneurial pursuits, suggesting instead that CLTs can provide security and freedom. Alex's goals, which align with the mission of the CLT they work at, include both meeting immediate needs for housing through affordable units *and* a broader cultural change. They view their work as part of a broader movement to redefine stability and wealth away from capital and towards relationship-based security. The latter also reflects the transformative political goals of their organization.

#### Dimension 4: Disposition

My research unearthed two different dispositions embedded in the political logics described here. Dispositions are tools that practitioners automatically draw upon to succeed in their work (Bourdieu 1990; Woolford and Curran 2013); in this case, the term refers to attitudes towards CLT residents, housing units, scalability, and affordability. In this section, I analyze how the values of scalability and efficiency shape the asset-based welfare approach, incentivizing these organizations to serve a large geographic area and treat acquisition of units and placement of prospective residents as separate tasks. I then theorize how the redistributive/collectivist logic highlights the emotional and cultural elements of housing and place, incentivizing the preservation of existing units and attention to preventing alienation and dispossession for precarious residents.

Interestingly, these dispositions are also likely the product of pre-CLT professional socialization. Eleven of the 13 participants who highlighted wealth-building as a core goal described professional backgrounds in real estate, development, and what scholars have termed high-capacity nonprofits (Nickel and Clark 2019). Those who relied heavily on the redistributive/collectivist logic, on the other hand, typically described their professional background as community organizing and activist work (7 participants), public sector work (6 participants), or listed a variety of fields unrelated to their current job (e.g. as a teacher, artist, salesperson, etc).

The asset-based welfare logic highly values scalability and efficiency and is concerned with affordability in general. Moreover, this logic conceptualizes housing as fundamentally fungible: units are viewed in terms of their market characteristics and treated as interchangeable for both staffers and residents. This generates a bureaucratic, arms-length approach to acquisition and placement of CLT residents in units, which largely mirrors market housing exchange. That is, these organizations focus on efficiently creating affordable housing anywhere in a geographic area, with little attention to the emotional significance of housing. This perspective is well-articulated in the following exchange with Skye, a Board member and resident of a CLT initially founded by a municipal government:

Interviewer: So you mentioned that a lot of the decisions [in] board meetings [are financial]. I'm curious, are there particular parts of town or the county that you focus on? Are there particular people who you want to be able to serve?

Skye: The low to moderate income people are who they basically want to serve. And I think any part of town that's affordable for people... I think they just look for land where it's affordable and they can get the most bang for their buck, so to speak. It just so happens that a lot of the properties that are coming up are more downtown-ish because they were city-owned or county-owned. So it's easier to negotiate with them than it is a private person who owns a huge property, say in [South Side] or whatever.

Skye and another staffer for this CLT independently stated that their organization's goal is to "maintain pockets of affordability in these neighborhoods that are gentrifying". This approach to gentrification treats the housing within gentrifying neighborhoods as interchangeable; the goal is to create some affordable housing somewhere in the geographic area, rather than prevent the displacement of particular individuals from particular homes. These findings help elucidate some of the ideological causes of the phenomenon John Davis termed "regionalization", wherein CLTs are serving increasingly large service areas. This approach also reveals the separation of acquisition and resident selection in the asset-based welfare approach: Skye describes acquisition as driven by pragmatic considerations, such as availability and ease.

The asset-based welfare acquisition and selection approach mirrors that of the traditional market, wherein the processes of unit acquisition and resident recruitment/selection are separate, independent processes. Unoccupied units are purchased (or partnerships with developers building units) based primarily on pragmatic concerns such as price and availability. After necessary rehabilitation is complete, residents go through a bureaucratic application process to purchase the building. The application process requires the prospective resident to demonstrate that they meet the income criteria and, often, to receive pre-approval for a mortgage. Depending on the number of units they typically had available, CLTs following this logic then use either a first-come-first serve model or a lottery system to determine who ultimately purchased the unit. This system positions the CLT as a key broker in the home-buying process and mortgage lenders as a key gatekeeper. Staff often supported prospective residents through the home-buying process, explaining the steps of the process and, in some cases, supporting them with pre-approval process (e.g. by giving them a target credit score to hit before applying). The role of CLTs as brokers who help prospective residents access support programs by helping them craft a

legible, legitimate application is beyond the scope of this study, but is a promising subject for future research.

In contrast, the redistributive/collectivist problem statement—and the professional backgrounds of CLT staff and leadership in community organizing—foreground the emotional and cultural elements of housing, leading to a disposition that emphasizes specificity of people, place, and housing. Sentimental attachments to particular buildings are not just present, but core to the work of the CLT. Frank, an older white CLT founder and resident, contrasted his organization's work with that of other established organizations in this area:

Most of the nonprofits that started off small doing work similar to ours, buying up 10-unit buildings, are now building new 100-unit buildings along the transit corridors and so on. Important work. But we have people in this building we're trying to buy right now who might've lived there 10, 20, 25 years. It's their home. It's where they've lived, it's where they want to stay. They don't really want to move onto the eighth floor of a multifamily building a mile away from where they are.

This quote demonstrates a common redistributive/collectivist attitude towards large-scale projects: they are necessary but do not address the particular problem the CLT seeks to address. Frank also highlights how long residents have lived in their current housing and emphasizes that a mile distance is significant for the residents the CLT serves. In Frank's view, the new build affordable apartments are not interchangeable with the currently existing apartments residents live in, even when both buildings are technically in the same neighborhood.

This relationship- and place-focused disposition leads organizations to acquire currently-occupied buildings and work to ensure that the tenants living in them can remain if they wish to. CLTs operating on this logic thus seek to address those experiences by supporting the continued tenancy of particular residents in particular units. Acquisitions occur largely through existing relationships with other organizations (e.g. tenants unions, associations, anti-displacement advocates) or by being contacted by the current owner or tenants directly. Moreover, acquisitions

occur in the context of relationship-building and conversations with current tenants. Pablo, a Hispanic CLT staffer, illustrates this approach with the following description of an upcoming building acquisition:

We've been doing some heavy tenant organizing with them for the last two years. It was a whole process where they [voted] to have us come in and acquire the property. So yeah, it's been very beautiful, just being able to collaborate with them.

Pablo emphasizes the length of time the CLT has worked with residents of this building—two years—and that the residents democratically assented to the CLT purchasing the building.

Acquisition, in a redistributive/collectivist logic, is not a one-way market exchange in which a CLT purchases a building, but rather a collaborative endeavor involving the CLT, residents, and in many cases, other partners (such as developers, rehabbers, tenants unions, etc). The role of the residents is not to prove themselves to be competent market actors, but rather to be active participants in a collective process (see more on subject-making in Chapter 3). Organizations which acquire already-occupied buildings, of course, also have resource constraints and acquire units opportunistically. However, these constraints shape *which* occupied building in a given neighborhood they acquire, rather fully dictating location and unit type across a region.

Participants perceived the redistributive/collectivist approach as less aligned with mainstream values and systems than the asset-based welfare approach. For instance, scalability is valued—and in some cases mandated—by many of the funding sources for affordable housing development; preservation of existing structures funding was so scarce that scalability was not a common barrier (see Chapter 3 for further discussion of the pursuit of preservation funding in California). Frank, again contrasting his CLT with peer organizations, said those larger, mainstream housing nonprofits “wouldn’t touch anything less than 30-50 unit [buildings]. It’s just not worth their bother. [But for us, it’s about] our vision of resident control. We do, technically, keep the units as rentals until we’ve had enough time to work residents.... It’s kind

of this whole democratic process. The whole model is about building in that sense of ownership or stewardship or more than just ‘an apartment you live in’.” Frank views the labor- and time-intensive process of tenant organizing as incommensurable with large-scale acquisitions; he, and other practitioners utilizing a redistributive/collectivist logic, erred on the side of relationship and capacity-building over acquiring more units.

Together, the dimensions outlined above—causal stories, espoused political goals, theories of change/solutions, and dispositions—provide an analytic framework for making sense of the political logics that CLT workers use to make sense of the meanings of their work and how they should pursue it. The differences between these logics illustrate how the proliferation of the CLT model has led to both dilution of the model and an extension of its core principles.

## Discussion

In this chapter, I contribute to the growing body of literature on the results of experimentation with the CLT model. I find two dominant political logics that shape CLT practices: the asset-based welfare logic and the redistributive/collectivist logic. Participants strategically draw on these political logics to make sense of their work and guide daily activities; political logics are also formalized through organizational priorities and practices.

The asset-based welfare logic encompasses an individualistic, “natural world” causal story (Stone 1989). Participants and organizations that draw on this logic view lack of access to traditional markets as the core social problem they must address. The redistributive/collectivist logic, on the other hand, use a place-based, specific, often racial-justice-oriented “social world” framework (Stone 1989). They define the social problem the CLT exists to address in terms of historical processes of dispossession, exclusion, and marginalization. These different causal stories reflect the divergent political goals associated with each logic—politically affirmative and

often colorblind for the asset-based welfare logic and politically transformative for the redistributive/collectivist logic—and the different solutions practitioners pursue. These two political logics encompass two different theories of change, or narratives about how participants’ work addressed the social problem they intended to address. Under the asset-based welfare logic, CLT participants seek to supplement the traditional housing market and support wealth-building through individual homeownership, addressing the problem of poverty and precarity by moving deserving individuals into the protected, valorized category of “owner”. Under the redistributive logic, CLT participants seek to enact new systems of collective governance and create a significant alternative to the market. Finally, these logics shape the organizational practices and staff orientations employed to pursue these solutions. The asset-based welfare logic values scalability and efficiency, leading organizations to treat housing as fundamentally fungible or interchangeable along market characteristics. This incentivizes organizations to serve a large geographic area and to employ a distanced, bureaucratic process for placing CLT residents. In the redistributive logic, the emotional and cultural elements of housing are central, leading to a disposition that emphasizes specificity of people, place, and housing. As a result, CLTs that operate on a redistributive logic frequently work with tenants who are at risk of displacement (due to the landlord selling or dramatically raising rents) and contacted the CLT for support; the CLT acquires their building and works with the tenants to form a limited equity housing cooperative (LEHC), which takes over administration and ownership of the building.

In some ways, these findings are in line with previous CLT research that documents potential dilution of the CLT model. The politically affirmative, racially colorblind approach present in many organizations represents a significant divergence from the origins of the model, which emerged out of Civil Rights era farmer independence (Davis 2014; Meehan 2014).

Organizations that operated on this nominally-apolitical logic were present across all states, lending evidence towards the process of dilution that John Davis and other CLT scholars have theorized. Moreover, this racially colorblind approach is unlikely to yield meaningful changes in racial inequality (Berrey 2015; Bonilla-Silva 2013; Imbroscio 2020). I also find some evidence that the asset-based welfare logic also led participants to pursue the hegemonic neoliberal project of shaping residents into individualized investor-subjects who achieved property ownership (Watson 2010), a concerning possible consequence of CLTs' increasing entanglement with the delegated welfare state that is discussed further in the following chapter.

However, despite my finding that some organizations are pursuing politically affirmative, mainstream poverty governance goals, I find little support for the narrative that the CLT movement is at risk of failure or total cooption, for several reasons. First, I did not find much evidence of mission drift within organizations; the CLTs that embraced the asset-based welfare approach had done so since their founding. Many of these CLTs were founded by local governments or established nonprofit organizations as a tool to ensure the permanence of affordable housing they created. Given this fact, the presence of politically affirmative CLTs does not necessarily indicate the loss or co-option of politically transformative organizations, but rather the growth of the model in general. Indeed, some asset-based welfare CLTs were pursuing organizational changes that would bring them closer to the classical model ideal of community control (e.g. resident advisory councils in addition to a tripartite board membership, to reflect the diversity of experiences in the large geographic region the CLT served), as a result of new staff and leadership. Second, the presence of politically affirmative CLTs may in fact be useful to the politically transformative side of the movement. Numerous participants who were pursuing political transformation asserted that the presence of more politically affirmative organizations

was useful. Sarah, a white executive director of a CLT in a politically conservative state, described the benefits of more politically affirmative CLTs this way: “For us, it's actually really helpful that other entities are starting [CLTs] throughout the state. It means it's not just a hippie liberal thing. It's an actual tool that other red communities are starting to use.” Other participants echoed this sentiment, describing these organizations as “political cover” or noting that more politically affirmative CLTs still served to familiarize politicians and the public with the CLT model; they viewed this education as an essential step for legitimizing the model and attracting funding and other resources.

Moreover, the CLT model definitionally limits appreciation, and thus the wealth that a resident can build through ownership; this fact prevented CLT participants from fully enacting the asset-based welfare model and, at times, created tension between their expressed ideological goals and their actual institutional practices. My observations and interview data suggest that this tension was largely resolved in favor of preserving permanent affordability. The resale formula which restricts the sale price of a home (and thus the appreciation and capital a resident can accrue) formalizes the tradeoff between permanent affordability (which requires a lower sale price) and wealth-building (which comes from a higher sale price). I initially expected the resale formula to be a contentious, fraught decision for many organizations. However, all of my participants described the resale formula matter-of-factly; none of them described conflict around this decision, though they were willing to disclose organizational conflict regarding other issues. Participants who most fully embraced the asset-based welfare often resolved or dismissed this tension by a pragmatic assertion about market failures; the classical asset-based welfare model wherein people benefit from the commodification of housing is simply not possible in their city.

Furthermore, the presence of CLTs enacting a redistributive/collectivist logic is critical because it represents an instance of CLTs pursuing politically transformative community control and decommodification while also embedded in a decentralized, publicly-funded context. That is, it is evidence that the growth of the CLT model is not uniformly leading to cooption by hegemonic institutions. In fact, in some ways, this model represents a more comprehensive challenge to the status quo than the classical model. Though all CLTs depend on novel property relationships, the hybrid CLT/housing co-operative model allows CLTs to facilitate direct, collective control among residents, rather than the more abstract, diffuse collective control a CLT exerts through a ground lease. Moreover, this model grounds the right to make decisions about one's living space in residence rather than property rights, challenging the individualized notion of property that emerged under settler colonialism (Bhandar 2018).

My findings about the two political logics present in CLTs across the Southwest are significant because they present a more complex process of institutionalization than the more common account of capitalism and settler colonialism coopting all attempts to change them. The dimension of political logics that I explicate above help scholarship move beyond categorizing organizations as politically affirmative or transformative and towards a more detailed understanding of *which* elements may affirm political status quo and which elements may be transformative. To this end, in the following chapter, I identify two core features of the CLT model that have, in some organizations and times, adopted more features of the dominant neoliberal logics than prior research may suggest. In Chapter 7, I then turn to a deeper investigation of the practices of CLTs that operate on a redistributive/collectivist logic.

## Chapter 6

### Neoliberal formulations of stewardship and community control

#### Abstract

In this chapter, I focus on CLTs with close ties to the state—as well as others that rely on the asset-based welfare political logic—in order to advance ongoing conversations about potential cooptation (Eriksson 2018; Selznick 1949) of the CLT model. First, I contribute to a growing body of work on CLTs and the state (Davis 2014; DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019; Spicer, Stephens, and Kramer 2024; Stromberg 2016) by outlining the ways in which CLTs in my sample were embedded in the delegated welfare state. Second, I identify an area of cooptation that has been largely un-examined in prior scholarship: the core CLT value of stewardship. Stewardship—broadly used to refer to CLT’s perceived obligations to stakeholders and the land they hold—is, at times, conceptualized in ways that encourage practitioners to prioritize the exchange value of their homes and to enact neoliberal paternalist<sup>14</sup> practices, including surveillance and discipline. Finally, I contribute to ongoing conversations around community control, highlighting a form of professionalization not discussed at length in prior research: the community development corporation (CDC) approach to community control. I call for scholars and practitioners to clarify their use of the term community control and distinguish between: 1) ongoing community organizing to develop a shared vision and collective power and 2) the fulfillment of a community goal that emerged from past, concluded grassroots organizing. This clarity is essential for making sense of the ways in which the CLT model may be co-opted

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<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 3 for an extended discussion of neoliberal paternalism in the context of welfare reforms in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

by neoliberal logics without obscuring the ways in which CLTs are still challenging or providing alternatives to mainstream systems.

## Introduction

Scholars and practitioners have observed the growing popularity of the CLT model with both triumph and trepidation. Though popularity brings the CLT movement greater resources, increased awareness, and the potential for a broader impact, many have observed that it appears to be changing the model itself, arguably for the worse. Prior research has documented the loss of community control as a central tenant of CLT work and, relatedly, a growing number of organizations that use the CLT model for technocratic, politically affirmative affordable housing provision (Davis 2014; DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019; Stromberg 2016). This pattern played out in my own field observations of CLTs in the American Southwest, raising questions about how cooptation<sup>15</sup> by the welfare state impacts CLTs' perceived and enacted responsibilities to their residents, broader communities, and fellow practitioners.

The dynamics at the heart of this issue were captured by a striking moment in my fieldwork. On a sunny day in 2024, I attended a panel of CLT staffers and leadership from six organizations at an online gathering of CLTs from across a Southwestern state. A high-level elected official delivered the opening remarks, acknowledging local histories of racist urban renewal and lauding the power of CLTs as a vehicle for “returning power to the hands of community” and “stabilizing working-class families” through ownership. The sixty or so Zoom attendees spent the rest of the morning watching presentations from each of the organizations

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<sup>15</sup> Cooptation is the strategic inclusion of actors seeking radical change into the system they seek to change. Inclusion allows the dominant actor to control and limit the amount of change enacted. When successful, cooptation leads to the would-be change agents adopting the goals, assumptions, and narratives of the dominant actor. See Chapter 3 for an extended discussion of cooptation theory (Eriksson 2018; Selvig 1949).

about their current work in affordable housing, community gardens, and food justice. The speakers presented their work as a local, community-controlled alternative to profit-driven development and speculation.

During the Q&A, someone asked: “What are CLTs’ democratic processes? How do you maintain accountability?” The panel speakers seemed taken aback, laughing uncomfortably and taking a moment to decide who had to respond first. The first speaker—a leader at a large, municipally-founded, now-independent CLT—dissembled and then pointed to their tripartite Board structure: one third of their Board members were residents and another third were “community members”. This leader did not, however, elaborate on the backgrounds of the Board members, how they were selected, or the groups they nominally spoke for. Two other speakers, whose organizations had very few units in their portfolios, said their “bylaws” held them accountable. One speaker—a community leader with close ties to local government—explicitly said “[community control]’s not what we’re trying to do. We want to buy every property in [the neighborhood we serve].”

On the one hand, this exchange illustrates precisely the dynamics that prior scholars flagged as threatening “the soul of the CLT”: one CLT leader disavowed democratic, collective decision-making entirely and several others had no systems to facilitate it beyond inert legal documents. The elected official who opened the event invoked discourses of local, democratic control but framed CLTs’ work in terms of traditional, individual ownership for (deserving) members of the workforce.

On the other hand, however, this moment—and similar moments in my fieldwork, interviews, and document analysis—paint a more complicated picture of the cooptation of the CLT model than prior work may suggest. The majority of the CLTs at this event *did* endorse

community control as a goal; several espoused explicitly politically transformative goals. Moreover, their declarations of community control were more complicated than merely shallow claims to legitimize their work; one organization conducted a series of listening sessions in new neighborhoods where they purchased homes and another had residents in paid staff and leadership positions. These activities go beyond the shallow or entirely absent community control documented by prior work but still fall far short of the ideal of democratic, grassroots decision-making that the term conjures.

I highlight this moment to illustrate several key contributions of this chapter. First, though many of these organizations had close relationships with the state, their actual political content varied widely and extended beyond the binary of idealized community control or co-opted, neoliberal, technocratic housing provision. Second, this exchange reveals the gap between CLT practitioners' notions of stewardship and community control (which they understand in terms of pursuing a fixed set of local interests, such as affordable housing) and the framing of "democratic decision-making and accountability" (which demands continuous engagement, ongoing revision, and reconciling disparate visions and interests). Finally, these participants' responses illustrate that their organizations had not prioritized formalizing democratic decision-making in their organizational structures or practices. Indeed, the broader CLT support infrastructure provided few tools or guidelines beyond the tripartite board structure or a general corporate membership.

## Findings

In this chapter, I replicate and extend previous findings in the ongoing conversations about the potential dilution of the CLT model. First, I contribute findings about a phenomenon that research on CLTs in other regions (Davis 2014; DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019;

Stromberg 2016) has documented: there is a subset of CLTs that reify the valorization of individual, traditional homeownership, emphasizing housing both as shelter *and* as a tool for wealth-building. These organizations are deeply entangled with municipal government(s) and/or established nonprofits, use workforce housing framing, and do little grassroots organizing or outreach. Second, I build on this line of research, arguing that the core CLT value of stewardship has been, at times, conceptualized in ways that drive practitioners toward neoliberal logics and practices (e.g. shaping residents into individualized investor-subjects). These findings are an important addition to prior research—which has documented resident engagement practices that can “challenge conventional private market approaches to property ownership” (Lowe and Thaden 2016: 611) and play an essential role in CLT’s ability to “resist the commodification of home and lives” (Cahen et al 2022: 395)—as they illuminate a different side of stewardship. Finally, I discuss the issue of community control, highlighting a form of professionalization not discussed at length in prior research—the community development corporation (CDC) approach to community control—and proposing a clarified definition of the term community control that draws attention to critical areas for study without obscuring the ways in which CLTs are challenging or providing alternatives to mainstream systems.

Though I also observed empowering and politically transformative resident engagement (see Chapter 7), taken together, my findings suggest a broader range of stewardship practices among CLTs than many researchers presume. Future scholarship should take care to investigate how stewardship practices are enacted in practice and experienced by residents, beyond the public claims of practitioners. Relatedly, CLTs that do nominally care about community control do not necessarily have organizational structures in place to enact it; technical guidance on such structures, their importance, and/or their implementation is almost entirely absent in the libraries

of resources that support practitioners in developing legal models, business plans, and otherwise pursuing the day-to-day work of the CLT.

## CLTs as Agents of the Delegated Welfare State

In line with previous research (Davis 2014; DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019; Stromberg 2016), I find that CLTs are increasingly a mainstream tool of the delegated welfare state and that these organizations are politically affirmative. Many CLTs in my sample engaged with the state beyond simply accessing funding; to various degrees, they carried out the work of social service provision and filled gaps left by the insufficient funding and administrative apparatus of city, county, and state governments. This supports previous findings that there a substantial segment of the CLT field is comprised of organizations that pursue technocratic affordable housing provision, rather than transformative political change, and reinforce subjectivity of residents as homeowners rather than community member (DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019; Kruger et al 2020; Stromberg 2016).

There are several models of state entanglement present in the Southwest, initiated by both the state and by CLTs. To my knowledge, two city governments in the Southwest—Flagstaff, Arizona; Salt Lake City, Utah—have founded and maintained administrative control over shared equity programs. These programs hold land, make homeownership affordable for qualified buyers, and use the ground-lease model to enforce resale restrictions limiting the owner’s equity. Unlike the classical CLT, they are run by city staff and not incorporated as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. There are also instances of municipal (state or county) governments founding or incubating a CLT that later incorporated as an independent nonprofit (e.g. Pima County CLT in Tucson, Arizona; Irvine CLT in Irvine, CA).

Alternatively, municipal governments may partner with extant CLTs to directly delegate ownership of and responsibility for certain properties to the CLT<sup>16</sup>. For instance, interviewees described acquiring low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC) units that had reached the end of their required affordability period, properties with existing municipally-created affordability deeds, and public housing units. The latter provides a fascinating case study for making sense of the delegated welfare state, CLT's role in it, and possible consequences.

Public housing disposition is a process authorized by Section 18 of the Housing Act of 1937, as amended in 2006, 2008, and guidance released in 2021. Section 18, and the related Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) Program, to enable public housing authorities (PHAs) to convert units to other funding streams (e.g. Section 8) or sell them outright. These programs are the most recent iterations of a series of regulatory procedures that facilitate the slow death of the US's public housing program; they are justified through the vast, unmet need for capital to fund repairs and rehabilitation of public housing units (Hanlon 2017). Public housing disposition of units through low-income homeownership program has been occurring, albeit at a very small scale, since 1974 (Hanlon 2017); the introduction of nonprofits as an intermediary is a somewhat newer innovation.

To my knowledge, in the Southwest, public housing disposition with CLTs as the buyer has occurred at least twice—in Fort Collins, CO and in North Richmond, CA—and is being discussed as a possibility in at least one additional city (Tucson, AZ). In Fort Collins, CO, 44 units were sold by the local PHA, Housing Catalyst, to Elevation Community Land Trust, a statewide CLT with over 300 units (Gaisford 2022) that creates affordable ownership

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<sup>16</sup> In this section, I discuss the transfer of actual housing units. Transfers of vacant municipal land are also common, but typically do not involve people currently living on the land in question. For more on public land disposition and government partnerships in California, see the Othering and Belonging Institute report titled [“CLTs as Stewards of Public Land: A Guide for Local Governments in California.”](#)

opportunities for “low to moderate income members of the community who would otherwise be likely to rent or be displaced” so they can “build wealth through ownership” (Elevation CLT “About Us” webpage). In North Richmond, Richmond Land CLT acquired two lots of vacant land which had previously been part of the 19 acre, 214-unit public housing project Las Deltas. The CLT is developing roughly 20 units of housing on the land (“the North Richmond Eco Village”) based on a community co-design project. In Tucson, a 2023 City-commissioned report recommended that the PHA convert two-thirds of the scattered sites units (single-family homes located across the service area; nearly 300 units) to affordable homeownership opportunities (Praxis Consulting Group “Portfolio Assessment and Preliminary Recommendations”). Discussions around whether and how the PHA will carry out these recommendations are ongoing.

The process of public housing disposition raises a number of questions for future research. First, it presents parallels to the rhetoric described in the opening to this chapter, wherein elected officials justify privatization to CLTs as returning power to the hands of the community. Second, though CLTs ensure long-term affordability (unlike LIHTC conversions or traditional affordable homeownership programs), ownership-focused CLTs serve a very different population than public housing rentals. In Tucson, for instance, the prospective CLT buyer, Pima County Community Land Trust, primarily serves residents who can qualify for mortgage pre-approval (per their website); these residents likely make close to the 80% AMI threshold, or roughly \$72,00 a year, per the Fannie Mae AMI Lookup Tool. In the four administrative districts where most of Tucson’s scattered sites units are located, the median income of the current public housing tenants ranges from \$11,527 to \$13,404 (Praxis Consulting Group “Portfolio Assessment and Preliminary Recommendations”:98).

Public housing disposition raises several critical empirical questions related to current public housing residents. If these residents are permitted to continue renting their unit, under the ownership of the CLT, how do they experience this transition? The rights of CLT renters are less clearly defined than the rights of public housing renters. Residents may also have a different relationship with the CLT than with the local public housing authority (for better or worse). Second, given the income of current tenants and realities of housing voucher programs, are CLTs contributing to the displacement of the current tenants of dispossessed public housing units, despite common displacement prevention measures? One common displacement mitigation approach is offering tenants the chance to buy the unit, but this is almost certainly untenable for the majority of residents, given the median income of public housing residents and CLT mortgage requirements. Another mitigation approach involves public housing residents receiving a housing voucher and other support for moving. However, nationally, an estimated 39% of voucher recipients cannot find an appropriate unit with a landlord willing to rent to them; those that are successful take, on average, 60 days to find a new unit (Ellen, O'Regan, and Stochak 2021). Moreover, public housing privatization has been linked to discrimination, unjust evictions, and inappropriate relocations (Avellino 2017; McLean 2019; Wallace and Burnett 2017). Privatization can have significant consequences for residents, as demonstrated by a high-profile case in which a resident of a re-developed building died of a heart attack after being denied a first-floor unit, despite a heart condition that necessitated an accessible unit (Avellino 2017).

At the heart of these empirical questions lies the concern that CLTs may be contributing to displacement and the dismantling of the public social safety net, a pursuit that runs counter to their core commitment to decommodification and market alternatives. The participation of CLTs

enables public officials to describe disposition as empowering community and maintaining affordability (without specifying *who* the units are affordable to). However, this dismantling is the product of broader political forces, not driven or initiated by CLTs. In other cases of CLT activity, such as affordable homeownership programs, prior research suggests that residents would likely be displaced—and unable to purchase a home—without the presence of the CLT (Schneider, Lennon, and Saegert 2023; Temkin, Theodos, and Price 2010; Wang et al 2019). In the case of public housing disposition, however, it is less clear what would happen without CLT participation. Most likely, other actors would seize the opportunity to acquire housing units—possibly for market-rate sale or rental. Given that, the case of public housing disposition may illustrate that CLTs’ commitment to long-term affordability is increasingly important as the incoming Trump administration pursues further retrenchment of the welfare state and disinvestment of non-market housing. Regardless, the case of public housing disposition reveals the conditions that encourage CLT participation in the delegated welfare state—chronic underfunding of affordable housing and federal-level policies that create intractable dilemmas for local actors—and potential consequences of their participation.

### *Embracing the Delegated Welfare State*

CLT participants operating under the asset-based welfare approach often made sense of their work in relation to the delegated welfare state. These participants framed their work as supplementary to that of the state, highlighting their commitment to long-term affordability (discussed further in the “stewardship” section below) and capacity for ongoing enforcement and care for residents and buildings. The following exchange with Henry, a staffer at a large, established CLT, illustrates this view nicely:

Henry: The City calls us a ‘preservation partner’. City-restricted units with a covenant or some other restriction can be purchased by us, with the understanding that we will preserve the affordability.

Interviewer: What would otherwise happen to the units with affordability covenants?

Henry: So, a lot of ‘em—There were some issues back in the late 20-teens where [the City] wasn't able to properly track a lot of the homes in its affordable covenant program, and they were sold at market rates. And title companies missed or ignored these restrictions and basically permitted the homeowners to sell the homes contrary to the restrictions. I think that was kind of a wake-up call for [the City]. It recognized the kind of ongoing stewardship work that a lot of this requires. And another thing that could happen with a lot of these [City] homes is the affordability restriction isn't super long. I think the longest that a [City] Covenant lasts is 60 years. So, they look at [this CLT] and that permanent affordability that comes with the CLT model as a real benefit to the city.

Henry’s account of the city government’s previous attempts to create affordable housing frames the CLT as an agent of the city, enacting its goals (affordability) with a different approach (a ground lease which ties the CLT to the owner and facilitates enforcement) and greater capacity to monitor affordability over time. Cody, a Hispanic leader at a large California CLT, put it even more strongly. “We're essentially operating as an adjunct staff and just adding capacity to the city to do their work,” Cody said, explaining that this arrangement benefited cities because, “they don’t have to worry about recapturing [subsidy] or monitoring or doing anything because the CLT is doing all of it.” These quotes illustrate how CLT practitioners at organizations that rely on an asset-based welfare logic position themselves as supports or partners of the City, not just beneficiaries of grants or funding. As John Davis (2014) anticipated, these participants framed themselves in relation to the state and how they could benefit the state, rather than grassroots community groups. Moreover, as described in the previous chapter, these organizations largely adopt the distanced disposition of the state. In contrast to prior research that largely focused on disavowal of politically transformative goals, however, I find that some of these organizations embrace the rhetoric of community control.

Furthermore, among organizations with these closer ties to municipal governments, I found no cases of individual organizations that began as politically transformative, grassroots programs but became politically affirmative agents of delegated welfare state. That is, in my interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, there was little evidence of mission drift over time. Instead, organizations that operated primarily on an asset-based welfare logic were *founded* with the goal of serving as agents of the state or partnering closely with them. This is a critical distinction to make as we consider the trajectory of the CLT movement; the growing numbers of technocratic CLTs may not necessarily imply fewer grassroots CLTs. Indeed, social movements research (e.g. Staggenborg 1988) and findings presented in the following chapter suggest that a robust population of technocratic CLTs may bring valuable resources and recognition to the movement that benefit more politically transformative organizations. However, future research is needed to investigate this more thoroughly, using documents produced over the course of an organization and speaking with a range of people involved in the early years of the organization (including those who are no longer involved), an approach that was not possible for most of the organizations in this sample.

One critical possible consequence of this that has not been thoroughly addressed in the literature, to my knowledge, is the possibility that CLTs will adopt the state's neoliberal paternalist orientation towards their *residents*. Interview and participant observation data from this study suggest that CLTs that operate on an asset-based welfare logic may pursue stewardship in ways that reify the exchange value of housing and enact paternalistic discipline of residents and prospective residents into idealized investor-subjects. In the following section, I analyze how stewardship, as actually enacted, may undermine the goals of cultural decommodification of housing and community empowerment.

## Stewardship

Beyond the municipalization and co-optation that prior research has identified, I found evidence that the core CLT value of stewardship is, at times, formulated in ways that reinforce neoliberal logics and practices. However, as prior work has argued (Cahen et al 2022; Hackett et al 2019; Kruger et al 2020; Thaden 2010), it also encourages CLTs to function as brokers guiding low-income beneficiaries through the complex home-buying process through pre- and post-purchase counseling and support.

Among CLT scholars and practitioners, “stewardship” is a common—but rarely clearly defined—byword. Nearly every participant endorsed a long-term commitment to the continued affordability and habitability of their housing units—and the long-term success of their residents—as core to their organization’s mission. Though practitioners often used the term “stewardship” to refer to this obligation, in practice, the term stewardship covered a wide range of obligations and meanings, from “preservation of housing units” to “financial education for prospective residents”.

Notably, however, the definition of stewardship that has been retained throughout the growing popularity of the CLT model largely omits any explicit links to community control. That is, common uses of the term “stewardship” refer to obligations to residents and housing units, but not to ongoing organizing or democratic processes. Stewardship is rarely used in terms of an obligation to continuously engage with the community, acknowledge and reconcile complex or contradictory community visions, respond to evolving needs or preferences, etc. This absence is reinforced by educational materials and technical resources (e.g. guides to starting a CLT or manuals for established practitioners).

Practitioners operating on an asset-based welfare logic typically invoked stewardship in the financial sense, a perspective well-captured by the Grounded Solution Network's introduction to its Stewardship Standards resource: "Affordable homeownership programs integrate stewardship practices to help households maximize wealth through homeownership while protecting the program and its public investment." This framing places monetary value—of the housing unit and the subsidy used to make it affordable—at the center of stewardship, echoing the classical definition of stewardship as the obligations of a steward to protect the monetary value of the asset long-term. The Grounded Solutions Network guide to CLTs for local governments likewise omits ongoing fidelity to the broader community's evolving needs and desires, framing stewardship in terms of obligations to structures/homes, homeowners, public funds, and the organization itself.

Interviewees echoed this attention to building and resident, framing stewardship as a key piece of creating financial stability for residents. Kathy, a white Latina leader at a CLT with close ties to municipal government, described the CLT's obligations in the following way:

If you are a true Community Land Trust, you're stewarding these people and these homes. Our role is to make sure that [residents] are successful and these homes are maintained. And so all our staff has taken that on as we've grown-- have taken on certain parts of that responsibility. Right now we're looking for a stewardship coordinator and a financial capability educator/coach. Because I really feel that if we want to prevent homelessness, if we want to help these people become successful—and the rest of the community—it's through education... Well, we don't really deal with the unsheltered, but everything we do in stewardship is about preventing that destabilizing... It's, like, you think people know how to do a budget and they don't. We live in complex financial/economic times. Everything from, you know, no more pensions. We all have to take care—it's our responsibility to take care of our retirement.

This quote illustrates Kathy's conceptualization of stewardship as an obligation to the CLT's residents and the houses they live in (but not the broader community her organization is embedded in). Kathy's understanding of stewardship includes, in colloquial terms, a narrative of

the neoliberal erosion of the social safety net (e.g. pensions) and the responsibility it places on individuals to secure their own, individual safety net (“take care of our retirement”). Moreover, it leads to and justifies the conclusion that financial education is the appropriate response to this erosion. Notably, obligations to the community the CLT ostensibly serves are missing. This quote also reveals how stewardship is often operationalized as training for prospective and current residents.

Every organization with units and residents—regardless of political logic—fulfilled their perceived stewardship obligations through required pre-purchase events and policies to support residents post-purchase. Pre-purchase requirements typically included anything from day-long “homeownership” trainings to one-on-one meetings with CLT staff. Post-purchase was often less structured and ranged from informal guidance (e.g. “call us if you have questions or are falling behind on your mortgage”) to funds for repairs. Organizations operating on an asset-based welfare logic described mandatory pre-purchase trainings and meetings wherein they communicated a vision of an idealized homeowner (an independent, savvy investor-subject) and provided prospective residents with the institutional social capital (Rita, Garboden, and Darrah-Okike 2023) they needed to make themselves legible to mortgage lenders. In contrast, redistributive/collectivist organizations described long-term relationship-building with the occupants of the building they acquired and pre-purchase intended to empower residents to take on collective fiscal and administrative responsibility (see Chapter 7 for an in-depth discussion of this approach.) For all CLTs, these pre-purchase trainings served pragmatic purposes—ensuring that prospective buyers understood the CLT model (and their limited appreciation) and were equipped to take over building maintenance—but also reflected organization’s beliefs about what a “good” homeowner looks like.

Prior research has theorized this support as ‘care’ based on interviews with staff and ethnographic site visits (Cahen, Lilli, and Saegert 2022), but participants’ reports to me and the limited documents they provided (e.g. slides for trainings) suggest dramatic variation across CLTs. In fact, my data suggested that this support may, at times, manifest as paternalistic idealized investor subject-making (in mandatory pre-purchase trainings) and accompanying surveillance and discipline (in post-purchase monitoring and enforcement). However, I also find evidence supporting the notion that stewardship practices may contribute to resident success and ongoing stability. Below, I outline preliminary findings based on my interviews and document analysis; future research should investigate how these trainings play out *in situ* and how residents experience this pre- and post-purchase support.

Stewardship within the asset-based welfare logic, as described by interviewees, was a complex blend of brokering and subject-making. Beatriz, for instance, explained the importance of pre-purchase support by asserting that, “there is a lot of financial repair that many families have to do... Building credit, or taking care of debt, or their income is not in a position where they can get a mortgage loan.” When I asked about whether the CLT worked directly with mortgage lenders, she said they worked with several and added:

In our program, someone has to be able to get pre-approved [for a mortgage before getting on the CLT’s waitlist.] And we do a lot of one-on-one coaching, we help them through their application... We do want families to be very independent. It’s not that we’re holding hands, it’s more of an education process. Families do need to take ownership. It’s not that I will be filling out the applications for them, because... They have to go through the process to see what it actually takes, right?

In this exchange, Beatriz grappled with expressing both the ideal of an independent, financially responsible homeowner *and* the considerable support the CLT provided to help prospective residents. In her view, a responsible homeowner needed to be able to “work on their budgets and their finances”; pragmatically, they needed to be legible to mortgage lenders as a viable debtor in

order to purchase the house from the CLT. Other interviews threaded a similar needle, emphasizing the responsibility and independence of prospective residents while describing the ways in which the CLT helped them navigate bureaucratic systems (e.g. brokering with HOAs). Abigail, for instance, a white staffer at a CLT with close ties to local government, described a planned meeting between CLT homeowners and City code and zoning staff. She explained that she had often needed to help owners navigate this system and wanted to do this proactively, saying:

Part of it, too, is the fees involved. If you do get a ticket from civil enforcement, what do you do? There are ways where, if you fix the problem, then you don't have to pay the fee. Or, if you miss all of these notices, you can still go to the hearing and they could still potentially waive the fee. Just understanding that there's ways out of these tickets. It's not just like, "oh, you got a ticket, so now let your weeds go crazy and it doesn't matter anymore."

Physical maintenance of the home was a common topic in required pre-purchase trainings and meetings among CLTs that focused on individual homeownership, often serving as a site for reinforcing both the importance of individual responsibility and the availability of CLT financial and institutional social capital support. The Grounded Solutions Network guidelines reflect this common focus, suggesting organizations should work with buyers "before and after they purchase their homes to ensure that they are well-prepared for homeownership, financially responsible, and able to maintain the home" and should "protect the community (or public) investment by monitoring the physical asset and enforcing program requirements over the long term." Cody echoed this sentiment, saying:

We try to prepare them for homeownership as much as we can and really try to educate them on all that goes into homeownership. And yeah, there's nobody to call. You can't just call your landlord to fix your toilet now. You're going to have to fix it yourself. And there's maintenance costs that go into homeownership.

Cody clearly articulates the importance of personal responsibility for maintenance, implying that residents who have been renters have little experience taking personal responsibility for routine maintenance tasks. The terminology of enforcement, monitoring, and individual financial responsibility are central to this conception of the CLT's role relative to residents.

Indeed, some of my data suggests that this stewardship may, at times, manifest as surveillance and disciplining residents into the norms of white, middle class American homeownership. Kathy, for instance, volunteered a story about a renter in one of her organization's properties, saying:

There's also a lot of fibbers—liars, really—about. [Our units] are all income-based. We cannot displace a [renter] just because all of a sudden they're a millionaire. But you're going to have to pay market rate. And they will do anything not to do that. And, so, this lady—I don't go there, but the property managers go—they've got a brand new F-something truck in the driveway in the carport. And there's signs that another-- a man lives there. She didn't disclose it.

Other CLT staff described observing and enforcing aesthetic concerns about the CLT's homeowner-occupied homes. For instance, Cody asserted that the resale restrictions may incentivize CLT residents to avoid maintaining the property and stated that his organization has maintenance agreements in the ground lease to mitigate that problem, leading to the following exchange:

Interviewer: How do you feel like those requirements in the ground lease are working? Are they effective?

Cody: Oh, absolutely. We still require monitoring. We have an existing home that we just did an inspection on because we noticed we drive by occasionally, and we noticed that it's in a little bit of disrepair. The grass is overgrown and the back, they've been storing old vehicles and stuff, so they're getting a notice that they need to make some changes, otherwise they're out of compliance. But the municipality states— we try to get them resources. It isn't like we're just like, “Hey, you have to do this.” We have a lot of available financing and other resources for the homeowners to continue maintaining that home. So it isn't, you know, as draconian as you would expect.

Other interviewees described “drive-by”s of CLT homes to check on similar aesthetic concerns or, in the case of rentals, to assess whether the occupants were being honest about the number of residents who lived there. The logic of investment and financial value may encourage CLT practitioners to enforce standards that are unrelated to the actual wellbeing of the residents. For residents, this form of stewardship may be experienced as surveillance or the CLT enforcing the aesthetic norms of white middle class ownership (Lipsitz 2011) under the guise of maintenance to preserve the structure for future residents. At other times, however, the CLT appeared to be serving as a mediator between surveilling institutions and residents. For instance, Abigail, the staffer organizing an informational session between CLT owners and code enforcement staff, asserted that many of the code violation tickets were the result of neighbors calling to report CLT residents. Abigail’s role in this case was not to surveil CLT residents, but to guide them through the system designed to punish nonconformity. Future research must investigate how CLT practitioners are adopting the mandate to “protect the public investment” and “ensure buyers are well-prepared for homeownership” through observation of pre-purchase trainings, CLT staff interactions with residents, and interviews with prospective and current residents.

There are some possible positive elements to CLTs’ stewardship practices beyond stabilizing residents: roughly eight interviewees conceptualized of stewardship in ways that encouraged a holistic approach to their work, beyond technocratic affordable housing provision. Interviewees and fieldwork participants at times used the term stewardship to refer to perceived obligations to historical preservation and environmental infrastructure. One such interviewee—Mae, a leader at an emerging CLT—spoke with loving detail about the early 20<sup>th</sup> century houses in the CLT’s service area through-out the interview, describing the flows of migration that led to each neighborhood’s growth, the sources of lumbar and brick used to build the homes, and the

communities formed in those neighborhoods. When asked who the “C” in “CLT” is for her organization—after discussing the CLT’s homeowners and membership—she said: “we’re a private organization, but we’re accountable to [this town] because we are stewarding the history. Those historic buildings. I can’t tell you how many people have come by when we’re working on one of our houses who say, ‘oh, I used to live here.’” Stewarding history, for Mae, meant preserving both the physical structures and the meaning and social context around them for future generations. Other CLTs enacted this type of stewardship through oral history projects, public performances documenting stories from the neighborhood, and similar cultural events.

Roughly a quarter of the CLTs in the sample referenced environmental concerns as a component of stewardship, either in an interview, during field observation, or in public-facing documents; there was no apparent association with either political logic. Stewardship in the environmental sense typically entailed improvements to the CLT’s units. For instance, Cody proudly described a range of environmental resilience rehabilitations made to the CLT’s homes, saying:

It’s always low-income families and BIPOC families that suffer the most from natural disasters. And so, we wanted to insulate—no pun intended—our folks as much as we can from all of these different factors that affect home ownership and affordable home ownership long term. With us here in California, specifically our region, we have issues with wildfires. They’ve come out with this designation called Wildfire Preparedness and there’s a base and a plus designation. We’re bringing all our models to the plus. So that includes things like dual-tempered glass windows throughout, non-combustible material plating on the exterior, and either no gutters or covered gutters.

Other participants described smaller-scale projects, including solar panels, smart thermostats, and energy-efficient appliances. This commitment to long-term environmental resilience may, in part, be driven by outside incentives (e.g. state or federal funding for such repairs), but it also represents a commitment to the long-term wellbeing of residents.

Finally, though these organizations did not participate in the study, several CLTs in California—Sogorea' Te Land Trust, Dishgamu Humboldt CLT, Tierras Indígenas CLT—pursue stewardship in the sense of Indigenous relationships to land, using the CLT model to rematriate land to Indigenous control (per their websites, news articles about their work, and limited participant observation). Future research should focus on this important use of the CLT model, as it is arguably one of the most politically transformative goals pursued by CLTs.

Stewardship as enacted may reinforce exchange value/commodity elements of housing and reify hegemonic ideals of ownership and individual responsibility, in contrast to the collective, common good that CLTs were originally imagined as. In the following section, I discuss a similar dynamic emerging around the core value of community control.

## The CDC Model of Community Control

As described above and in the previous chapter, I found evidence of CLTs that disavowed or superficially endorsed community control as a value, in line with prior research on CLTs (DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019; Stromberg 2016). However, as illustrated in the opening of this chapter, I also found evidence of organizations that espoused community control as a core value but operationalized the community's vision as the technocratic provision of permanent affordable housing. These organizations thus pursued “community control” through practices common in the professionalized community development field.

The term CDC, which broadly describes a non-profit organization that pursues physical (re)development in a defined geographic area, began in the late 1960s and gained popularity in the 1970s as local groups opposed redlining and urban renewal (DeFilippis 2012; Stoecker 1997). The CDC field grew through the 1980s and 1990s in response to the shrinking public sector,

joining the growing delegated welfare state (DeFilippis 2012; Stoecker 1997; Wolch 1990). In the 2000s, CDCs have embraced neoliberal communitarianism (DeFilippis 2012; Heil 2018). Neoliberal communitarianism is a governance approach that pairs seemingly contradictory notions of individual responsibility and collective obligation, with the logic that market and community are served by increased social control and the production of rational, self-controlling individuals (Van Houdt and Schinkel 2013). In the context of CDCs, neoliberal communitarianism aligns with market-based policies and non-confrontational organizing approaches by presuming that communities have universally shared interests which need only social relationships and individual gains to be realized (DeFilippis 2012; Heil 2018). In doing so, this approach downplays the importance of—or need for—political transformation, political organizing, and democratic resident control (Heil 2018; Lowe 2008; Stoecker 1997).

Much like the apolitical CDCs documented in prior research (Gittell & Vidal 1998; Lowe 2008; Walker & Weinheimer 1998), the six CLTs discussed in this section framed their work as community control but lacked active, participatory processes in which CLT residents and non-CLT locals could influence decision-making or visioning. Instead, they engaged with the population they served through professionalized community development-style outreach—such as highly structured, CLT-initiated listening sessions, newsletters, and other relatively infrequent (e.g. 1-4 a year) events.<sup>17</sup>

Prior research suggests that the tripartite board model and general membership (if present) would ensure that CLTs enact community control more effectively than CDCs, ensuring that they stay aligned with resident and community interests (Lowe and Thaden 2016). However,

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<sup>17</sup> Though I am emphasizing similarities with CDC-style community engagement, it is important to note that these organizations also employed stewardship practices that are not typical of CDCs. Several had residents on their board of directors. Their work should thus not be reductively understood as identical to CDCs.

alignment with resident and community interests is arguably not the same as community control, which would involve democratic decision-making among a larger sample of local population, processes for reconciling disparate needs and desires, and processes that build collective power within and outside of the CLT. Moreover, data from my interviews and participant observation suggest that resident Board members and general members may, in practice, often take relatively passive roles in this organization. Though these findings suggest that a large swatch of CLTs are not enacting community control, many of these organizations are enacting a form of *local* control that is meaningfully different from the status quo of development and growth machine (Logan and Molotch 2007) urban place-making.

In the following section, I discuss what these CDC-style forms of community involvement looked like in my sample and outline factors that may drive practitioners to adopt the CDC-style operationalization of community control. For instance, preliminary findings suggest that CLT associations have neglected to develop technical guidance or organizational forms to help practitioners resolve this tension and some leaders have reduced community control to a tripartite board and maybe a membership. Finally, I argue that scholarly and applied conversations around this topic are muddied by the absence of shared definitions of community control and propose an alternative framework.

Based on interviews, document analysis of CLT documents and news stories, and participant observation, six CLTs in my sample held community control as a core goal but enacted it through professionalized CDC-style activities. The following exchange with Kathy illustrates her understanding of community control, which is representative of this subset of CLTs:

Interviewer: Communities often have a wide range of needs and I could see a lot of ways a CLT could help. How do you identify the needs of your community? If it helps, you can think of a recent activity you started or were considering.

Kathy: When you have people coming in here for— So, we're a HUD-approved housing counseling agency. So people come to us because they want to purchase a home or save their home or [we refer people for rental eviction counseling.] Our housing counseling is where we identify the needs. Or just talking to our peers. At my church, I attended a presentation by someone at [another local nonprofit] who was giving us statistics on the new homeless population, which is increasingly older and women... [When our initial municipal funding ran out], we were like, what are we gonna do now? Me and [another staffer] started talking about the gentrification issue and kind of very intentionally said, ok, let's focus on [gentrifying neighborhoods]. So, we intentionally purchased a lot of those vacant parcels in [those neighborhoods.]

Later in the interview, Kathy cited two highly structured, CLT-led activities as instances of community outreach: an educational session for prospective homeowners about the CLT model and meetings with local neighborhood associations. She later clarified that the primary goal of the education sessions was to recruit prospective homeowners and that the impetus for the neighborhood meetings was to anticipate and mitigate resistance to the CLT's presence in neighborhoods that were particularly suspicious of development. Though document analysis and other interviews revealed that Kathy's CLT engaged in a series of regular community listening sessions, where people were encouraged to drop by for food and conversation, she did not bring up this series in her interview. Kathy's CLT also partnered with local arts organizations to promote the Chicano history of the neighborhood, contributing to ongoing place-building commemoration projects (Brown-Saracino 2021).

These quotes illustrate a dynamic present through-out Kathy's interview, other interviews with members of this organization, and my fieldwork: Kathy's organization is not involved in political organizing or collective decision-making. Though she and other staff members promoted the CLT as empowering the community, they understood empowerment through the

lens of access to individual ownership. Other CLTs that relied on CDC-style community control likewise relied on highly structured, CLT-led community engagement and outreach, such as advisory boards and councils where homeowners could “share issues with the CLT and board” (as Henry put it). For instance, Sarah described plans for “some sort of resident structure” that provides residents with “some locus of control in their life” but acknowledged that it would be “fairly managed by us because the budget will still come through us and final okays will come through us.”

In contrast to the organizations highlighted in the following chapter—which nurture collective decision-making structures at the most micro level of community (the residential building), support spin-off projects inspired by collective organizing, and strategically invest in partnerships and leadership-sharing with other local, membership-based organizations—these CLTs had no formal structures, staff, or partnerships in place to enact collective decision-making, identify an evolving, collective vision, or grapple with diverse publics. Their resident engagement and community outreach activities did not give residents or non-CLT locals tangible decision-making power about key issues: the work of the CLT, the use of CLT land, or development in the neighborhood. Moreover, they were rarely attended by a large swatch of the population (a challenge that staffers acknowledged but had little capacity to address).

Nevertheless, these staffers considered this work an adequate response to their perceived obligations to enact community control. In part, this is because they defined community control (in interviews, fieldwork, and public-facing documents) as the *pursuit of community interests*, which they defined simply as the presence of affordable housing. Therefore, creating affordable housing was the exertion of community control, with no additional steps required. At other times, they defined democratic decision-making solely as the existence of a tripartite board (e.g. “we

build community power and solidarity through our tripartite board”). The latter is reinforced by much of the CLT technical support literature, which emphasizes the tripartite board and general membership but provides little support for practitioners seeking to run boards in democratic, equitable ways.

Much of the debate over community control—whether and how it is enacted effectively—stems from the fact that the term “community control” can be used to gesture at very different things. Some practitioners and scholars use the term to assert that the CLT is pursuing community *interests* or the public good. Others use it to mean the CLT is facilitating political organizing and democratic governance: building solidarity among different groups, defining a collective vision, developing collective power, and so on. Though the classical CLT model was developed for the latter, it seems likely that people will keep using both meanings. However, future scholars should be precise about their usage and operationalization of the term. This clarity is essential for an accurate understanding of the promise and actual impacts of the CLT movement, but also because a narrow focus on the latter meaning may obscure the ways in which CLTs *are* challenging the status quo of urban development. Even CLTs that are pursuing affordable housing as a public good are doing something very different from developers pursuing profit. It may be more appropriate to term their work “local control” rather than community control. A more critical approach to the term community control may also clarify the challenges that genuine community control presents. CLTs serve diverse publics: place-based populations with a wide range of needs, desires, and interests. They are unlikely to operate in a place with a pre-existing, singular “community vision” – at least not without significant organizing before the creation of the CLT. Scholars and practitioners must develop systems for accountability and

ongoing community control at achievable scales. In the following chapter, I discuss adaptations to the classical CLT model that allow practitioners to do just that.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I contribute to a growing line of research on the pitfalls of CLT mainstreaming by replicating and extending previous findings on possible neoliberal cooptation of the CLT model. I identify several key elements of the CLT model that, for some organizations, align with hegemonic, neoliberal logics. First, I build on research on other regions of the United States (Davis 2014; DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019; Stromberg 2016), finding that there is a subset of CLTs in the Southwest that reify the valorization of individual, traditional homeownership, emphasizing housing both as shelter *and* as a tool for wealth-building. I outlined ways in which CLTs can be embedded in the delegated welfare state, from local government founding CLTs to CLTs literally taking on ownership of public housing units to convert them from rentals to affordable ownership units through public housing disposition. Second, I identify a new and understudied domain in which neoliberal logics are manifesting in CLT's work; I find that that the core CLT value of stewardship is, at times, conceptualized in ways that may drive practitioners towards practices of surveillance, discipline, and the cultivation of individual investor-subjects. Finally, I identify the presence of a neoliberal communitarianism approach to community control, wherein organizations embrace the notion of community control but enact it through shallow, CLT-led "engagement" and "outreach". These manifestations of stewardship and community control reflect that CLTs that operate primarily on the asset-based welfare political logic in my sample are not doing *cultural* work of

decommodification, despite the fact that they literally remove or insulate<sup>18</sup> units from the market fluctuations. These organizations are largely not contributing to the political project of centering the use value of housing (as shelter, as a “home”, etc) over its exchange value, prioritizing subjective attachment to place, or grounding collective decision-making in residence, rather than capital and property rights.

That said, these CLTs *are* providing affordable housing, often (but not always) at greater scales than the CLTs operating on redistributive/collectivist logics. Though I do not have data on CLT residents, prior research suggests that CLTs make homeownership possible for those who have no other avenues to purchase a home (Schneider, Lennon, and Saegert 2023; Temkin, Theodos, and Price 2010; Wang et al 2019). This suggests that politically affirmative CLTs are still having a measurable, positive impact on their residents. In their absence, these CLTs’ residents would likely be paying market rents that generate significant housing cost burden and/or force them to move to somewhere with lower housing costs. The absence of cultural decommodification work is not a problem in and of itself; it becomes problematic only in the context of CLTs claiming broader impacts (e.g. community control) or in their (perceived, hypothetical) threat to the broader CLT movement. I address this dilemma further in the subsequent chapter, arguing that the presence of politically affirmative organizations poses less of an existential threat to the movement than prior research may suggest.

Regardless, future research should investigate the factors that contribute to these neoliberal formulations of stewardship and community control. They are likely to be, in part, a product of the professional *habitus* of the staff and founders: nonprofit professionals and state

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<sup>18</sup> I use the term insulate here because many CLTs do not, in fact, fully remove their units from the commodity market. CLTs that tie resale price to income or length of tenure fully remove their units from the traditional market, but many resale formulas are tied to changes in market value.

workers are likely more familiar with the mainstream, shallow, top-down participatory practices of CDCs than grassroots political organizing practices. The technical guidance available to CLT practitioners may exacerbate this trend; much of the publicly available guidance for CLTs stops at operationalizing community control in the form of the tripartite board or, at most, a general membership. Guidance on how to meaningfully engage members beyond donations and annual membership meetings, reconcile divergent—or competing—needs and desires among community members, and/or maintain accountability to a diverse public is difficult to find, particularly in comparison to the ample technical support regarding ground leases and funding acquisition. Instruction on how to build organizational capacity for this work—in addition to the core responsibilities of finding funding, acquiring units, and placing residents—is even scarcer. However, limited guidance in these matters is available with searching; those supporting CLTs should consider making it as visible and prioritized as resources that provide technical support.

Relatedly, I join other scholars in calling for greater attention to CLT's tangible relationships with the diverse communities they operate within. The conflation of the tripartite board and community-wide democratic decision making is a presumption that merits future scholarship. Limited data from my interviews and fieldwork suggest that the tripartite board structure and corporate community membership may not facilitate organizational accountability to CLTs' residents and broader communit(ies) as effectively as technical guidance might suggest. Three resident board members separately asserted—in interviews and fieldwork—that they primarily followed the recommendations of professionals on the board. They spoke at some length about feeling daunted by the complexity of topics discussed on the board, saying “I’ve been on the Board 10 years and I’m just getting the hand of it” and “At [board] meetings, we just talk about financial things that are over my head.” These may, of course, simply be

representative of how these particular members—all low-income women—view their role or wish to present themselves. However, it may also reflect board dynamics that undermine the intent of the tripartite board structure. The tripartite board structure ensures that CLTs include board members with personal knowledge and experience within the community they serve, but technical guidance rarely provides best practices for ensuring that resident and non-expert members have the confidence and knowledge to influence important decisions. Future research should investigate how these governance structures operate in practice and, as needed, assist practitioners in developing systems that ensure residents and non-experts are empowered to participate fully. As the story at the start of this chapter describes, some of my data suggests that practitioners may not have tools to think about accountability or democratic decision-making outside of this structure.

More expansive definitions of stewardship and more limited, achievable conceptualizations of community control may assist practitioners seeking to balance expansive ideals and limited capacity. Scholars and practitioners would benefit from thinking about whether the CLT is responsible for *ongoing* community control or for carrying out one group’s vision at one point in time. Gibson-Graham describes community economies as the part of diverse economies where democratic decision-making takes place (Blažek 2023); CLTs may be those spaces *or* be the vehicles for enacting the decisions made in those spaces.

Practitioners and scholars invested in this moment might consider incorporating stewardship of community vision and ongoing organizing as part of this core value; alternatively, they might embrace a mission of local control, rather than community control and embrace their role as “the technical arm” of a social movement (as one interviewee put it). In the following chapter, I describe—what I consider to be largely successful—approaches for balancing the

demands of technical housing provision and genuine community control. Future research might also engage more fully with the adoption of the CLT model for Indigenous land reclamation, as an evolution of the model that preserves its politically transformative, multifaceted goals.

My findings also highlight an urgent need for more ethnographic research on stewardship and CLTs as they actually exist. Scholars have theorized stewardship practices (e.g. pre-purchase trainings, support for homeowners after purchase) as care based on interviews with CLT practitioners (Cahen, Lilli, and Saegert 2022) and CLTs are certainly providing beneficial support and prior research suggests this support meaningfully contributes to CLT residents' stability (Lowe and Thaden 2016; Thaden 2010). However, my interviews also suggest that CLT staff may, at times, conceptualize stewardship as paternalistic discipline and the enforcement of white middle-class aesthetic norms. Future work must investigate how pre- and post-purchase stewardship activities play out in practice, as well as how prospective and current residents experience them. Participant observation and interviews with CLT residents are critical for accurate, holistic theorizing of stewardship.

Furthermore, some data collected for this project suggests that CLTs operating on an asset-based welfare logic may be more likely to serve market-ready people (e.g. those with near-middle income, good credit, citizenship, and the ability to navigate complex financial transactions; McCabe 2023). Though the 2022 CLT Census collected data about the maximum allowable AMI in each organizations' units (Wang et al 2023), to my knowledge, there is no systematic data about the initial and current incomes of all CLT residents. This makes it challenging to assess the range of income levels that CLTs are actually serving. It would be valuable to have a comprehensive quantitative analysis of who CLTs serve (e.g. their proximity to the market, AMI, immediate housing insecurity, etc.) in order to determine whether these

organizations truly serve different populations. Such a complex portrait of CLT residents would be especially valuable given that market readiness and AMI do not necessarily correlate with housing insecurity.

The presence of politically affirmative, state-oriented CLTs does not, to my mind, suggest the complete dilution or loss of the CLT movement as a whole. The heart of this problem is insufficient funding and resources. As long as there's not enough to go around, people will use heuristics to determine who gets help and who does not—and those rules will favor people who are already privileged. In the following chapter, I present findings on other CLTs in my sample that are seeking mainstreaming without compromising their commitments to community control and complete (cultural and legal) decommodification.

## Chapter 7

### **Communities of the Dispossessed: The hybrid CLT/housing co-operative model**

#### **Abstract**

In this chapter, I present findings on a set of CLTs in California, Colorado, and Arizona that pursue the CLT movement’s foundational goal of incubating “communit[ies] of the dispossessed” (Davis 2014: 30). These organizations operate on the redistributive/collectivist political logic described in Chapter 5. I argue that these organizations are both engaging with the state *and* facilitating direct, collective local control among tenants at risk of immediate displacement; in doing so, they are successfully pursuing mainstreaming in a way that preserves the multiplicity of broader futures they seek.

I draw on theory from the sustainable transitions literature (Wittmayer et al 2021)—and evidence from interviews with CLT staff and leadership, participant observation, and public documents—to make sense of this process, analyzing the channels through which redistributive/collectivist CLTs in my sample are seeking institutionalization. Much of the chapter focuses on a subset of Californian CLTs that acquire occupied rental buildings and work with residents to create community control at the most local level, often through housing co-operatives. First, I outline how these redistributive CLTs pursue the cultural work of decommodification through a hybrid CLT/housing co-operative model that involves CLT staff engaging in self-governance capacity-building with their residents. Second, I describe how CLTs across California are pursuing state subsidies and policies in a way that formalizes the cultural aspects of decommodification (e.g. use value over exchange value) and community control (e.g. centering the needs and desires of current residents over those with capital). Finally, I present

evidence that practitioners are aware of the pressures to conform to neoliberal, technocratic housing provision and describe two ongoing efforts to build collective resilience to these pressures. Ultimately, I argue that CLTs represent a case of a politically transformative project becoming increasingly mainstream *without* being wholly diluted or coopted by existing systems. I call for a return to the framework of experimentation when making sense of the consequences of CLT mainstreaming. My findings suggest that, at least in the Southwest, experimentation with the CLT model is yielding both technocratic, politically affirmative organizations *and* politically transformative, grassroots organizations.

## Introduction

In November of 2019, Dominique Walker and her children moved into 2928 Magnolia Street: a small, two-story home in West Oakland with blue accents, holes in the roof, and a cracking foundation (Hahn 2020). She, and other members of activist group Moms 4 Housing, got to work fixing up the home right away. They pressure-washed the blue cement steps, installed a water heater and stove, fixed up the roof, and decorated with flowers. Three weeks later, they received an eviction notice on behalf of the home's owner: real estate investment firm and speculator Wedgewood (Barmann 2021; Hahn 2020).

Walker and her fellow activists had moved into the two-years vacant house without Wedgewood's knowledge or permission, both for shelter and to protest the speculative real estate investment they hold (partially) accountable for the housing crisis that has accelerated the displacement of Oakland's Black population (Hahn 2020). The founders of Moms 4 Housing had been homeless for months—in some cases years. They, and their young children, had been sleeping in shelters, hotels rooms, and on family members' couches (Hahn 2020; Wolffe 2019).

They had seen likely Wedgewood and its competitors forcibly evict long-time residents only to leave the homes vacant and decaying indefinitely.<sup>19</sup> They had also been organizing. With the support of the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), Moms 4 Housing engaged in a seven-week legal battle with Wedgewood, drawing national attention and widespread support; they were evicted from the home in January 2020 by dozens of police armed with AR-15 rifles, a battering ram, and an armored vehicle (Barmann 2020; Hahn 2020).

A year later, Wedgewood sold 2928 Magnolia to Oakland Community Land Trust as part of a deal brokered by Oakland's Mayor Libby Schaaf and California Governor Gavin Newsom; OakCLT rehabilitated the home, which now serves as transitional housing for moms and their children (Hahn 2020). Moms 4 Housing's civil disobedience inspired vacant home occupations in Los Angeles and San Francisco, a new state law, a proposed (failed) amendment to formalize housing as a right in the California Constitution, and at least two proposed city ordinances called Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Acts (Baldassari and Solomon 2020).

The story of Moms 4 Housing illustrates a dynamic playing out across California: established tenants' rights organizations are enlisting CLTs in their fight to alter the power relationships between property owners and residents and to enshrine housing as a human right. Though the results of these partnerships can be uneven and delayed—it took nearly a year for 2928 Magnolia to be occupied again and the purchase required over \$500,000 in community donations made possible by the high visibility of this particular case—the CLT model provides activists with a way to acquire property and the legal benefits ownership entails, ensuring long-term control of the property. In this chapter, I explore the side of the CLT field that operates on

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<sup>19</sup> In 2021, Wedgewood reached a \$3.5 million settlement with the state of California over its alleged practices of harassing and unlawfully evicting tenants (Barmann 2021).

collectivist/redistributive logics and propose a new framework for thinking about CLT's growing popularity and institutionalization, based in theory from sustainable transitions research.

## Theoretical Framework: Mainstreaming

The question of whether—and how—social movements might achieve their goals and gain widespread recognition is a recurring question across many disciplines. Research across domains suggests that such success is rare; more commonly, radical innovations are gradually diluted, adapted, and absorbed by incumbent actors and institutions, often in ways that contribute to system reproduction (Geels and Schot 2007; a phenomenon also thoroughly documented in criminology, e.g. Haney 2013). However, in this chapter, I apply a framework from sustainable transitions research to make sense CLTs that pursue institutionalization while—so far—retaining a collectivist/redistributive logic.

Sustainable transitions scholars study attempted and ongoing transitions toward sustainability in energy, water, and other sectors (Markard, Raven, and Truffer 2012). This seemingly unrelated case provides a remarkably useful lens for making sense of CLTs' pursuit of housing justice and alternative forms of collective governance, ownership, and relating to space and place. Much like CLTs, those pursuing sustainable transitions seek changes in both physical and socio-economic infrastructure. Alternative forms of energy require significant changes to the built environment (e.g. the creation of local, small-scale energy grids) and to the political systems that govern them (e.g. regulations). Those seeking to change the built environment—for affordable housing or for sustainable energy production—must gain access to significant financial and material resources (to build new infrastructure) and then coordinate large-scale human activity over a long period of time (to maintain that infrastructure and allocate the resources it generates).

The theoretical framework of “mainstreaming”—which was explicated in recent sustainable transitions research on energy co-operatives that produce and then consume their own electricity—helps scholars make sense of how social movement actors may address the need for significant material and social resources to accomplish their goals (Pel et al 2020; Wittmayer et al 2021). Wittmayer and colleagues (2021) argue that transformative movements must leave their radical niches and become “mainstream” (i.e. widespread and institutionalized within one or more spheres) in order to fully realize their transformative potential. They theorize mainstreaming as the result of a contested and uneven political process in which potentially transformative innovations are adapted, appropriated, instrumentalized, and “translated” by diverse actor networks with varied interests (Wittmayer et. al. 2021).

Wittmayer and colleagues identify three channels through which radical niche actors may pursue mainstreaming: the state, the community, and the market.<sup>20</sup> Mainstreaming through the state entails seeking bureaucratization and standardization, including legal recognition, access to subsidy schemes, and laws governing relevant activities (Wittmayer et al 2021). Mainstreaming through the community channel, on the other hand, involves cultural interventions that facilitate communal action (e.g. reframing energy as a commons, promoting a culture of “do it yourself” and “do it together”; Wittmayer et al 2021; p5). Finally, mainstreaming through a market channel involves the pursuit of opportunity for financial gain and integration into markets (e.g. the creation of new business models, promotion of competitiveness and affordability; Wittmayer et al 2021; p5). The latter is, so far, least relevant to the case of CLTs. As a result, in this chapter, I

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<sup>20</sup> Wittmayer et al (2021) use the term “institutional logics” to refer to these channels (e.g. the market logic approach to mainstreaming radical energy cooperatives would involve the commodification of renewable energy sources and the invention of business model and technology to facilitate exchange of these sources.) Because I use the analytical framework of *political logics* throughout this manuscript, to avoid confusion, I adopt the terminology of “channels” to discuss Wittmayer et al (2021)’s work.

focus primarily on the ways in which CLTs pursue mainstream status through state and cultural/community channels.

This chapter contributes to the eternal question of whether and how social movements can grow without cooptation by delving further into organizations that operate on the redistributive/collectivist political logic described in Chapter 5. In this chapter, I analyze the ways in which redistributive CLTs are both engaging with the state *and* facilitating direct, collective local control among tenants at risk of immediate displacement. Drawing on evidence from interviews with CLT staff and leadership, participant observation, and public documents, I argue that these CLTs are successfully pursuing mainstreaming in a way that preserves the multiplicity of broader futures they seek. I use Julia Wittmayer and coauthors' (2021) framework to make sense of this process, analyzing the channels through which redistributive/collectivist CLTs in my sample—in California, Colorado, and Arizona—are seeking institutionalization: cultural intervention; state subsidies and policies that further the establishment of civic rights; and regulation. I argue that CLTs are a case of a politically transformative project becoming increasingly mainstream *without* being wholly diluted or co-opted by existing systems. Moreover, this set of CLTs appear to follow a trajectory very different than the decline towards technocratic, politically affirmative affordable housing provision that prior studies (DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019) describe. Instead, they use a hybrid CLT-housing co-operative model to pursue the CLT movement's foundational goal of incubating “communit[ies] of the dispossessed” (Davis 2014: 30)

## Findings

In this chapter, I draw on a theoretical framework from sustainable transitions research—a relatively new field which documents attempted and ongoing transitions toward sustainability

across sectors, including energy, water and sanitation systems, and transportation (Markard, Raven, and Truffer 2012)—to make sense of how a subset of redistributive, politically transformative CLTs may be leaving their “radical niche” (Wittmayer et al 2021) and seeking entry into the mainstream.

In the following chapter, I present findings on the ways in which a network of politically transformative CLTs are working to provide people with an alternative to capitalist extraction and displacement at three levels of intervention. First, I analyze how CLTs in California, Arizona, and Colorado are pursuing informal normalization through shared values, pursuing political education and cultural change at the individual and community level (what Wittmayer et al 2021 call a “community logic”). Next, I analyze the ways in which CLTs in California are seeking recognition and integration into state policies and subsidy (what Wittmayer et al 2021 call a “state logic”), in a way that preserves the core CLT values of community control through multifaceted, empowering work. Finally, I document how CLT practitioners are working to mitigate pressures towards affirmative politics and help their colleagues and emerging organizations focus on community control, decommodification, and radical political transformation.

This chapter focuses primarily on CLTs that operate on a redistributive/collectivist logic. As described in Chapter 5, the redistributive/collectivist political logic encompasses a “social world” causal story that focuses on place-based histories of systemic marginalization, a commitment to transformative political change, and the pursuit of alternative systems for distributing housing and power. These logics lead participants to embody a relationship-centric disposition and often engage in a targeted, anti-displacement housing strategy.

Much of this chapter will focus on a cluster of CLTs in California that acquire occupied buildings (often at tenants' request) and work with tenants to enact resident control of the building (often, if tenants are interested, by supporting them in incorporating a Limited Equity Housing Co-operative or LEHC that purchases the building from the CLT). The phenomenon of CLTs interrupting the cycle of displacement for particular people in particular buildings (rather than providing affordable housing that will indirectly reduce displacement from a neighborhood or other area) is well-documented in practitioner-focused reports and news media but largely absent from academic research on CLTs. To my knowledge, there is no systematic data on the national prevalence of co-operative units on land owned by CLTs; though there appears to be a question related to co-operative units on the Grounded Solutions Network Census, a response is only available for eight organizations, only one of which has co-operative units (Champlain Housing Trust in Vermont, which holds 212 co-operative units; GSN 2023). A 2023 survey by San Francisco CLT found that the eight California CLTs they surveyed collectively held 71 co-operative units, with 80 additional units on the path to collective ownership (Beckley and SF CLT 2023). Of the 33 organizations at which I was able to interview staff or leadership, eight reported units that were co-operatively owned or in the pipeline to co-operative ownership. Though I did not identify any CLTs pursuing LEHCs outside of California, there were several CLTs in Colorado and Arizona that relied primarily on the redistributive political logic that are included in portions of this chapter.

## Grassroots Change through Cultural Intervention and Housing Provision

Redistributive CLTs' day-to-day work of displacement prevention and capacity-building contributes to transformative political change and, arguably, to the informal mainstreaming of those transformative goals through cultural change.

In this section, I present findings from interviews and participant observation, arguing that CLTs operating on a collectivist/redistributive logic are engaged in community and individual political education. I describe how redistributive/collectivist CLT workers facilitate self-governance through skill-based capacity building and formal structures. Throughout, I argue that this work contributes to cultural mainstreaming through “the processes of normalization and integration with shared values” (Wittmayer et al 2021: 3). The core alternative value that CLTs promote is collective control/decision-making by the people who live in and use a place, rather than top-down control based in property rights and the pursuit of profit. Critically, this is rarely a top-down process of the CLT imposing values; participants reported that the CLT was often contacted by an existing, organized group of tenants in an at-risk building. Indeed, participants often asserted that co-operative organizing was most effective when initiated by tenants before the CLT’s involvement. The CLT’s work, beyond providing the technical knowledge needed to fund and carry out an acquisition and then ensure permanent affordability, often took the form of individual capacity-building and creation of institutional arrangements that made collective control possible. That is, CLTs did not just support values of self-governance—residents have control of building, what happens to it and to themselves and their neighbors—but helped residents develop the skills and systems needed to enact those values.

Among redistributive/collectivist organizations, support of resident self-governance involved setting up systems for collective governance with residents—a very different approach than the asset-based welfare trainings that emphasized individual, personal responsibility for finances and management. As Sharon, an executive director at an established California CLT who had worked with numerous emerging CLTs, put it: “A lot of [CLTs] are interested in acquiring existing properties in order to stabilize the tenants and then to work with the tenants for

the tenants to take over whatever level of control of the property that they want over time.” Later in the interview, she elaborated: “The CLT’s work is so often: what can the residents do? What decision-making can they contribute to or take over? And then: what skills or structures do they need to be able to do that? And then: how do we deal with the inevitable conflicts that are going to rise in the course of that decision-making?”

Scaffolding resident control typically involved a gradual process where residents gained more control and autonomy over time. Frank described working with tenants at a newly acquired building to set up a funded landscaping committee to oversee the rehabilitation of the building’s neglected yard, in response to tenants’ desires to make better use of the space. He viewed this as an opportunity for residents to collectively manage a budget and make decisions that affected the whole building, as well as an example of “allocating responsibilities to smaller groups because different people are interested in different things.” He then added: “it’s a gradual process as they learn more. Eventually, they say to us, ‘wow, we want to move to the next level. We’ll start collecting the rents and making the deposits ourselves.’ That’s usually kind of the next step. You set up a finance committee and they kind of track the rents and all of that.” Speaking of another property, Frank described the type of training that residents received from the CLT:

On Friday, we’re doing a training for them on capital replacement budgeting, which is really looking at that long-term view of setting aside reserves. That’s a process. It takes a little while, but the residents are really interested in better understanding of that. That’s great to me. It’s really important because they’re starting to say, ‘well, these repairs we want to make. And we want to understand better, how do we get those funds?’

These quotes from Frank and Sharon illustrate that the CLT’s goal is resident control, to the extent that residents are interested in dictating how their rents are spent. The CLT provides technical expertise and experience, for instance, in helping residents anticipate future expenses and save for them in advance. Moreover, these financial decisions are grounded solely in pragmatic repair and maintenance costs. The buildings are run based on what funds are actually

needed to make them work for their occupants, with no additional profit motive or need for surplus.

Interviewees operating on a redistributive political logic viewed the CLT's pre-purchase support as building on existing competencies. Angela, a nonbinary mestiza staffer at an established CLT, noted that they did not use the language of "education" or "training", adding:

These are grown ass adults who already have a lot of other experiences. [Our job is to] acknowledge what experience is in the room and build what's there for cooperative organizing." When discussing a particular training on long-term financial planning for the co-operative, she added: "Not surprisingly, we had budget queens in the room and people who were bookkeepers or nonprofit finance people or managing their own business. And then there were people who—one person said, 'I'm in an earn a dollar, save a nickel place'. [They're] just trying to make ends meet. Which, I understand that too.

These quotes reflect a common sentiment among interviewees operating on a redistributive logic; interviewees acknowledged a wide range of variation among residents and attempted to instill further confidence and technical skills. Sofia, an Indigenous staff member at another CLT, similarly explained conflict among residents as the product of system failures, rather than individual deficiencies, saying: "Conflicts usually arise from gaps in their systems and the protocols." This posture is a stark contrast to the paternalistic approach at the heart of contemporary welfare provision, which presumes incompetence and dependence.

The particular skills and systems that CLT staff helped residents implement depended largely on resident preferences. CLT staff described meeting with residents and presenting a range of options for self-governance systems. As Frank, a white, long-time CLT worker and co-op resident, put it:

The first part of [the self-governance] conversation starts with: who has a vote? In a unit, does each room have a vote? If you have a couple living with you, does their one room have a vote or do they each get a vote? ...And then it's: what's a quorum? How many people need to be present to see a vote go through? And then going over the different models of voting... And then we get into the different decision models. Are we doing consensus? Modified consensus? Super majority or simple majority? And kind of

holding: what are the pros and cons of these? What's going to feel like a good fit for the makeup or size of the group? And maybe it's modified consensus for one kind of decisions, super majority for most [decisions]... Maybe modified consensus and super majority are the same number with how many people you have!

Frank's explanation illustrates the role the CLT takes on in facilitating self-governance: the CLT provided expertise on the varied models for self-governance and helped residents identify systems and rules that suit them. Often, this involved CLT staff drawing on personal experience living in housing co-operatives.

This tailoring extended to the possibility that some or most residents would not want to participate in a co-operative; multiple interviewees described a range of models for resident self-governance that involved the CLT retaining ownership of the building long-term. Pablo, a Hispanic CLT staffer, described the range of models they may use as "anything from traditional affordable renting to the co-op model to commercial and residential combined." Interviewees reiterated that operating a housing co-operative was a labor- and time-intensive process; assessing residents' desire and capacity for such labor and designing sustainable systems accordingly was a key part of the CLT's stewardship (Pablo: "it all depends on the people who are living on the property.").

Prioritization of self-governance capacity-building was reflected in broader discussions among redistributive CLTs and supported by informal and formal relationships among California CLTs and national associations. Interviewees drew on resources from the California CLT Network, LA Housing Movement Land, the Sustainable Economies Law Center, and the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment. The CA CLT Network, for example, provides legal and technical resources on their website<sup>21</sup>, including a legal commentary on the 2011 CLT Technical Manual ground lease for housing cooperatives and other extensive resources to help

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<sup>21</sup> CA CLT Network "Resource Library". <https://www.cacltnetwork.org/library/#resources>

CLTs implement the ground lease (e.g. in light of different resident preferences or constraints imposed by funders). This work reduces one barrier for CLTs interested in working with housing cooperatives: the need for technical, legal expertise.

CLT support of resident self-governance also involved training-style education to impart soft skills, typically geared towards conflict resolution. Unlike the asset-based welfare focus on individual responsibility, redistributive CLTs sought to provide residents with the skills they needed to be competent community members who could resolve conflict, make collective decisions, and care for their building independent of the CLT. Sofia, for instance, described a listening exercise that she had found effective when dealing with co-operatives. In the exercise, residents listen to someone tell a story three times and practice using three levels of listening each time: listening for the facts of the story and connecting to your own experiences; listening for the emotion and intent of the story-teller and connecting to their experience; and then listening to connect your experience and their experiences. She believed this exercise facilitated communication among prospective co-op organizers, reporting that after the exercise, “the flow of the meetings was a lot different. It was easier to have conversations. I think it helped prevent escalating situations when it was something high-stakes that people really cared about. Just having that reflection, the curiosity when listening.” Unlike the individualized, investor-subject trainings of the asset-based welfare approach, Sofia’s goal in this quote is to support residents in having calm conversations towards collective governance. This example illustrates how the education that redistributive CLTs provide—regardless of their effectiveness or how residents experience them—are intended to build interpersonal skills and facilitate collective decision-making, in sharp contrast to the individualism of the asset-based welfare approach.

This political education is potentially a subject-making project very different from the individualized, responsibility-oriented investor citizen subject-making of asset-based welfare. However, I was not able to directly observe CLT-resident interactions or speak to participants about their experiences and thus cannot draw conclusions about the nature of CLTs' subject-making or how residents experience this work (e.g. as paternalist, shaming, or punitive). Future research should investigate how residents experience these interactions and relate to the CLT more broadly.

### State-Oriented Mainstreaming through Policy Advocacy

Seeking access to funding and inclusion in state bureaucracy is often cited as a likely cause of dilution and conformity, as organizations are required or incentivized to “align themselves with elites who control access to both practical and political resources” (DeFilippis et al 2018: 757; see also Eriksson 2018; Fyall and MacGuire 2015; Piven and Cloward 1979; Selznick 1949; Wittmayer et al 2021).

However, evidence from media articles, reports, interviews, and my participant observation suggests that the California-based coalitions in my sample are largely maintaining their politically transformative, collectivist orientation. I find that these coalitions are pursuing institutionalization in a way that facilitates ongoing commitment to the core values of the CLT model: community control and decommodification. In the following section, I present findings on two high profile instances of this: campaigns to support CLT acquisition of units occupied by tenants at risk of displacement at the state and municipal levels, in which CLTs seek to formalize the right of those currently using housing as shelter over the right of prospective buyers with capital, and recent policy advocacy to encode the classical definition of CLTs in state law, which

preserves the multifaceted work that scholars have observed the loss of in other contexts (DeFilippis et al 2018).

Unlike CLTs that join the delegated welfare state, these CLTs are joining other politically transformative movements and seeking to carve out space for alternatives to the commodity housing market, traditional ownership, individualism in legislation, subsidies, regulation, and the granting of civic rights. As expected from prior research on nonprofit political advocacy, much of this policy intervention work is spearheaded or facilitated by coalitions of CLTs (Bass, Arons, Guinane, and Carter 2007; Fyall and McGuire 2015), including the California CLT Network, CLT Capacity Collaborative (15 organizations in the Bay Area), and Los Angeles CLT Coalition (5 organizations in LA County). Elena, an experienced Latina/mestiza staffer at a California CLT, described the CA CLT Network as “sort of our state advocacy entity that advocates for legislation that benefits CLTs at the state level but is also doing things like capacity-building technical assistance for CLTs.” These coalitions are pursuing institutionalization in terms of ensuring that the innovation of the CLT model, and its benefits, “are to be redistributed through becoming part of the bureaucratic apparatus and being made accessible through standardization... for example... in policies, regulations, and subsidy schemes” (Wittmayer et al 2021: 3).

**Figure 6: CA CLT Network Member Organizations**



Map from the CA CLT network website, accessed on Jan 20, 2025.  
<https://www.cacltnetwork.org/california-clt-definition/>

### *Campaigns to Support CLT Acquisitions*

One of the primary goals of policy coalitions is, perhaps unsurprisingly, promoting funding sources and pathways to unit/land acquisition for CLTs. In order to remove housing from the traditional market, CLTs often need to first succeed in that market and purchase the home at the market-rate. This is often deeply challenging, as CLTs have far less access to capital than for-profit market competitors and need a longer time to access that capital when available. Following the Moms 4 Housing occupation of the 2928 Magnolia Street house, the California Senate passed Senate Bill 1079 (SB 1079), with the vocal support of the CA CLT Network and the Sustainable

Economies Law Center, among others (Baldassari 2022). The bill was intended to make it easier for tenants, foreclosed owners, and affordable housing nonprofits to buy foreclosed homes at auction. It banned the practice of bundling properties at foreclosure auctions and created an exclusive 45-day bidding period in which qualified buyers (i.e. tenants, local governments, and nonprofits) could match the winning bid at the foreclosure auction (Skinner, Nancy. 2020. *SB 1079: Residential Property: Foreclosure.*). However, the bill initially omitted any enforcement or accountability mechanisms or requirements to use the purchased homes for affordable housing (Baldassari 2022). When it became apparent that for-profit firms were bypassing the intended exclusivity window, the CA CLT Network successfully sponsored Assembly Bill 1837, which revised the definition of an eligible nonprofit buyer, created a conditional affordable requirement, implemented enforcement provisions, and restricted evictions in homes acquired through SB 1079 (CA CLT Network; “AB 1837 Fact Sheet”).

Though this policy technically provides an opportunity for CLTs to compete with for-profit flippers and prevent the displacement of current residents, it requires CLTs to pay market price for the home and to fund any rehabilitation the structure may need; as such, its benefits are quite limited without funding. In 2021, SB 1079 was funded through the Foreclosure Intervention Housing Preservation Program, which allocated \$500 million to help tenants, CLTs, and affordable housing developers acquire buildings at risk of foreclosure. This funding would have subsidized eligible entities acquiring foreclosed homes, preventing the displacement of the occupants and ensuring the home was affordable for at least 30 years. However, this program was cut in June 2024 light of a projected \$56 billion budget deficit before any funds were dispersed (Mello 2024).

CLTs have succeeded in generating funding for acquisitions at the municipal level. In 2020, the LA County Board of Supervisors created the LA County “Pilot CLT Partnership Program”, which made \$14 million available to the five established CLTs for the acquisition and rehabilitation of unsubsidized multifamily housing and protect renters at the risk of eviction and homelessness (Donlin-Zappella, Gugich, Carter, and Gacao 2022). These funds were used to preserve eight multifamily properties in LA County (Donlin-Zappella et al 2022).

CLTs have also sought policies that formalize the right of those using housing as shelter over those who wish to profit from it at the municipal level. Opportunity to Purchase Acts are designed to give renters a chance to own the home they reside in when the current owner—the landlord—is ready to sell. These policies give either the tenant or a qualified nonprofit organization the right of first refusal to purchase their property. These policies have a long history—the oldest OPA in the US was passed in Washington, DC in 1980 (Goncalves 2024)—but gained popularity following the covid-19 pandemic (Gilgoff 2020). CLT coalitions have been involved in advocating for the passage of municipal OPAs in jurisdictions across California, including Los Angeles County, Long Beach, Oakland, and Berkeley. The CA CLT Network currently provides resources to anyone interested in initiating their own OPA campaign.

CLTs’ pursuit of Opportunity to Purchase Acts and SB 1079 represents both a pragmatic move toward standardization (Wittmayer et al 2021) that makes it easier for organizations to acquire buildings and an ideological move to formalize civic rights for residents at risk of displacement. OPA laws provide CLTs with a clearer pipeline to acquiring buildings where tenants are at risk of imminent displacement (typically due to the landlord or landlord’s heirs selling the building). OPAs often require landlords to give tenants a minimum amount of notice and to wait to place their property on the market for a certain length of time, allowing tenants or

organizations acting on their behalf time to buy the building instead. However, equally importantly, OPAs and SB 1079 formalize the right of a current resident to remain in their home over the right of the landlord or mortgage holder to sell to the highest bidder on a commodity market, provided the tenant or a benevolent “qualified organization” is able to pay market price. OPAs thus preserve the property rights of the owner (who still receives market price) and the rights of the tenants (to remain in their home). Proponents of OPAs in California frame this as giving tenants and/or non-profit developers “an equal opportunity to compete in the market” (“Opportunity to Purchase Act Campaign Playbook” 2022). This move to institutionalization reflects the redistributive/collectivist logic’s emphasis on the emotional and cultural elements of housing; it is arguably a step towards formalizing legal protections recognizing the use value of housing as well as the exchange value.

#### *Encoding the Classical Definition of CLTs in State Law*

CLTs have also sought to formalize a definition of CLTs in state law that preserves key elements of the classical definition of CLTs. The CA CLT Network sponsored Assembly Bill 2897, which updated the legal definition of CLTs to include purposes beyond affordable housing ownership programs (e.g. purchasing non-residential property for use as community gardens or commercial space) and clarified their tax status (Halstead 2024). This bill, which was the topic of much conversation at the 2024 CA CLT Network conference, was signed into law on September 25, 2024. This definition ensures that CLTs will be eligible for future funds or privileges (e.g. through SB 1079) regardless of their activities. Though this is a relatively minor legal detail for day-to-day activities, it is a clear step towards institutionalizing and preserving the “multifaceted ways in which CLTs can be utilized to help communities beyond providing access to affordable housing” (DeFilippis et al 2018: 764).

## Building Collective Resilience to Diluting Pressures

In many ways, the policy advocacy described in the previous section is the continuation of longstanding social movements in California; though not a central focus of this project, these social movements likely make the work of politically transformative policy advocacy more feasible in a number of ways. For instance, housing co-operatives have been recognized under California state law for decades, since the Davis-Stirling Act of 1986. This Act, which governs California condominium, cooperative, and planned development communities, known as common interest developments. CLT practitioners pursuing housing co-operatives had a wide array of resources and experiences to draw on thanks to the existing ecosystem around housing co-operatives in California. Likewise, the tenants rights movement has a long history in California (Card 2023). The Berkeley Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA) was endorsed by dozens of organizations in addition to the CA CLT Network, including ACCE, the Sustainable Economies Law Center, East Bay Community Law Center, and Berkeley Tenants Union. This finding echoes observations of CLTs in Liverpool emerging from either professional/arms-length state agencies or from long-standing collaborative housing activist around co-ops (Thompson 2020). Institutional and community knowledge from a robust, mature network of social movement organizations may help California CLT practitioners anticipate potential dilution or cooptation and provide a strong foundation to combat it.

In the following section, I describe the ways in which CLTs across California—and across the political spectrum—are experimenting with organizational and field-level infrastructure to help insulate individual CLTs from pressures to conform to hegemonic values and practices. Much of this infrastructure is intended to ensure that CLTs can contribute to genuine community control, despite complex administrative and technical demands. First, I

outline the technical demands that may lead organizations toward technocratic housing provision. Next, I describe the two emerging approaches to mitigating this pressure: 1) embracing specialization and sharing the work of community control by positioning the CLT as the technical agent of a broader movement or 2) outsourcing technical knowledge to free up CLT capacity for community control.

One of the key pressures that may drive CLTs towards technocratic, politically affirmative affordable housing provision is intrinsic to the model: the work of running a CLT demands extensive technical knowledge across a range of fields (GSN 2018). Though the traditional model attempts to address this through the “expert” third of the board of directors (GSN 2018), in practice, CLTs may need to prioritize hiring staff with experience in development and property management (Axel-Lute and Hawkins-Simons 2015; Gray and Galande 2010). The demands of acquiring buildings, legally removing them from the traditional housing market, and running a non-profit may thus contribute to CLTs being led and run by practitioners who do not value or have the capacity to enact the community control aspects of the model.

Practitioners described several organization- and field-level strategies for managing the technical demands of their work. Interviewees and fieldwork participants operating on a redistributive/collectivist logic typically acknowledged that genuine, complete community control is a demanding, time-consuming process that is often far beyond the capacity of the CLT. As such, they viewed the CLT as just one component/actor in a broader movement towards community control and pursued partnerships with other organizations. As Sharon put it:

Many of the organizations I’ve worked with are really intent on a broader and deeper level of social change. And I’ve seen some situations recently where the founding organization has a membership. And what they really need is a technical arm to an existing movement that can do this particular very intricate housing strategy... The [CLT] has an organizing partner, they don’t really need to do their own organizing. And they become very expert at responding to situations that the community brings them.

Likewise, Elena, a Latina/mestiza CLT staffer, said: “I think CLTs are having to get creative to figure out how to build in accountability to an organized group of people in the community. I don't know how successfully a CLT can [organize] without being like a multi-department organization.”

Elena and Sharon articulate a common sentiment among respondents operating on a collectivist/redistributive logic: politically transformative CLTs in California cannot enact community control alone. These participants, and the CLTs they described, resolved the inherent tension between the technical demands of CLT work and the ideal of community control by embracing the CLT as a specialist organization. These organizations pursued community control directly in some ways—residents on the CLT governing board, events and listening sessions in the place they served, supporting residents in direct control of their home and land—but also maintained close partnerships with membership-based, democratic, grassroots organizations. CLTs and their partners would apply for funding together, meet frequently, and, at times, share board members. This approach has been observed outside of the Southwest, as well. The community of Dudley Street, in Boston, MA, utilized two “complimentary anchor institutions”: the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, which pursues resident empowerment through fosters youth and resident leadership development, training, organizing, and community-requested programs and Dudley Neighbors Incorporated, which carries out the development mission of DSNI by acquiring land, overseeing development, and stewarding properties (Thaden and Pickett 2019). In a sense, CLTs operating on this model *are* engaged in the technical, limited housing provision that scholars have cited as the potential demise of the classical CLT (Davis 2014; DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019). However, in this case, CLTs are specialists enacting

a housing strategy not on behalf of the state, but on behalf of politically transformative social movements that pursue alternative systems for allocating housing, power, and dignity.

This phenomenon does not seem to be unique to California; practitioners and journalists Miriam Axel-Lute and Dana Hawkins-Simons (2015) investigated six established CLT's approaches to organizing and identified two broad roles the CLT could adopt. CLTs could either be envisioned as the entity that would broadly implement the community's vision (including the work of helping identify a shared vision among a diverse, potentially fragmented population) or be envisioned as a "narrowly focused technical organization that other organizations implementing a community vision could turn to for help with CLT-specific functions" (Axel-Lute and Hawkins-Simons 2015).

Practitioners in California are also pursuing field-level strategies to support individual CLTs in navigating the demands of technical housing provision and community control. Taking an opposite approach the one described above, the CLT Capacity Collaborative seeks to provide technocratic assistance to member CLTs, allowing them to spend resources and time on community organizing and stewardship (Bailey et al 2024; "CCC Info"). The CLT Capacity Collaborative is a cohort of CLTs (fifteen, as of Sept 2024) that draw on collective shared infrastructure to make their work "more sustainable and scalable" (Bailey et al 2024). This shared infrastructure uses the hub-and-spoke model, wherein expensive functions (e.g. hiring experts in real estate development, law, and finance) are consolidated into a back-office hub that serves individual spoke CLTs ("CCC Info"). Initial funding for the program comes from a \$20 million donation by Mackenzie Scott (Bailey et al 2024). One interviewee expressed hope that this model (which also includes a fee-for-service program available to a broader population of CLTs over the next 3 years) would support CLTs in "what they do best, which is really work with

BIPOC communities and work on democratic, resident-controlled community ownership of land and housing... community control with community power.”

The CA CLT Network also provides technical guidance for CLTs, including workshops and manuals on CLT Board Governance, asset management, engaging tenants before and after acquisition, property taxes, and adhering to Fair Housing law when instituting community preferences in tenant selection. Pablo, a Hispanic CLT staffer, described the CA CLT Network as “like our Swiss Army knife in the back pocket” that helps with “a little bit of everything”; another participant joked that their organization “plagiarized all of the [Network]’s paperwork” when discussing ground leases. This work removes some of the burden of technical expertise for practitioners, theoretically allowing them to focus capacity and time on community control.

**Figure 7: Advertisement for a CA CLT Network technical assistance program**

**California Community land trust network** **TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM**

**Real Estate**

- Determine the feasibility of specific opportunities
- Plan for rehab and tenant outreach

**Legal Assistance**

- Draft bylaws, ground leases, partner agreements
- Incorporate as a 501(c)(3) and/or LEHC

**Business Planning**

- Create a long term business plan, project budget

**Campaign Planning & Advocacy**

- Get advice on your public policy campaign
- Strategize around incumbents and candidates

An infographic from the CA CLT Network’s January 2025 newsletter

Some attendees of the CA CLT Network’s annual conference expressed a desire for more guidance on community control and organizing, saying they felt the conference focused too much on securing funding and navigating legal hurdles. Some feared that this programming focus would contribute to the dilution of community control as a foundational CLT value (as discussed in the previous chapter’s section on community control). However, there is also some evidence that the CA CLT Network’s work is also encouraging non-activist professionals to center community control more fully in their work. An attendee at the 2024 CA CLT Network annual conference said that attending felt like “de-bureaucratizing my brain” as it opened her eyes to the possibilities for community organizing and coalition work.

Though resources that further democratic decision making and local control are likely also needed, the technical support that the CA CLT Network (and national Grounded Solutions Network) provide helps grassroots activists—who have fewer resources and experts than municipal governments or established nonprofits—start a CLT, ensuring that CLTs do not become solely a tool used by mainstream organizations to carry out an individualized, politically affirmative housing strategy.

Moreover, the existence of these infrastructure-creation projects that seek to preserve community control as a core value presents an important counter to the narrative of threat and dilution of the CLT movements, as it demonstrates that the presence of diluting pressures and some conforming organizations is not a complete picture of the trajectory of CLTs. The framework of dilution is incomplete if it does not recognize practitioners as agents who are responding strategically to the forces that incentivize professionalization.

## Conclusion

My findings on CLTs operating on a redistributive/collectivist orientation in the Southwest suggest that scholars and practitioners should understand the growth of the CLT field as an explosion of diversity in all directions, not just towards neoliberal conformity. I find many instances of both established and emerging CLTs that seek political transformation. These organizations re-center the use value of housing over the market value, directly intervene in displacement and profit-oriented urban development, enact experimental, collectivist models of ownership, and refine the tools for managing conflict necessary for pursuing alternatives. In this chapter, I used a theoretical framework from the sustainable transitions literature (Wittmayer et al 2021) to make sense of data from interviews with CLT staff and leadership, participant observation, and public documents. I analyzed the channels through which redistributive/collectivist CLTs are seeking institutionalization without succumbing to neoliberal cooptation: cultural intervention; state subsidies and policies that further the establishment of civic rights; and regulation. First, I described the process of CLT acquisition of occupied buildings and the relationship-based process through which CLTs facilitate self-governance among residents. Next, I outlined the ways in which California CLTs are pursuing formalization within what Wittmayer et al (2021) call a “state logic”; far from diluting the values of the CLT, this formalization shifts power from those with capital and property rights to those who use the space in question in their day-to-day lives. Finally, I highlight the agency of CLT practitioners in the face of conformity pressures, analyzing the strategies that they use to resist—and help others resist—incentives to retreat to technocratic, individualized housing provision.

The CLT work highlighted in this chapter represents a genuine move towards alternative ways of thinking about housing, ownership, and what we owe the most precarious members of

our society. Unlike the CLTs described in Chapter 6 and research on the cooptation of CLTs, these organizations are arguably creating a genuine third path, apart from the first and second tiers of housing welfare; their anti-displacement work is neither a highly visible, stigmatized rental subsidy for the working class, nor the promotion of individual homeownership for wealth-building. Instead, they challenge the notion of housing as an impersonal, fungible commodity, centering specificity of place and people that is largely absent from the market-based status quo. In doing so, they have the potential to interrupt longstanding cycles of valuation and devaluation that displace and dispossess people of color.

The theoretical framework of “mainstreaming” clarifies the channels through which actors may seek to interrupt these cycles: the state channel and the community or cultural channel. CLTs are arguably pursuing mainstream status in relation to the state, both by embracing their role as possible partners and by seeking recognition in legislation and subsidy schemes. In contrast to the organizations highlighted in the previous chapter, however, the CLTs highlighted in this chapter are arguably seeking institutionalization without losing core elements of the classical CLT model. The recognition, legitimacy, and access cultivated through legislation enshrines the right of tenants to remain in place and preserves the multifaceted work of CLTs (rather than allowing the definition of a CLT to narrow to that of a technocratic housing provider). Likewise, the CLTs highlighted in this chapter are seeking cultural mainstreaming in their daily work. They reframe housing as a collective concern and nurture local control at the most micro level—through resident control of the buildings where they live—and at the level of neighborhoods, cities, and regions through coalitions with other politically transformative organizations. Though not a central focus of this project, I found that many of these

organizations engage in multifaceted work that supports community building and care through gardens, community spaces, and small business spaces.

These organizations present a very different trajectory for the land trust movement than pessimistic accounts of neoliberal cooptation would suggest. Organizations that employ the joint housing co-operative and CLT model are iterating on the classical CLT model in ways that arguably enact community control and political transformation more directly than the classical single-family-home approach. Moreover, at the field level, these and other redistributive CLTs are creating hubs that help practitioners swim against the currents that encourage an exclusive focus on housing and political affirmation. By providing technical support, funding in coalitions, incubating emerging CLTs, and providing communities of practice around creating community control and community organizing, these field level infrastructures support the emergence of new redistributive/collectivist CLTs. The trajectory of CLTs in the Southwest is towards mainstreaming, certainly, but not necessarily towards dilution of the core principles of the CLT. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 6, the presence of more neoliberal, normative CLTs may be beneficial for the field as a whole, as we enter a political era of further welfare retrenchment, punitive orientation, and market logics. Work from the social movements literature suggests that the institutionalized elements of social movements may help maintain the movement when environmental conditions make mobilization difficult (Staggenborg 1988).

Future scholarship on CLTs would be well-served by abandoning attempts to trace a trajectory upward or downward and instead returning to the framework of experimentation. Experimentation necessarily has diverse, often unpredictable results. Indeed, my findings suggest that, at least in the Southwest, experimentation with the CLT model is yielding both technocratic, politically affirmative organizations *and* politically transformative, grassroots organizations. We

might take a page out of the sustainable transitions literature and accept that political actors and governance networks in the mainstreaming process “may support different ideals and potential futures to different extents”; rather than fear existential threat from this fact, scholars and practitioners could consider “the range of institutional arrangements and logics through which [our] strivings could be secured” (Wittmayer et al 2021: 2).

Future scholarship might also pursue greater analytic and empirical clarity about the pressures to conform that CLTs face in practice. Certainly, there are many aspects of CLT work that incentivize professionalization, including the technical demands of navigating complex real estate transactions. But there has been little systematic empirical investigation of how emerging or growing organizations access the expertise they need, how the professional backgrounds of participants influence the CLT’s mission and activities, and whether and how CLTs actually abandon. My findings from this project suggest that such neoliberal cooption may be uncommon and that organizations hire based on their own values and tastes. Subsequent studies might also systematically investigate how CLT practitioners seek funding and shape their activities in response to real or perceived funder expectations. My data suggest that CLT practitioners are more strategic, agentic actors than common scholarly accounts may acknowledge and that many practitioners have professional experience pursuing politically transformative goals despite normative pressures in previous roles as community organizers and political activists.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

Over the course of this dissertation, I have sought to advance theoretical and empirical conversations around the growth of the CLT movement, including its implications and consequences for the transformative potential of the CLT model. Though prior research suggested that cooptation may be widespread among CLTs (DeFilippis et al 2018; DeFilippis et al 2019; Stromberg 2016), my findings suggest that, at least in the Southwest, institutionalization should be understood as a heterogenous process that is producing greater diversity among CLTs, rather than a straightforward decline towards neoliberal conformity. My findings thus contribute to scholarship on how institutionalization occurs in practice and how the delegated welfare state is, in part, formed by social movement actors. Existing theory and research on the delegated welfare state is largely top-down, examining how federal and state policies delegate authority and shape the conditions in which that authority is wielded. This study contributes a bottom-up analysis of how an attempted transformative movement navigates the conditions created by those federal and state policies, joining the delegated welfare state as they seek resources and political change.

My first empirical chapter, Chapter 5, provided a framework for making sense of the diverging political logics that animate organizations across my sample of Southwest CLTs. In this chapter, I described two dominant political logics that shape the mission and activities of CLTs: an asset-based welfare logic that aligns with the hegemonic approach to poverty governance in the United States and a politically transformative redistributive/collectivist logic. I analyze these political logics through the lens of four key dimensions: causal stories, political goals, theories of change/solutions, and disposition. This framework elucidates core components of political logics in ways that will, I hope, contribute to analysis in other contexts.

In Chapter 6, I analyzed CLTs in the Southwest with close ties to the state, as well as those that frequently rely on the asset-based welfare political logic. Municipalization, one of the drivers of accelerated experimentation that Davis (2014, p55) identified, is indeed driving many—but not all—of the CLTs in the reformist category. In fact, I would argue that, across the spectrum of dispositions and political goals, CLTs are becoming part of the delegated welfare state—one of the tools public officials reach for as they enact poverty governance in conditions of austerity (Davis 2014; Engelsman, Rowe, and Southern 2016). Furthermore, I identified an area of possible cooptation that has been largely un-examined in prior scholarship—the core CLT value of stewardship—and explicated increasingly divergent understandings of the core CLT value of community control. However, I also argue that this possible cooptation does not represent an existential threat to the CLT movement. In fact, in a sense, the absence of grassroots organizing among some CLTs reflects one of the arguable strengths of the CLT model: ongoing activism, political mobilization, and confrontational protest are not *needed* to retain successes (such as the decision to make a given parcel a decommodified community resource or to designate a unit affordable housing). Community Benefits Agreements are a comparable anti-gentrification tool, but after the agreement is signed, volunteer activists often have to continuously monitor and negotiate with the developer to ensure the terms are fulfilled. That CLTs help circumvent this process is a benefit of the model.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I drew on theories from the sustainable transitions literature to make sense of CLTs that operate on redistributive/collectivist political logic. Though seemingly disparate domains, the conceptual framework of “mainstreaming”, developed from social movements seeking energy justice, provides a valuable framework for making sense of how social innovations—which seek to create alternative forms of infrastructure and relations to

better meet collective and individual needs—may become more widely influential in more nuanced ways than either radical transformation of social systems or system reproduction (Pel et al 2019; Wittmayer et al 2021). I argue that these organizations are both pursuing mainstream recognition and status through both state and community channels (Wittmayer et al 2021) *and* facilitating direct, collective local control among tenants at risk of immediate displacement. I analyzed how this subset of CLTs navigate possibly co-opting pressures by pairing the CLT model with housing co-operatives—allowing CLT staff to pursue community control and the cultural work of decommodification in their daily housing provision activities—and by anticipating and strategically managing tensions that incentivize conformity. Ultimately, I concluded that experimentation with the CLT model is not leading to straightforward cooptation of the CLT model but rather yielding a diverse array of organizations and a robust field of CLTs.

## Limitations and Further Research

Though interview and document data suggest that mission drift within CLT is relatively uncommon, this study is limited in its ability to draw conclusions about changes over time because it relies on one-time interview data and content analysis of currently available documents. Interviews allowed comparison across more organizations and a sense of CLT field across a particular region. However, future work should assess mission drift within particular organizations. Subsequent studies might gather a more comprehensive selection of organizational documents across organizations' entire histories to assess how publicly claimed political goals, service areas, missions, and organizational partners change over time. Alternatively, long-term participant observation with both politically transformative and politically affirmative emerging CLTs would provide valuable insight into the cooptation pressures that organizations face, how

practitioners manage these pressures, and how organizational frames, missions, and practices evolve over time.

Lack of data on CLT residents, service area residents, and CLT-resident interactions *in situ* is a significant limitation of this study. The absence of this data renders the study largely unable to speak to the consequences of political logics for the population CLTs serve. Though interview data and technical documents for practitioners suggest that CLT practitioners may, at times, adopt a paternalistic or disciplinary stance towards residents in trainings (see Chapter 6), further research is needed to determine whether and how this publicly espoused stance manifests in practice and how residents experience it. Ethnographic observation of CLT pre- and post-purchase support would provide valuable insight into whether and how CLTs seek to shape residents into their vision of a “good” citizen-subject. Moreover, future work must consider the role of scarcity in driving exclusionary policies and boundary-making around deservingness. The heart of these impulses is often insufficient funding and resources. As long as there's not enough to go around, people will use heuristics to determine who gets help and who does not—and those rules are likely to favor those who are already privileged in some way. Ethnographic investigation would likely provide insight into ways in which CLT support mitigates the need for residents to use cultural and social capital to successfully acquire and keep housing. Finally, such research is needed to illuminate how CLT residents experience “stewardship” in its many manifestations.

Relatedly, I was unable to collect data that would speak to organizational implications of the different political logics I observed. For instance, it is possible that the different dispositions, housing models, and espoused goals of CLTs influence the populations they serve. For instance, the criteria, assumptions, and practices of market-supplementing CLTs lead them to serve more

market-ready populations (e.g. those with near-middle income, good credit, citizenship, and the ability to navigate complex financial transactions), as observed in other studies of affordable housing (McCabe 2023). Future research should collect systematic data on the *actual* characteristics of CLT residents (e.g. income level). Though the 2022 CLT Census (Wang et al 2023) collected data about the maximum allowable AMI in each organizations' units, to my knowledge, there is no systematic data about the initial and current incomes of all CLT residents (in part because CLTs themselves do not have a system for collecting and maintaining these data). Data on residents' demographic characteristics would also provide valuable information to practitioners, as several participants in my study noted challenges with acquiring mortgage financing and meeting affordability for those more than a few percentage points below their threshold for service (e.g. 80% AMI). Information about when and how CLTs are able to provide housing for very low-income households would assist local actors seeking to develop a comprehensive housing strategy which may include tools beyond CLTs. Research along this line should collect a wide array of data on residents' experiences, beyond their demographic characteristics, because market readiness and AMI do not necessarily correlate with housing insecurity (as demonstrated by a participant in this study—a CLT volunteer and resident—who qualified for a mortgage and became a CLT homeowner shortly after being evicted from the apartment where she was using a Section 8 housing voucher).

The network of relationships and partnerships that CLTs operate in is also a promising avenue for future investigation. Much of the conversation about cooptation and professionalization frames CLT workers as atomized actors. However, social networks are likely important forces for the dispersal of institutional frame and practices, both towards and against cooptation. As this study documents (see Chapter 7), many CLT staff members have long-term,

close working relationships with other membership-based social movements organizations. Likewise, their CLTs are members of closely coordinated coalitions and partnerships with other place-based organizations (and/or local chapters of state-wide or national organizations). As CLT staffer Elena said, CLTs that technocratically focus on housing provision may be providing "political cover" for more confrontational organizations. Alternatively, worker relationships and organizational ties may encourage CLT workers to hew to funder and field norms and "best practices" in order to acquire resources.

As described in Chapter 6, future research might also investigate how the organizational structures used to enact community control are working in practice. Long-term observation of various organizations' tripartite boards and broader communities would illuminate how board dynamics play out in practice. Nonprofits research suggests that power dynamics and actual decision-making processes are likely to resemble those of the outside world, unless particular care is taken to ensure that CLT residents and non-expert community members feel confident in their expertise and role (e.g. Hardina 2006). In addition to generating best practices for CLT practitioners, such research could illuminate the breadth and depth of community control that CLTs enact in practice.

## Looking to the Future

CLT scholars and practitioners would be served by a holistic, long-term view of the pluralities created by CLTs' growing popularity. The current political moment presents a profound threat to funding for market alternatives. The first Trump Administration attempted to cut housing choice voucher programs and funding for public housing repairs (but were blocked by Congress; Schneid 2024). The Project 2025 presidential transition project—written by Trump's former HUD Secretary, Ben Carson—proposed massive budget cuts to HUD and

Turner, who was appointed HUD Secretary in 2025, oversaw roughly \$50 billion of private investment in “opportunity zones” (King 2024; Watkins and Lawrence 2025). On the one hand, these policies put CLTs that depend on state funds at stake, while fanning the flames of profit-oriented development and “revitalization” that does little to mitigate displacement. On the other hand, more politically affirmative CLTs may be better equipped to appeal to the new administration’s priorities of wealth-building and individualism and to slip past reflexive contempt for market alternatives.

Regardless, the Trump administration’s latest housing policies potentially threaten CLTs’ ability to maintain the ideal of stewardship described here—ongoing residents support and building maintenance by the CLT—and pose an increased threat to the most vulnerable members of CLTs’ communities. CLTs may need to seek funding from other sources, though philanthropic giving is limited and participants from all political logics asserted that grassroots funding from paid membership and ground lease fees are insufficient to cover even one staffer, let alone any rehabilitation costs. What will happen to residents without the stewardship of CLT? How does the ground lease work if the CLT can no longer fund staffers? Organizations and national associations have an obligation to consider these questions, develop plans of action, and clearly communicate them to residents and broader community. However, it is also important to note the CLT model is likely less susceptible to these types of federal-level fluctuations than other models, such as project-based vouchers, because CLTs’ ongoing subsidy needs are lower (though not zero).

I hope that practitioners and scholars interested in CLTs leave this dissertation encouraged to theorize the maturation of the CLT model through the lens of experimentation—following John Davis—and to take a long view of the pursuit of alternatives to settler

colonialism and market systems. Binary frameworks of reformist/radical change—and fears over the loss of the model—are understandable responses to observations of technocratic, coopted organizations, but experimentation with alternatives definitionally yields diverse fruits. Some of these will be a watered-down, neoliberal version of the original stock, while others will represent promising mutations. Elements of hegemonic logics will likely be present in all of them. Rather than strive to classify organizations as reformist or radical, we must sharpen our attention to the *elements* of CLTs' work and structures that inadvertently replicate the status quo and the *elements* that further the creation of alternatives to racial capitalism and settler colonialism. The explosion of CLTs in California, in particular, illustrates the range of possibilities yielded by experimentation, including CLTs that provide large-scale affordable homeownership opportunities by removing housing from the commodity market, Indigenous-led CLTs that return land to Indigenous stewardship, and CLTs that pursue displacement prevention and community control at the hyper-local level of the multi-unit building through housing co-operatives.

# Appendix

## Interview Schedule

### Introduction and Values

1. Just so I have some quick background, tell me a bit about your work with the CLT. How did you get involved and what do you do?
2. Tell me a bit about the CLT overall. What are your priorities right now? What does the CLT's current housing portfolio look like?
  - a. Prompt: What population/demographics do you typically serve?
3. How have those priorities evolved over the course of acquiring and managing the units you have now? If you think back to early times in the organization, how're things different now vs then?
4. Some CLTs focus on providing affordable housing for groups historically left out of the housing market, like Black and Latino people. What do you think of that?

### Legal Models

5. I'm also interested in the law and in how the legal system we have around housing can affect CLTs. What legal approaches do you use to maintain affordability?
6. What legal approaches did you consider for maintaining affordability?
7. How did you learn about the legal approaches you use now? All of these legal documents can get really complicated. What was it like to start learning about ground leases and deed restrictions and all that?
8. How do you feel the legal approaches you chose are working?

9. I understand the resale formula is a big conversation for a lot of CLTs. What was that conversation like for you? What factors did you weigh in that decision?
  - a. Optional Prompt: Walk me through some conversations you all had around that. Were there disagreements? Was it a difficult decision?
10. How do you feel about the resale formula you use now?

### Co-operatives

11. Do you have any units that are in a housing co-operative or that are working towards it?
12. How did you become aware of the building? Tell me about the acquisition process.
13. How did the CLT and other decision-makers set rents and then share prices and monthly dues?
14. What does decision-making within these buildings look like in general?

### Big Picture

15. I'm interested in what you think about other approaches to affordable housing, specifically the shared appreciation model. Unlike the shared equity model, where the resale price is capped, under this model, homes are sold at market value and a portion of the proceeds goes to the organization to buy or build more affordable housing. Are you familiar with it? What do you think about that model?
16. This may seem like an obvious question, but I'm curious: why is affordable housing important, in your view?
17. Who's the C in CLT? Has that changed over time at all?

### Wrap Up

18. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

19. Is there anything you think I should be asking that I didn't ask?
20. If I have more questions, would it be ok to follow up with you at some point in the future?
21. Now that you have a sense of the questions, is there anyone you know who would be good for me to talk to?
22. What questions do you have for me?

Follow-up Survey:

- What pronouns would you like me to use for you?
- How would you describe your race or ethnicity?
- How would you describe your professional background?

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