Community Land Trusts (CLTs) In The Context Of The Solidarity Economy, Revolutionary Politics & Indigenous Communities

By Joty Dhaliwal

"The Thanksgiving Address reminds us that duties and gifts are two sides of the same coin. Eagles were given the gift of far sight, so it is their duty to watch over us. Rain fulfills its duty as it falls, because it was given the gift of sustaining life. What is the duty of humans? If gifts and responsibilities are one, then asking 'What is our responsibility?' is the same as asking 'What is our gifts?'.... An integral part of a human's education is to know those duties and how to perform them"
-Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass

"We've got to become involved, we can no longer just sit back and let somebody else do it, whether it's the City of Boston or even Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. We have to do this"
- Ché Madyun, Resident (Community Organizer and Former Board Member, Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative & CLT), Holding Ground Documentary

A community land trust (CLT) can be understood as an invitation to rethink and rearrange rights and responsibilities to land. In the "classic CLT model" that originated in the United States, one division and arrangement of rights and responsibilities was defined along the lines of private ownership of different titles, one entity holding the title to the land and another to the buildings built on the land. However, private ownership doesn't have to be the only framework for discerning rights and responsibilities. Inspiration for what else might be possible lies within the solidarity economy movement, revolutionary politics and Indigenous relationships to land.

Solidarity Economy and CLTs

Understanding the distinction between the solidarity economy and the social economy is useful for understanding different political and cultural orientations, and thus undertakings, of CLTs. In "The Solidarity Economy And Social Transformation" by Michelle Williams, Williams describes and builds an argument for the differences between social economy versus solidarity economy. In Williams' argument, the social economy consists of approaches and practices that seek to address the harms of capitalism, without changing the social relations and economic structures that cause the harms in the first place. In contrast, the solidarity economy seeks to transcend capitalism by developing different and alternative social and economic relations that subordinate the economy to social needs (Williams).

We can understand the solidarity economy, which originated in Latin America as a reaction to neoliberal politics, as seeking to birth a socialist future out of our existing capitalist system. As a result, because this movement is seeking political and economic change, projects within this movement try to create alternative ways of producing, distributing, consuming and reproducing - the four primary economic activities - in ways that look more democratic and center

interconnectivity, reciprocity and justice. These projects may also engage with the broader political apparatus they are within, in order to push the politics present in those spaces to more radical and revolutionary policies and platforms. This may include electoral politics as well as the economic and political institutions in the areas of finance and law.

Another distinction that Williams' makes in her paper is where the agency of enactment is placed. The social economy asks what social needs are not being met and how can a service be designed to meet these needs. As a result, this orientation can lead to a focus on service coordination as well as seeing the recipients of that service as clients or consumers, most aptly reflected in charity models. The agency of the solidarity economy on the other hand is placed within its participants, reflected in the opening quote by Ché Madyun. This means that there is not only a rearrangement of relationships in order to conduct economic activities in more democratic and just ways, these relationships also require the work of many in continuous participation with each other.

Particularly as CLTs have begun to be taken up as a solution to the affordable housing crisis, we've begun to see how these distinctions play out on ground, with some "sector-led" initiatives orienting towards service provisioning methods, while others are being birthed out of active community movements. For CLTs to align with the political project of the solidarity economy movement, I would argue that the emphasis should be placed on how community members are able to enter into relationships of co-stewardship with each other, versus the responsibility of stewardship being predominantly managed by staff. From acquisitions being guided by community organizing to political organizing outside of the CLT, one of the greatest offerings within the CLT model is a meaningful integration of community participation backed by concrete structures put into practice through relationship building, democratic governance, political education, and material interests.

Co-Stewardship and Indigenous Relationships To Land

CLTs that want to orient towards co-stewardship through the political and economic commitments of the solidarity economy can find inspiration in Indigenous relationships to land, such as those held by the Haudenosaunee and Oceti Sakowin, who emphasized the role of humans and nonhumans to be co-stewards and co-participants of the living environment, collectively understood as land.

Reflected in the opening quote, the Haudenosaunee practice of the Thanksgiving Address, also known in the Onondaga language as the Words That Come Before All Else, sees the land to consist of many co-stewards. In the Address, each co-steward is named along with its function which is understood to be both its gift and duty to the other co-stewards. As such, the Thanksgiving Address serves as an economic model, a social contract, and as a political document, all of which are orientated around an understanding of people, nature and the land as existing in shared, but different duties and responsibility to each other (Kimmerer, 2013, p.115). This economic order and social contact is based on reciprocity; the effort, generosity and sacrifice of this reciprocity is recognized through gratitude.

In Michael Gouldhawke's writing, for many Indigenous communities, "land is the terrain upon which all our relations play out, and it can even be seen as a living thing itself, constantly shaping and being shaped by other life forms. Land isn't just a place; it's also a territory, which implies political, legal, and cultural relationships of jurisdiction and care." Consequently, the call for Land Back is equally a call for Relations Back, emphasizing the need to restore these relationships and resist the structures imposed by colonial systems (Gouldhawke).

"Skillfulness" In Relationships

I frequently heard among CLT staff and residents that while the community broadly has shared interests which individuals agree with, these same individuals may also have unique interests that come into friction with the shared interests. For example, a community as a whole may be in agreement that they want their neighborhood to remain affordable and diverse, and come to the conclusion that having a CLT is the best way to do this. However, this requires significant personal investment in time and energy to participate in the organizing, when these same individuals may not be the ones to experience a significant reduction in their rent. Since CLTs often have to take out conventional bank loans for acquisition, the reduction in rent might instead be experienced by future tenants once these loans are paid off. Additionally, the CLT may also require individuals to share and define access to common spaces such as gardens and parking, which in some cases have become contentious conversations. As a result, the CLT can be understood as a site for how individual interests contend with shared commitments and as a container for mediating these different and overlapping sets of interest.

Similar to many cooperative projects, CLTs may require one to find a balance and new "center" somewhere between the self and collective needs, a process that is in itself a form of struggle. For many people who have endured the worst harms under capitalism, the "collective" may have also been where harm was experienced, which one has had to develop ways to protect oneself against. I spoke to some CLT organizers and residents who observed particularly when members hold economic, cultural or racial trauma, they have developed an emotional and interpersonal skill set that was perhaps necessary for surviving their conditions, but isn't useful in a co-stewardship setting. This is because these forms of trauma can predispose people to difficulty in emphasizing and deeply listening, preemptive defensiveness and fear of potential harm, paranoia, and an inability to articulate needs and preference while holding space for others. As a result, learning how to be in a cooperative and co-stewardship practice may require deeply emotional and relational work to overcome these tendencies.

While these tendencies can lead to a CLT and cooperative being a site of conflict, these projects can also be a site for empowerment and some of the deepest forms of healing justice. Reflecting on events such as the Wounded Knee Massacre, Lakota Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart introduced the concept of historical trauma to clinical psychology and defined it as cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including one's life, which emanates from massive group trauma (Brave Heart, 2011, p. 283). Her research has found that when the trauma is collective, healing modalities that recognize the collective nature of the trauma and create collective

responses that draw upon community support systems and sacred cultural traditions -group containers such as circle-keeping- can be highly effective and perhaps even essential in addressing the harm (Brave Heart, p. 283).

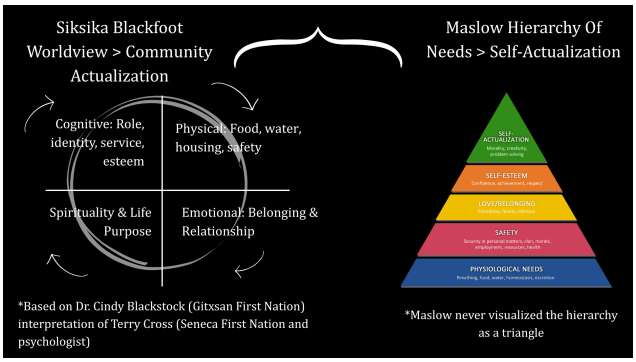
One CLT tenant organizer I spoke to shared how they are developing a generative conflict training series for their members. The training includes baseline conflict literacy (how conflict is not a problem and can be generative); practicing deep listening skills and reflecting back to one another; understanding each others different and historical conflict approaches, and how these approaches have come with benefits and challenges; how to give feedback; and if there is a rupture due to conflict, how to take accountability for one's behaviour and repair. For many of the residents, this was the first time they had engaged in this type of interpersonal reflection and they came to see how some of their own tendencies were contributing to the dynamics of disagreements. This type of skill-training not only equips one to enter into a group container, but also informs the quality of that container itself so it can be healing and collaborative. This in turn might create a new terrain for greater political engagement through the ability to take on new challenges and struggle.

At the 2025 Resist and Building Summit, I found the Asset-Based Community Development workshop to share a complementary approach in the context of organizing. The approach emphasizes organizing from a starting point that seeks to learn the gifts of the different people being organized and bringing these gifts together in order to create and be in service of a shared goal and commitment. It seeks to empower individuals to build relationships with each other and through these relationships create the change they are looking for. In the workshop, conversations and reflections surfaced how humans want to feel needed and so often we're told we're not enough; there is great potential in collective healing when we organize by lifting up our individual gifts in order to create a new whole where our gifts are needed. Reflected in the opening quote, our gifts then become our duties and responsibilities to each other in creating a shared terrain, including land. For one community in Dayton, Ohio, this organizing approach led to realizing a cooperative grocery store in a food apartheid neighborhood(site).

Some of these threads are mirrored in the Siksika (Blackfoot) worldview that centers multi-generational community actualization over individual actualization (Ravilochan). Teju Ravilochan documents how if Maslow had truly integrated the Siksika way of life into the development of the Hierarchy of Need, he would have shared how for many First Nations self-actualization is not something to be "achieved." It is instead situated in community actualization and realized through community enactment. Self-actualisation is not "earned" by an individual, but is instead drawn out of an inherently sacred being who is imbued with a spark of divinity; as a result, "education, prayer, rituals, ceremonies, individual experiences, and vision quests can help invite the expression of this sacred self into the world" (Ravilochan).

These practices not only draw out the sacred self, but also teach the self the "skillfulness [required] to nourish a community-wide family, keep each person fed, live in harmony with the land, and minimize internal and external conflicts." These practices are essential because skillfulness can vanish as people pass on; as a result, "each generation sees it as their responsibility to perpetuate

their culture by adding to the tribe's communal wisdom and passing on ancestral teachings to children and grandchildren"(Ravilochan). It's from this orientation that the understanding of seven generations is derived, articulated by Cindy Blackstock as meaning "that one's actions are informed by the experience of the past seven generations and by considering the consequences for the seven generations to follow"(Ravilochan). Education is essential to community and self actualization.



Contradictions

The Native Roots Network cites Indigenous scholar Vine Deloria, Jr, that "the U.S. is a rights-based society - perhaps even individual-rights based - where's Indigenous cultures are generally responsibility-based societies." Since Indigenous communities orient towards land as being a living terrain of social relationships that contains responsibilities, settler policies specifically sought and still do aim to break these social relationships in order to make land more predictable and amenable for settler development (Gouldhawke). One tactic has been to make the social relationships more transactional and based on private and individualized rights to property and political representation (Gouldhawke).

If Indigenous communities, and all those who want to support the decolonization and decommodification of land, want to use CLTs as a strategy for reclaiming certain co-stewardship practices of land, they will have to navigate several contradictions in this process as they reconcile utilizing colonial property law that is individual-rights based while putting into practice relationships that center co-stewardship and responsibilities. One orientation that can guide navigating these contradictions is having conversations to define what can exist in the jurisdiction of the "internal container" of the CLT and where is its "threshold," the boundary at which it begins to engage with colonial property law.

Another source of inspiration that I recently heard about is the Homefulness project by Poor Magazine in Oakland. The project is structurally applying some of the mechanisms of a CLT, but as one that does not charge rent and emphasizes community organizing (Poor Magazine). I was reflecting recently with a friend how if rent no longer denotes a right to have access to land, then the question becomes, as this writing and presentation has been considering, what allows a person to have access and anchor into a community? Rent abolition may clear the way to have conversations

about how access and relationships can be mediated and defined by what is one's responsibility to the continued survival and flourishing of that collective project.

In general, any complex situation will have multiple contradictions and our guide in navigating these contradictions is to hold the contradictions while experimenting in order to find resolution. In the words of Kali Akuno when reflecting on liberated zones, "Our Communes and/or Liberated Zones are bases of experimentation. Nothing more and nothing less. We don't build them to escape, we build them to live out elements of our dreams, to perfect our practice, to serve as living example of what socialism could look like, feel like, operate like" (Yaw, 2025).

This sentiment of communes as both building blocks and experimentation of socialism is also reflected in the research of Chris Gilbert and Cira Pascual Marquina of social communes in Venezuela. In *Commune Or Nothing*, they document how the state policy of social communes took hold not just due to the vision of Hugo Chavez and theorization of István Mészáros, but because this formation resonated with the experience of Indigenous people who had the stories, memories and understanding of communalism. Our experimentations, whether CLTs or communes, can look to the past in order to inform the socialistic relationships we want to develop now and into the future, and through our enactment could become new sources of inspiration and possibility.

Conclusion

The aspirations of CLTs in the solidarity economy and Indigenous relationships to land both challenge capitalist logic in complementary ways: the emphasis is placed on co-stewardship and shared responsibility in maintaining a living terrain that isn't singularly "owned." If we place these aspirations as our north star, we are better able to push CLTs as far as they can go within capitalism during a pre-revolutionary stage and will likely find many new ways in which we can learn to relate with each other and the land that supports our broader organizing for economic and political transformation. Particularly, CLTs can ask us what are the social relationships we need to co-steward in healthy ways with each other and our nonhuman relatives, and what is required from us on a personal, spiritual and social level in order to enter into these relationships of solidarity.

About The Writer

Joty Dhaliwal is a settler researcher, writer and organizer on Ohlone lands (Oakland, California), born and raised on Coast Salish territories (Surrey, British Columbia) and has ancestral ties to Punjab, India. She has worked in municipal politics, construction and interior architecture, as a Restorative Economics organizer and program developer, and now at a cooperatized community land trust. She is committed to front-line organizing that emphasizes political education and leadership development.

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as part of the URB 639 Fieldwork class for the community partner the Aboriginal Housing Management Association in British Columbia, Canada.

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