

THE WORK OF THE URBAN COMMONS:  
LIMITED-EQUITY COOPERATIVES IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

by

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**Abstract**THE WORK OF THE URBAN COMMONS:  
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This research theorizes the work of the urban commons through close examination of a group of ten limited-equity housing cooperatives in Washington, D.C. Limited-equity co-ops, or LECs, are a noncommodified resource that is collectively owned and maintained by their members. I argue that LECs are a manifestation of the commons, and that they represent a specific form of the commons – the urban commons. In this research, I ask: how does the urban commons – as manifested in this case by limited-equity housing cooperatives – function? The commons, as I theorize it, is a space that both *provides* a basis for life outside of (or at least less dictated by) capitalism, and that *requires* collective work to build and maintain. The commons, Peter Linebaugh (2008) argues, is constituted through *commoning* – the many overlapping practices of being-in-common that allow for a collective approach to life. The urban commons, I argue, is constituted through work, and future theorizing and action around the commons needs to take work seriously.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In the summer of 1975 in Washington, D.C., a tall white man had something to say. The man, Dave Clarke, was a member of the D.C. city council, which was then a brand-new entity; the residents of the nation's capital had not been allowed to elect their own local leaders for 100 years. In 1974 they finally won the right to local self-representation. And in 1975, the newly elected city council immediately turned its attention to one of the most pressing issues of the day: gentrification and displacement of low- and moderate-income residents. Gentrification was a relatively new phenomenon in early 1970s America, and D.C. was on the leading edge of the trend. Residents were worried that, just as this majority-black city was finally gaining voting rights, low- and moderate-income people – most of them black – would be driven out by high housing costs. David A. Clarke had been elected to represent Ward One, the city's centrally located and most densely populated and diverse ward. In his statement before the city council, Clarke addressed himself to Marion Barry, then the chairman of the committee on finance and revenue, which was considering legislation that would protect low- and moderate-income people from displacement. This was legislation Clarke supported ardently. He began with a rhetorical flourish:

“Mr. Chairman, it has been my good fortune during the past ten years to live in an area where all of America's dreams of the ability of its many different people to live together have come to fruition. This area lays mostly in the first or second concentric circle of residential areas [of Washington, D.C.]. But over the years, by the sweat and toil and concentrated efforts of its neighbors, it has been able to become a place where black people and white people and brown people and old people and young people and rich people and poor people and male people and female people and gay people and straight people and yes even tall people and short people have been able to find unity in their diversity.

“This has not been easy for there have always been those agents of discord who have desired to have us destroy one another but we now face an even more perilous enemy – those who would, without having been part of its creation and therefore unaware of its

depth, advertise this diversity and capitalize upon its appeal with the end result of its destruction.”

He continued:

“If you come to our area Mr. Chairman as you have done on many occasions, you will see that much of what our neighborhoods are has been built by their own people. An example of this exists in Community Park West. An isolated tract of vacant land, held for appreciation and disposition purposes, the people have transformed it into a recreational center of such quality and with a program such as few other communities in our city enjoy.”

Yet Clarke feared for the fate of this community that had collectively built itself, and soon reiterated his main point, which is underlined in the original testimony:

“The more attractive diversity becomes in the hands of those who have not labored to maintain that diversity but only to project it as an abstract value; the greater the danger of the ultimate destruction of that diversity.” (Clarke 1975)

The world Clarke describes here, I argue, is a kind of urban commons. A commons, put simply, is a resource that is both collectively owned and/or managed by its members or users; and is valued by its members for its everyday use, rather than for its potential monetary exchange on the market (Nonini 2007). A commons is distinct from public space: public space is owned and regulated by the state, while a commons exists, as Vinay Gidwani and Amita Baviskar argue,

“as a dynamic and collective resource – a variegated form of social wealth – governed by emergent custom and constantly negotiating, rebuffing, and evading the fixity of law... In a sense, commons thrive and survive by dancing in and out of the State’s gaze, by escaping its notice, because notice invariably brings with it the desire to transform commons into state property or capitalist commodity” (2011 42).

Clarke is concerned precisely with the “dynamic and collective resource” constituted by the urban neighborhoods he describes. He is concerned with a space people have worked together to create and maintain, and that is a decent and even joyful home for a variety of people, regardless of background and income. This is a space that was, at least for a few years, unattractive to external capital investment, and therefore provided a ground for experimentation in urban community. It escaped the notice, for a time, of both capital and the state. In addition

to building the community park, neighborhood residents in the 1960s and '70s were working to clean up their streets, start food cooperatives, develop plans for fish farming in basements, form artists' collectives, organize for community control of the local elementary school, build their own system of elected neighborhood self-governance, and much more (Hess 1979; Henig 1982). What the people of Ward One were creating together – and yes, the process was messy and full of conflict that was never necessarily resolved – was a place that served as a common basis for urban life. And what Clarke warned of – that profiteers would seek to sell the idea of this place for their own gain, with the effect of destroying the diversity created by the residents – has, since 1975, been largely accomplished.

Yet, despite ever-escalating gentrification, the idea and practice of the commons has never been totally destroyed in Washington, D.C. Of the many laws the progressive city council passed in the 1970s and '80s to protect low- and moderate-income people from displacement, one of the most successful has been the law that gives tenants the first right to purchase their homes when their landlords choose to sell. Using this law, the origins of which I detail in Chapter 4, low-income tenant associations have been able to collectively purchase their apartment buildings from their landlords, and have often converted them into limited-equity cooperatives. Limited-equity cooperatives, or LECs, are owned collectively by their members, as is any housing cooperative. The difference is that LEC members purchase their membership shares at very low rates, and then must sell those shares for similarly low rates should they choose to leave the co-op. This structure allows for home ownership opportunities for low-income people, while keeping the housing affordable for future residents as well. It essentially removes the housing from the real estate market, with the goal of keeping the housing very affordable for members. Because they tend to take the form of apartment buildings or other

relatively dense housing, LECs tend to be urban phenomena. In the United States, LECs are found in greatest numbers in New York City and Washington, D.C. (Sazama 2000; Saegert and Benitez 2005). The benefits of this housing are many: residents have more control over their dwelling space than they did as renters; they are generally able to form a supportive, family-like community; they have a stability of tenure that renting does not provide; and, above all, their housing costs are kept at affordable rates. Yet, because these co-ops have no landlords or higher authorities to which to turn, this housing also requires a certain amount of collective labor on the part of members to maintain. For people who are accustomed to having landlords, self-management can be hard to get used to, and hard to maintain over time. Yet limited-equity cooperatives, I argue, are a form of urban commons that can help provide the basis for less commodified forms of life.

In this chapter, I first introduce my research project, and then outline three alternative frameworks for studying limited-equity cooperatives, pieces of which inform the framework of the urban commons, which I present in Chapter 2.

### **The research project**

My research examines the work of the urban commons. Limited-equity co-ops, I argue, are a form of the commons that is specifically urban – and the urban commons, I maintain, is an important concept for scholars and activists to take up. In my research, I ask: how does the urban commons – as manifested in this case by limited-equity housing cooperatives – function? The commons, as I theorize it, is a space that both *provides* a basis for life outside of (or at least less dictated by) capitalism, and that *requires* collective work to build and maintain. The commons, Peter Linebaugh argues, is constituted through *commoning* – the many overlapping

practices of being-in-common that allow for a collective approach to life. “[C]ommoning,” Linebaugh writes, “is embedded in a labor process: it inheres in a particular praxis of field, upland, forest, marsh, coast. Common rights are entered into by labor” (2008 45). Unlike human rights, which are more abstract and universal, Linebaugh argues that common rights require direct engagement on the part of those who would claim those rights (see also De Angelis 2010). I take seriously Linebaugh’s assertion that commons rights are asserted and maintained through work; the purpose of my investigation is to closely examine the work of the urban commons in order to understand how these commoning practices actually function. The urban commons, I argue, is constituted through work, and future theorizing and action around the commons needs to take work seriously.

The contribution of this research is two-fold. One, I put forth a theory of the urban commons, using limited-equity cooperatives as a lens through which to develop and examine the theory. Surprisingly little research brings together a theory of the urban commons with the empirical evidence of how such commons function. Though a number of commons researchers have performed their research in cities, few say anything about what is unique theoretically about an urban commons. The urban is messy, marked by dense and diverse populations, competition for land use, and rapid change. It is therefore, as I will explain in the next chapter, a difficult site for theorizing the commons. But the world is rapidly urbanizing, and if the theory of the commons is to mean anything for humanity, it must work in the urban context.

Two, I highlight the work required of the urban commons, through examining the work of maintaining LECs. My focus on work is meant to be a caution against the romanticization of the commons that courses through contemporary anti-capitalist movements. While I find the idea of the commons, and particularly the urban commons, to be essential for envisioning a

society beyond capitalism, I do not want to ignore the fact that collective self-governance requires constant work. The commons does not come freely, nor does it freely self-replicate. The question of how the commons expands is crucial, and I find that the work of maintaining and expanding the commons is a dialectical process. Finally, my research suggests that it is through doing the work of the commons that people may learn to collectively self-govern, to live in common.

### **Frameworks for studying limited-equity cooperatives**

Though I am theorizing limited-equity housing cooperatives as a kind of commons, there are a number of different theoretical frameworks through which LECs could also be analyzed. I briefly review three different frameworks here: the affordable housing policy framework, which draws mostly on literature in the urban planning and housing policy fields; the right to the city framework, which is less oriented towards policy, and more towards activism; and the diverse economies framework, which seeks to interrogate given concepts of “the economy.” As will be seen, these three frameworks overlap with each other to varying degrees, and all help inform a commons framework.

#### ***Affordable housing policy***

Affordable housing is a perennial concern in the United States. By one measure, one third of U.S. residents are “shelter-poor,” meaning they pay more for their housing than they can afford given their incomes and other expenses (Stone 1993; Stone 2006). In 2009, over half of U.S. renters lived in unaffordable housing (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2011). In an economic system in which housing is a profit-oriented financial investment, affordability will

always be a problem for lower income people. Housing affordability is a particular problem for low- and moderate-income people in relatively strong housing markets. My research site of Washington, D.C. has long been one of the strongest housing markets in the country and has therefore long been a site of particular unaffordability (Paige and Reuss 1983).

The root cause of the housing crisis is that housing, within capitalism, is a commodity: that is, housing is treated as a means to profit, not as a social good (Achtenberg and Marcuse 1986a). A commodity, as understood here, is made up both of its use value – what it provides its owner in terms of everyday use – and its exchange value – the amount for which it can be sold on the market. A commodity is marked by the inherent tension between its use value and exchange value (Marx 1973). While Engels (1935 [1887]) takes pains to argue that housing is a commodity like any other, Harvey (1972) argues that housing is, in fact, a unique commodity, for a constellation of reasons, some of which include: it has an absolute and inflexible location; it is often freighted with emotional meaning; its purchase is geared not just for present use value, but for future exchange value; and it is a commodity that one cannot choose *not* to purchase: everyone must exist in some space, and that space must be paid for.

One way to address the problem of affordability is to create noncommodified forms of housing. Such housing has been removed from the real estate market and cannot serve as a financial investment (Achtenberg and Marcuse 1986b). This can be rental housing operated by a landlord, such as a nonprofit organization or religious institution, that has no profit motive; it can be publicly-owned rental housing; or it can be home ownership housing with resale restrictions that ensure that future residents will be able to afford to buy in (Stone 2006). Noncommodified housing that is privately owned has been referred to as “third sector” housing. Third sector housing has three characteristics: it is privately owned, price restricted, and socially oriented –

that is, the primary function of the property is to meet the shelter needs of current and future residents, not to accumulate wealth for the property's owners (Davis 2000). Common examples of third sector housing include mutual housing associations, community land trusts, nonprofit rental housing, and limited-equity cooperatives (Institute for Community Economics 1982; DeFilippis 2004; Davis 2010). Rental housing has a very important role to play in providing affordable housing; yet affordable home ownership for low- and moderate-income people has also been a goal of national policy, particularly since the Clinton years (see Rohe and Watson 2007). Third sector home ownership models are particularly relevant given the ongoing foreclosure crisis, which has shown that low-income buyers may not benefit from purchasing housing on the open market, and may in fact end up in a worse economic position after foreclosure than they were in as renters (Saegert, Fields et al. 2009). While thousands of low-income individuals have lost their homes to foreclosure, very few low-income owners of homes on community land trusts have been victims of foreclosure (Thaden and Rosenberg 2010).

Limited-equity co-ops can be one element of a local or national strategy to address the crisis of affordable housing (Miceli, Sazama et al. 1994). The fact that LECs exist in Washington, D.C. is the result of aggressive advocacy at the local level for the rights of low-income tenants not to be displaced, a story I tell in Chapter 4.

I first became interested in LECs through the lens of policy, when I was working for an organization in D.C. that advocated for better city policy in the field of affordable housing development. My plan going into dissertation research was to understand why some LECs had converted to a market-rate condominium form of ownership when they had the chance, and why others had remained limited-equity. For years, a debate has raged in the Washington, D.C. affordable housing community as to whether affordable home ownership units should be resale-

restricted or not. Those who favored resale restrictions (such as the restrictions on LEC owners) saw them as necessary for ensuring a long-term supply of affordable housing. But those opposed to resale restrictions saw them as denying low-income home owners the opportunity to build wealth. In essence, this was a larger argument about whether affordable home ownership housing should be conceived of as a commons, or should be designed for private gain.<sup>1</sup> But I could not find any research that systematically asked low-income owners of resale-restricted housing, such as LECs, how they understood this tension between long-term affordability and wealth gain. My initial goal, therefore, was to ask owners about this tension in order to inform affordable housing policy. But once I began interviewing LEC members, I realized that I was more interested in how members experienced their particular form of home ownership, and in thinking about how this unique form of housing could open up new possibilities in members' lives and in cities more broadly. This seemed beyond the scope of a policy-oriented work.

### ***The right to the city***

Another way to examine LECs might be through the lens of the right to the city. Over the past decade, the *right to the city* has become a powerful call in both academic and activist circles. The writings of Henri Lefebvre, who coined the phrase in the midst of the urban revolutions of 1968, is the starting point for theoretical discussions of the right to the city (1996 [1968]; 2003 [1970]). For Lefebvre, the right to the city is the right to not be alienated or marginalized in decision-making processes that frequently revolve around the use of urban space. More broadly, the right to the city for Lefebvre is the right to the freedom to habitat and to inhabit – that is, the right to be in a place, and the right to make that place one's own.

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this particular insight to my friend Jen Kaminsky of the Urban Homestead Assistance Board (UHAB) in New York City, which helps tenants develop limited-equity cooperatives.

Lefebvre sees the city as a creative work – an *oeuvre*. And the right to the city includes the right to participate in creating that collective work that is the city (McCann 2003; Mitchell and Heynan 2009). Around the United States and the world, the idea of the right to the city has been put to work in struggles over the rights of poor people to live in informal settlements, the rights of day laborers to congregate in public to find work, and the rights of the homeless to exist in public, among many other struggles (Mitchell 2003; Fernandes 2007; Varsanyi 2008). These struggles do not exist in isolation. In the U.S., the Right to the City Alliance helps organizers connect around similar issues; globally, bodies like the United Nations and the World Social Forum issue papers and convene discussion and action using the right to the city framework (Brown and Kristiansen 2009; Leavitt, Samara et al. 2009; Urban Social Forum 2010).

At the core of the right to the city analysis is the understanding that space – in this case, urban space – does not exist naturally, but is socially produced (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]). The city is constantly made and remade: by private developers, public planners, and everyday inhabitants. It is this work that both creates the city and provides, or denies, access to its resources. The right to the city is a collective right to decision making over how to create and distribute the surplus that constitutes cities, and that cities generate (Harvey 2008). This right, then, is to participation in a democratic process. It is because the right to the city framework is so closely entwined with democratic participation that it makes sense as a framework for studying LECs, which, unlike traditional rental housing, rely on the participation of members to function. When tenants use their collective power to buy their buildings from their landlords in order to stay in their neighborhoods and gain control over their housing, they are in a sense exercising their right to the city.

Yet a framework grounded in rights remains abstract, and it can be unclear how the call for a right to the city plays out in actual life (Attoh 2011). According to Lefebvre, participation is a wide-open act that includes all the action of daily life: one participates in creating the oeuvre of the city by living one's everyday life. Right to the city scholars acknowledge this, yet often go on to imagine a level of participation in urban governance that is much more intentional and engaged with the structures of the state than what Lefebvre seems to be calling for. In writing about efforts to claim the right to the city in Los Angeles, Mark Purcell, for example, does not recount the daily rounds of everyday life. What he describes is participation through going to meetings and city council hearings, making phone calls to organize with one's neighbors, working to keep out certain kinds of development and making sure the city allocates resources to public transportation used by poor people (Purcell 2005). This is work that, at its best, is deeply enmeshed with the everyday life of neighborly contact. But it is real *work* all the same. As my research continued, I found myself frustrated with the right to the city concept in its insistence on rights to a noncapitalist way of life, without explicit acknowledgement of the hard work required of people to collectively create such a life.<sup>2</sup> The right to the city vision elides the difficulties of long-term collective work. I was searching for a way to understand the radical potential of LECs that was squarely grounded in the reality of the collective work they entail.

### ***Diverse economies***

A third way to examine LECs is from a diverse economies perspective. Diverse economies theorists argue that noncapitalist and anticapitalist practices exist right now all around us, and that the task for scholars is to uncover and theorize these practices so as to enable such

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<sup>2</sup> Recently, Anant Maringanti (2011) has attempted to ground the right to the city in a theory of the commons. Further theorizing on the right to the city as not just a collective but a common right, as described by Linebaugh (2008), would help ground the idea of "rights" inherent in the call for the right to the city.

practices to expand (Gibson-Graham 2006). The thrust of economic geographers J. K. Gibson-Graham's work is to recognize and encourage the multiple economic practices that, they argue, exist in and amongst capitalist practices. Rather than theorizing capitalism as a totalizing entity that engulfs all it meets, they theorize it as being shot through with all sorts of other economic practices, including, among many others, bartering, gift-giving, gleaning, and cooperative enterprise. Once these are recognized as alternative economic practices, they argue, these noncapitalist economic ways of being can be expanded in order to take up increasingly more room in the social-economic world, eventually leading to a more egalitarian society. A limited-equity housing cooperative represents just the sort of noncapitalist economic practice that Gibson-Graham theorize: it is housing created to fulfill the need of its residents, it is purchased and developed collectively, and it is owned outside the framework of the capitalist commodity system. Yet these co-ops still exist within the larger landscape of capitalist housing markets.

Gibson-Graham call for rethinking the economy as an “ethical space of decision making.” The economy, for them, is an eminently social field in which people must constantly make joint decisions. And they are very interested in as-yet untested economic ways of being.

As they write:

“If we wish to emphasize the *becoming* of new and as yet unthought ways of economic being, we might focus on the multiple possibilities that emerge from the inessential commonality of negotiating our own implication in the existence of others. An ethical praxis of being-in-common could involve cultivating an awareness of:

- what is *necessary* to personal and social survival;
- how social *surplus* is appropriated and distributed;
- whether and how social surplus is to be produced and *consumed*; and
- how a *commons* is produced and sustained” (2006 88, emphasis in original).

The commons, then, is a key element of their understanding of how to create new economic forms of life.

Gibson-Graham are hardly alone in their desire to rethink what constitutes “the economy.” Pavlovskaya writes of the “multiple economies” of post-Soviet Moscow, detailing the ways in which households engaged in multiple economic practices to make do in the rapidly changing time of the 1990s. Recognizing the wide range of household economic practices, she argues, is crucial for understanding not only how everyday life functioned at the micro-scale, but also for understanding macro-scale economic transitions (Pavlovskaya 2004). Graeber goes further, arguing against the very idea of a thing called “the economy,” a thing separate from moral and political life. As he writes, “Economics assumes a division between different spheres of human behavior that among [many peoples] simply does not exist” (2011 33). For Graeber, this separating of the “economic” from the moral and political has had profound consequences. Through interrogating the economy, as Gibson-Graham, Pavlovskaya, Graeber, and others do, new ways of collective existence can be theorized and created.

The diverse economies perspective comes closest of the three theories to capturing the particular quality of the limited-equity cooperatives I have studied in Washington, D.C. These co-ops are noncapitalist economic structures that exist in the midst of a capitalist real estate market. And they are sites of experimentation, where members have been learning how to live in common, where economic ways of being are “new and as yet unthought.” Importantly, the diverse economy literature has consistently drawn on feminist work to theorize difference in economic practices. This grounding in feminist theory is also appealing, given the fact that much of the work of the limited-equity cooperatives I studied was performed by women. I also appreciate Gibson-Graham’s attention to the importance of ethical decision-making in a commons, which speaks to a broader concern about commons maintenance over time. But their theory, while it is excellent at framing the idea of the commons, does not delve deeply enough

into the problem of the work required of the commons, which, as I continued with my research, clearly became the overriding issue of the limited-equity cooperatives I was investigating.

## **Conclusion**

In recent years, the commons concept has been taken up by anti-capitalist organizers who seek a more just, equitable and sustainable world. The Occupy Wall Street movement, for instance, speaks in terms of the commons, and in early 2012 organized a forum on the commons, the purpose of which was to deepen understanding of different practices of the commons, and to think through how commons can be expanded. The commons is becoming an increasingly popular – some might say trendy – idea. It is precisely because the idea is taking hold of the popular imagination that I find it urgent to closely interrogate the practice of the commons, in order to banish romantic visions and enter into the practice of the commons clear-eyed, with an appreciation for all the messy work it requires.

Finally, a disciplinary note. I am a geographer. When I tell people about my research into limited-equity cooperatives in Washington, D.C., they invariably ask, “How is that *geography*?” My first answer is that the urban commons, as I theorize it, is explicitly grounded in geography: in tangible, irreplaceable, space. While I am not dealing with landforms per se, I am dealing with the larger question of how urban land is used and who has access to it, which is at its heart, I and many others argue, a geographic question. The housing co-ops on which I focus in this study collectively make up only a tiny percentage of the square acreage of Washington, D.C.’s land. Yet they exist in the city in a very material way, taking up space that might have been used for other purposes, and providing an affordable place for mostly low-income people to live securely. My second answer is that geography deals with multiple kinds

of space, and not just the literal and absolute space of the ground. Space can be absolute, but it can also be relative and relational (Harvey 2004). D.C. co-ops exist in relative space, in a city with high housing costs and often in neighborhoods experiencing gentrification. Within the absolute spaces of co-op walls, co-ops also help generate relational spaces of community, that ultimately help create new ways of being together that may expand beyond the co-op building. Space, Lefebvre reminds us, is not a blank stage on which human actors meet; space itself is socially produced (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]). The field of geography and its close study of space has much to offer efforts to advance the theorization and practice of the urban commons. In the next chapter, I begin this task.

## Chapter 2: Towards a Theory of the Urban Commons

The commons is broadly theorized as a set of resources that is subject to collective governance, and which is treated not as a commodity to be sold on the market for individual gain, but as a resource to be used and managed for the greater good of the whole. Some scholars study the commons at a fine-grained empirical level, while others conceive of it more broadly. Yet regardless of the scale of study, the commons is usually theorized, implicitly or explicitly, as a political space of decision-making over collective resources (Gibson-Graham 2006; Hess and Ostrom 2007; Nonini 2007; van Laerhoven and Ostrom 2007; St. Martin 2009; Harvey 2011).

Interestingly, little empirical research explicitly theorizes the *urban* commons. The lack of theoretical attention to the urban commons is surprising given the increasing interest in cities as sites of social struggle; the call for the right to the city is one prominent manifestation of the contemporary concern for urban justice (Mitchell 2003; Harvey 2008; Leavitt, Samara et al. 2009). But most commons research does not deal at all explicitly with the urban. Commons research, rather, has focused on rural areas, natural resources, and, more recently, information and the internet; larger discussions of “the common” include language and culture as things that are created collectively by people, and that no one person can claim to own (Hardt and Negri 2009). Prominent scholars of the commons, like van Laerhoven and Ostrom (2007), along with legal scholars like Foster (2011), have called for more precise attention to the urban commons. While recently a number of scholars have examined the commons as manifested in cities, this work for the most part takes the city as a site for the commons without theorizing what may be distinct about the urban commons (an exception is Sundaresan 2011). The idea of the urban commons needs to be much better developed, for both theoretical and practical reasons.

The commons is a slippery concept. It can be hard to define the idea, and it can be hard to understand how the idea can be put into practice. The city, I argue, is a good place to test the theory of the commons, because the city is a more difficult environment in which to work, theoretically and practically: cities are more densely populated; they are eminently social spaces; they have more potential for conflict; and they are more subject to quick change than less populated areas. As Harvey argues, the urban commons “poses all the political contradictions of the commons in highly concentrated form” (2012 80). If researchers cannot develop a theory of the urban commons, then the theory of the commons will remain a practical reality only in relatively isolated areas of low population density, places where traditional values hold and economic and political systems are small-scale and simple. These are places, as Ostrom writes, where populations are stable and relatively culturally homogenous, where people “have shared a past and expect to share a future” (1990 88). It is possible that the commons is a concept that works best in these latter situations, which is where most of the commons management research has been done, and that the commons is not, in fact, an appropriate way of thinking about heterogeneous and complex places like cities. But I argue otherwise: that it is possible to reclaim, manage, and extend an urban commons. Because the planet is quickly urbanizing (United Nations Population Fund 2007), realizing the urban commons is an essential part of creating a democratic world.

I conceive of a democratic world as one in which people gain control over their lives through non-coercive collective decision-making and action. Democracy as such cannot be imposed through external structures, but must be formed through people’s direct experiences of working together. Democracy here is defined by a prefigurative approach to politics. Prefigurative politics, as Chatterton writes, “aims to build the future hoped for world right here

in the present, where the values, tactics and organizational forms try to prefigure the future that activists and campaigners seek” (2010 906). This definition of democracy squares with that of Thomas Jefferson, as elaborated by Michael Hardt in his (2007) work on Jefferson. Jefferson’s vision is for a democracy that is small-scale and flexible, adapting to changing circumstances. It is a democracy that is learned by doing. Democracy, for Jefferson and for Hardt, is an iterative process: for Jefferson, Hardt writes, “democracy is the goal of the revolutionary process and, paradoxically, democracy is also the means of achieving it” (2007 xv). There are two reasons the prefigurative, Jeffersonian theory of democracy is a good framework for research into the commons. One, it works theoretically: the commons is a space of prefigurative action. Two, it works politically: ultimately I am interested in expanding the idea of the commons, and am therefore interested in the idea becoming mainstream. Basing a theory of democracy on the writings of one of the founders of the United States is one way to argue for the normalcy of the commons. I do recognize, however, the limitations of the Jeffersonian model, as much of the work of the commons – and the urban commons – takes place in the global south of India, Africa, and elsewhere (see for example Federici 2011; Gidwani and Baviskar 2011; Parthasarathy 2011), and is democratic in ways not necessarily informed by Jeffersonian thought. While part of the purpose of my research is to uncover urban commons practices in the “developed,” Western world, where the commons has been undertheorized (cf St. Martin 2009), a theory of the urban commons must work globally.

In this chapter, I first examine the evolution of the idea of the commons, beginning with Garrett Hardin’s argument in his article “The Tragedy of the Commons,” responses to Hardin, and the changing definition of the commons. Next, I ask why it might be important to theorize a specifically urban commons, and outline three particular characteristics of the urban commons. I

then argue my main point: that the concept of the commons is explicitly a concept of collective work and self-governance. Collectively managing the commons, I argue, is how people can learn to self-govern in general; the *practice* of the commons is a necessary element of democracy. Finally, I introduce the example of a group of affordable housing cooperatives in Washington, D.C. to set the stage for my empirical research of theorizing the urban commons in a grounded way.

### **The evolution of the theory of the commons**

The idea of the commons goes back centuries and spans continents. Early Judeo-Christian thought includes conceptions of the earth as a commons that could provide for all beings. God's command for a year of Jubilee every 50 years, during which the land would rest, slaves would be freed, debts remitted, and land redistributed, has been theorized as an act of conserving and "communizing" the commons (Hart 2006). The English commons were spaces peasants used to make a living, via pasturing animals and collecting food, fuel, and materials (Thompson 1963; Marx 1973; Neeson 1993). The commons was an important element, too, in the early United States. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Commonwealth of Massachusetts, "proprietors" of a commons were legally enabled to use the powers normally granted towns to regulate the commons through assessing taxes, electing officers, and passing by-laws (Handlin and Handlin 1969). Today, self-regulation of collective resources is normal behavior for people in many parts of the world. But the commons have often been contested. Boston Common, which can be seen as perhaps the prototypical American urban commons, was often the site of struggle over who had the right to use the space. In 1877, for example, the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association

sought to use a portion of the Boston Commons for their for-profit fair. A host of petitioners spoke against this commercial use of the space. As one man testified:

“We regard it as an infringement upon the rights of all, and as a most wanton encroachment upon the enjoyment — aye, the health — of the great mass of our neighbors and townspeople, who, in the heats of summer, obtain upon the Common their only breath of fresh air. We denounce it as the denial of the right of all classes, of both sexes and of all ages, under the law to freely use and freely enjoy Boston Common. Better abolish the name of Common at once than allow by any act of yours such a perversion of its use by a wealthy corporation, which seeks a selfish end...” (Boston Committee of Citizens 1877 15).

Yet it was concern over this use of the commons by the “great mass” of people that led ecologist Garrett Hardin in 1968 to publish his “The Tragedy of the Commons” in the journal *Science*. In what became a seminal piece, Hardin argues that human overpopulation and the resulting overexploitation of natural resources will lead inevitably to ecological disaster. To prove his point, he engages in a thought experiment: imagine, he says, a group of herdsman who share a grazing area. Each man owns a herd of cattle, but none of them owns the land on which the cattle graze; it is a grazing commons. It is to the individual advantage of each herdsman, Hardin argues, to continually add more cattle to his stock, even though the cumulative effect of each herdsman adding more cattle will eventually lead to depletion of the commons through overgrazing. The benefit of adding cattle accrues immediately to the individual owners of the herds, while the cost of degrading the pasture is borne in the long term by all the herdsman as a whole (Hardin 1968). Under Hardin’s logic, an individual herder who chooses not to add cattle out of concern for the long-term ecological consequences is a “sucker”, since other herders will inevitably continue to profit by adding more cattle (Ostrom 1990). “Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit — in a world that is limited,” Hardin writes, in an oft-quoted passage. “Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons.

Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all” (1244). For Hardin, individuals acting in their own rational self-interest will inevitably lead to the depletion of the commons. Hardin’s idea that resources held in common would inevitably lead to tragic outcomes has been enormously influential, becoming “the dominant framework within which social scientists portray environmental and resource issues” (quoted in McCay and Acheson 1987 1).

But the framework has begun to crack. Since the mid-1980s, two streams of thought have emerged that take the commons seriously as a way to manage resources. The first stream focuses on the commons as workable property regime. Concerned with “common property regimes,” or CPRs, researchers have in thousands of studies documented cases of contemporary functioning commons around the world. The cases they study range from mountain meadow tenure systems in Switzerland to irrigation collectives in the Philippines. Particularly in the earlier years of CPR work, a commons was defined as a natural resource that was not owned by a single individual, and that was managed collectively by its users (or “appropriators”). Such a commons is marked by its subtractability – that is, its resources can be depleted by overuse, hence the need for management. Traits of successful common-pool resource regimes include the following: the commons is clearly bounded, as is the membership in the commons; appropriators help establish and modify the rules of the collective management, and these rules are well-matched to local needs and conditions; appropriators monitor the commons and the behavior of fellow appropriators, apply graduated sanctions for those who break rules, and have mechanisms for resolving conflict; and external authorities (e.g., the government) do not interfere with the collective management (Ostrom 1990). Over time, “common property regimes” research has been reframed as “common pool resources” study (also known by the CPR acronym), and more recently CPR researchers have evinced an interest in “the commons” more broadly, in order to

think beyond the framework of property per se. Much of the commons management scholarship has focused on five arenas: fisheries, forests, irrigation systems, water management, and animal husbandry, all of which may be loosely described as “natural resources” commons (van Laerhoven and Ostrom 2007). Mainstream recognition of the importance of theorizing the commons as workable self-managed property regimes arrived in 2009, when political scientist Elinor Ostrom received the Nobel Prize in Economics for her work (Uchitelle 2009).

The second stream of commons thought is less concerned with the empirical details of commons management in particular locales, and is more concerned with what the commons means politically on a larger scale. This stream of thought, which is deeply enmeshed with the alterglobalization movement, is associated with the rallying cry, *reclaim the commons*. The commons, for this group, is constituted by a vast mesh of resources and goods that, it is argued, are collectively produced and should therefore be freely available to all who participate in society – and not just to those with the wealth to buy them (Klein 2001; Starhawk 2004; Harvey 2005). This focus on the commons, Caffentzis argues, emerged historically from the disintegration of communist governments symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. People began to acknowledge that, while the market could not be relied upon to provide for all, the state could not necessarily be relied upon to care for them either. The commons, in contrast, could provide a way towards social structures that provided a basis of life for people in a participatory, democratic way (Caffentzis 2010). This stream of thought has a more global perspective than the CPR approach. To reclaim and reinvent the commons in the global North, Mies and Benholdt-Thomsen argue, requires also defending them in the global South. And embracing a commons approach, they and other argue, requires scaling back the consumption to

which citizens of the global North are accustomed, in order to create a more ecologically and socially sustainable world (Mies and Benholdt-Thomsen 2001).

Broadly speaking, each of these two perspectives considers separate aspects of the commons. Alterglobalization theorists are concerned with the reclamation of the commons, and do not do much work that addresses the particulars of long-term maintenance of the commons they hope to reclaim. CPR theorists, on the other hand, are not particularly concerned with how commons are formed, and are more concerned with how they are maintained over time. The theoretical gap between the politics of commons formation or reclamation and the everyday work of their long-term maintenance is one I hope to begin to fill with my research.

Though the two streams of commons thought differ in their approaches to documenting and theorizing the commons, they share an underlying critique of the tragedy of the commons narrative. The critique, at its basis, is that Hardin conceives of the commons as a thing – a physical space, a set of resources – while in fact the commons is a social process. This confusion of thing and process allows commons naysayers to conflate *commons* and *open-access property regimes*. For Hardin, a commons is defined by its nature as an open-access resource; that is, open to exploitation by anyone. To the contrary, many scholars have argued, a commons is *not* necessarily open to all; it is often only open to a certain group of people, and those people make sure to regulate it in order to ensure its long-term sustainability (Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop 1975; McCay and Acheson 1987; Bromley 1991; Bollier 2002). The fishermen of 19<sup>th</sup> century Naples, for example, belonged to groups that regulated access to the urban sea commons. One of these groups, a religious association of fishermen called the Confraternity Santa Caterina dell'Arte, “established the size and shape of tools, fishing seasons, the size and weight requirements of the catch, and finally, imposed fines for infringements. When those from other

districts sought to break those rules, reactions were quite severe, including the burning of boats or even shootings” (Armiero 2011 23). The Confraternity Santa Caterina dell’Arte and other Neapolitan fishing groups were not open to all; and nor was the urban sea commons they (sometimes violently) regulated. Agricultural economists Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop, who theorize self-regulation of the commons, go so far as to argue that a commons is only really a commons *if* it is self-managed by a closed group of users. Perfectly open-access resources would not, for them, constitute a commons; a commons is necessarily closed. They are therefore defining a commons by how is it managed, not as an a priori existing *thing*. As Linebaugh writes:

“To speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst – the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature” (2008 279).

This emphasis on the social nature of commons enables an understanding of commons that are explicitly created by humans, including the immaterial world of ideas and the built environment of cities. In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, commons research has turned in part to the “new” commons, with a focus, most notably, on the internet and the digital and knowledge commons (Hess 2000; Dolšak and Ostrom 2003; Hess and Ostrom 2007). The new commons are characterized by their human-made nature, as opposed to the “natural” nature of the “old” commons (Hess 2000). The knowledge commons cannot be physically bounded; nor is it marked by the subtractability that defines natural resource commons. To the contrary, when one uses knowledge, one not only does not take away from the knowledge commons; one adds to it (Hess and Ostrom 2007). In recent years the commons has also been much more broadly theorized by alterglobalization theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who prefer the term

“the common” (Hardt and Negri 2004; Hardt and Negri 2009).<sup>3</sup> The common, they argue, is both a source of wealth and the means of producing wealth; it is the basis of life. Hardt and Negri seize on the city (they prefer the word “metropolis”) as the locus of the common. But while they make a good argument for the city-as-*common* (more on this in the next section), they do little to explicate what an urban *commons* might be, and how it could work in everyday life.

Hardt and Negri argue that the organization of work and production is immanent to the common, and does not exist in a separate sphere. Federici agrees, but her critique is that Hardt and Negri do not deal sufficiently with social reproduction. She is critical generally of the tendency in the alterglobalization stream of commons theorization to be concerned more with the commons in a formal theoretical sense and less in the material way the commons can be used to support everyday existence. As she writes:

“[W]ith its emphasis on knowledge and information, [Hardt and Negri’s] theory skirts the question of the reproduction of everyday life. This, however, is true of the discourse on the commons as a whole, which is mostly concerned with the formal preconditions for the existence of commons and less with the material requirements for the construction of a commons-based economy enabling us to resist dependence on wage labor and subordination to capitalist relations” (Federici 2010 4).

The city provides an excellent opportunity for answering Federici’s call to ground commons research in specific material needs and social relations. In my research, I aim to combine the empirical approach of the CPR researchers with the political perspective of the alterglobalization theorists. Ultimately I want to see what possibilities can be opened up by a theory of the urban commons, and to understand how the concept can be put to work, practically and politically.

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<sup>3</sup> Hardt and Negri speak not of the *commons*, but of the *common*. They explain the distinction: “We are reluctant to call this the commons because that term refers to pre-capitalist shared spaces that were destroyed by the advent of private property. Although more awkward, ‘the common’ highlights the philosophical content of the term and emphasizes that this is not a return to the past but a new development” (2004 xv). I disagree that the commons are a thing of the past; my point in this paper is that they exist and are produced continuously. However, though I am concerned with the commons, when referring to Hardt and Negri’s ideas, I use the term “the common” to be consistent with their work.

### **Why an urban commons?**

Though urban space has been included in the definition of the “new” commons (Hess 2000), little work has been done to theorize a specifically urban commons. A number of researchers have written about commons that exist in cities, including the urban sea commons of Naples, referenced above, along with work on urban brownfields commons and urban commons in Ethiopia and South Africa (Clapp and Meyer 2000; Kassa 2008; Mandizadza 2008). While this work provides good case studies of commons in cities in particular places, it does not theorize the urban commons more broadly, or ask why the term “urban commons” might be useful. Pointing to this lack, a number of scholars have called for more attention to and better theorization of the urban commons (Blomley 2008; Bravo and De Moor 2008; McShane 2010; Foster 2011). Recently, Harvey has theorized the urban commons broadly. While Harvey finds the concept of the commons promising, he is concerned with elucidating how the commons can “jump scale” and work at macro levels (Harvey 2012). Two other geographers, Nick Blomley and Efrat Eizenberg, have done empirical research investigating the urban commons from a critical standpoint.

Blomley examines the case of a building in downtown Vancouver that had once been a department store called Woodward’s, and then sat vacant for years. A developer wanted to turn the building into condominiums; community members wanted it for their own collective use, plastering it with graffiti crying, “Give it back!” and “This building is not for sale. It belongs to the community.” Blomley sees the community’s demand for the building as connected to fears of enclosure, and conceives of Woodward’s as a form of urban commons. Woodward’s, Blomley argues, is not an instrumental commons, like the commons the CPR researchers

describe; rather, it is a “moral and political commons, justified and enacted through a language of rights and justice” (Blomley 2008 318). Also against the CPR theorists, he argues that if private property is the right to exclude, then common property is the right to not be excluded (see also Macpherson 1978); for Blomley, it appears, a commons is necessarily open-access. And a commons is also, he writes, a “form of place-making” (320). A commons is as much a discursive as a material construction, created through narrative as well as through use (see also Rose 1994; Gibson-Graham 2006). Yet though Blomley addresses the question of the commons carefully, and is clearly working in an urban context, he does not ask why it is important that the commons he theorizes is urban. Is there something about a specifically urban commons that makes it a different beast, theoretically and materially, from the commons more broadly conceived? Blomley does not say.

Eizenberg’s work is with community gardens in New York City. Community gardens are perhaps the clearest manifestation of commons in cities. They are spaces, originally owned by private or governmental entities, that have been reclaimed by neighborhood residents who work collectively to grow things, including food for their families. Eizenberg argues that community gardens are “actually existing commons” that flourish in the midst of the “actually existing neoliberalism” of the contemporary city (Eizenberg 2011). These spaces are relatively easy to conceive of as commons because they tend to be collectively managed by the gardeners, are open for all to enjoy (at least during certain hours), and are valued for their use (growing food and serving as a community center) rather than for their potential monetary exchange on the market. A commons, though it may generate wealth, is not treated as a commodity by its members. This, Nonini argues, is what distinguishes a commons from private property (Nonini 2007). Like

Blomley, Eizenberg fleshes out an instantiation of a commons that exists in a city, but she does not theorize what about a specifically urban commons might be important.

But is it necessary to theorize a specifically urban commons? One could argue that it is more politically powerful to theorize the commons as broadly as possible, rather than enclosing the idea into separate spheres, resulting in the “sea commons,” the “knowledge commons,” the “digital commons,” the “urban commons,” and on and on. One could even speak, as Hardt and Negri do, of the “common” instead of the “commons,” a word which in its grand singularity renders the idea of collective resources even more wide open. Yet cities are marked by three particular traits that, if closely analyzed, I argue can enrich the theorization of the commons more broadly.

One, cities are places of relatively intense competition over land. Cities have relatively high densities of human population. A relatively large number of humans on a relatively small amount of space means that people are more forced to share (or compete for) resources. As Sundaresan puts it in his work on the urban commons of a lake in Bangalore, India, urban life is marked by “intense sharing of various kinds of resources that support individual and communal capacities” (2011). As noted, much of the research on practices of the commons has been conducted in rural or maritime areas, where human populations are relatively sparse. But as of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, most of the world’s people live in cities (United Nations Population Fund 2007). When people live together in a densely populated area, so the narrative goes, the competition for scarce resources is ratcheted up. In many cases, of course, scarcity is socially created. Resources that are declared “scarce” may in fact be much more available than is made apparent by private owners and the state. Still, is there not at some point a limit to resources, and

a limit to what the commons can provide? Investigating the commons in cities provides a good opportunity to test this question.

Two, because cities are densely populated and co-created by a diversity of people, they are necessarily sites of conflict (Sennett 1970). In a city, different ideas of the commons – ideas about who should manage which commons, and how – come into conflict. Cities are places where a wide variety of people live together, in contrast to a village in which people may share more in terms of background and values. As discussed, community gardens have been theorized as a form of commons in the city (Linn 2007; Foster 2011). Yet in New York City’s Lower East Side in the 1980s, community gardens were seen as taking up land that could be used for a different form of commons: affordable housing (Schmelzkopf 1995). Commons, Harvey insists, are always contested. “One commons,” he writes, “... may need to be protected at the expense of another” (2011 102). In a city, the potential conflict among commons becomes obvious. Conflict within and among commons is an important practical and theoretical task to take up; with the city as our focus, this task is unavoidable.

Finally, the city itself is the locus of the commons conceived more broadly. At its core, the city is the physical manifestation of a collectively generated surplus; cities came into being as places to store a society’s wealth (Harvey 2008). For Hardt and Negri, the metropolis is what generates the common. The metropolis is where people come together and encounter each other in unexpected ways, and work together to create culture. For Hardt and Negri, the metropolis does not just create the common; it also *is* the common. The city, they write, “is the source of the common and the receptacle into which it flows” (2009 154).

Hardt and Negri explain the urban common with the concept of externalities. The externality, a key concept of mainstream economics, is an effect of a system that cannot be

contained by the system. Externalities can be negative (high crime rates) or positive (a good neighborhood school). If crime rates are high, all residents of a given area are potentially in danger of being victims of crime, no matter who creates it; conversely, if the neighborhood has a good public school, all children who live there may attend it, no matter how involved their parents may or may not be in the school's PTA. The value of real estate, particularly in cities, is determined far more by things "external" to a given piece of property, like crime rates and school systems, than in the actual quality of the lot, house, or building in question. Externalities, write Hardt and Negri, are an expression of what a society creates collectively: the common. Real estate values are determined primarily by externalities – in other words, determined by location. And "[l]ocation," they conclude, "is merely a name for proximity and access to common wealth" (2009 156). Harvey makes much the same point about the value of urban land: the bulk of this value is not individually produced by the owner of the land, but is generated collectively by society (1972). But in a capitalist real estate market, a "good location" – one with access to socially-created goods and services – can only be purchased by the highest bidders, and the poor are pushed to the edges. A fairer system, Hardt and Negri and Harvey all seem to argue, would be one in which increases in land value flowed less to the individual owners of land, who did little to make the increases happen, and more to the society that has enabled the value to increase, through factors "external" to the land in question. Of course, society is made up of the actions of individuals; individuals may be able to effect rises in property values through, for example, opening art galleries that make the neighborhood more appealing for new investors (Zukin 1982; Smith 1996). But a gallery, to continue with this example, only succeeds because of the social world that constitutes it – the people who attend openings, the artists who display work, the critics who write about the space and encourage art-lovers to venture into an as-yet-

unknown neighborhood. The apparently lone individual who opens the gallery, I would argue, relies on deeply enmeshed social networks for success. If property values increase in the neighborhood because of the gallery's presence, it is therefore difficult to attribute the increase in wealth to the work of the individual gallerist. The common is what generates wealth, and to the common wealth should therefore return. And in cities, the process of wealth generation and distribution through the common is amplified. Because of these three particular qualities of cities – intense pressures over land, heterogeneity of population, and the function they serve as both the source and the manifestation of societal wealth – it is crucial to develop a theory of the urban commons.

### **The urban commons and the work of self-governance**

The commons is an easily romanticized idea, but it is not necessarily an idyllic socio-economic form. Here, I first address two major critiques of the commons framework, and then discuss the role of work and self-governance in the commons.

One critique deals with the relationship between the commons and capitalism: this critique is that the commons framework can be used to advance capitalism just as well as to dissolve it. While Caffentzis, for example, is a champion of what he terms the anti-capitalist commons, he argues that the commons can also be a framework that supports capitalism. Capitalism, as Marx pointed out, depends on the cooperative labor of individuals (Marx 1973). Yet capitalism also encourages a highly individualistic, competitive mode of being. If, Caffentzis argues, “everyone acted like a perfect neoliberal agent aiming to maximize his/her own private utility function,” the cooperative basis on which any social system necessarily rests would disintegrate, and much monetary wealth would be lost (2010 23). As Nobel Prize-winning

economist Kenneth Arrow argues, the decidedly “non-economic” concept of *trust* is a key basis of economic transactions: “Virtually every commercial transaction,” he writes, “has within itself an element of trust” (1972 357). Trust, it appears, emerges from and is itself a common that is necessary for capitalism to work. From a capitalist perspective, the commons framework encourages the cooperative, mutually trusting labor necessary to capitalist accumulation, helping to save capitalism from its own self-destructive tendencies. The danger, for Caffentzis, is that the commons plays the role of “Neoliberalism’s ‘Plan B:’” commons as back-up plan when capitalism is in crisis (Caffentzis 2010).

I agree with Caffentzis (and Marx) that capitalism relies on people working cooperatively, so in that sense capitalism depends on a commons form of management. But this may be a good thing: it allows the realization that the commons is such a ubiquitous framework that even mainstream capitalist practices depend upon its logic. The next step is to realize that people who can work in common do not need a higher authority above them; and that they themselves can determine how to use the surplus they collectively create. Part of the work of commons scholars, then, is to point out the myriad ways in which commons practices already course through society – and importantly, the way in which they show up everywhere in contemporary, Western society, not just in ancient time or among more “primitive” cultures. In his study of how northeastern U.S. fishermen collectively self-regulate their fishing waters, St. Martin emphasizes the need to document how people work in common amidst capitalist practices; and how this collective work changes participants’ economic subjectivities, such that they begin to recognize themselves as economic subjects existing in realms other than capitalism (St. Martin 2009). When cooperative work is framed as a story of the commons, St. Martin and

other diverse economies scholars argue, the narrative can open up new ways of thinking about how to engage in economic practices.

The second critique deals with the relationship between the commons and the state: this critique is that the commons can be used to absolve the state of its responsibility to care for its citizens. In examining urban commons in Australia, McShane warns that the resurgence of the commons could also serve to sneak in the “Trojan horse” of a regressive anti-state agenda. To embrace the collective self-provisioning of the commons can be, in a sense, to tell the state it isn’t necessary (McShane 2010). Movements of self-provisioning – that reject state care in favor of a self-help, do-it-yourself approach – are often critiqued for letting the state off the hook. In an analysis of self-help housing in New York City and Berlin in the 1980s, Katz and Mayer argue that self-help movements help members gain autonomy while providing a democratic challenge to state bureaucracy and meeting their own material needs. But these movements are also quite convenient for a neoliberal state. As they write:

“From the point of view of the state, self-help represents not only a partial solution to fiscal crisis tendencies – through the use of state clients’ non-monetized labour – but also a new structure for reshaping and disciplining the normative orientations of citizens. That is, self-help is represented as a form of social self-maintenance and self-policing” (1985 17).

Katz and Mayer are examining movements of collective self-help in the 1980s: tenant takeovers of buildings abandoned by landlords in New York City, and squatters movements in what was then West Berlin. What tenants and squatters in New York City and West Berlin were doing was seizing and maintaining a commons. In doing so, they provided for themselves, in more or less democratic ways. But in putting their energies towards providing for themselves rather than towards petitioning the state for better housing, they essentially gave up on the possibility of a welfare state, and shouldered more responsibilities themselves. They gained a

great deal from this, materially and socially (Kolodny and Gellerman 1973; Leavitt and Saegert 1990). But in embracing the commons and rejecting the state, they are taking a tremendous risk: that they will be able to care for themselves collectively in the long term, without the state's assistance. This tension between committing to collective self-provisioning and/or placing demands on the state is difficult to tease out and resolve.

Caffentzis is concerned that capitalism can use work-in-common to support its own growth; McShane and Katz and Mayer worry that people working in common may absolve the state of its duty to protect its citizens. Both of these warnings about the commons are in essence about the problem of work. In both cases, the warning is that the collective work of the commons can be coopted: in the first instance by capitalism, or in the second instance by the state. The work of the commons, these scholars are arguing, can become self-exploitative (more on this below). It makes sense that warnings about the commons would be based in questions of work, because the commons, I argue, is at its core *about work*. The commons, as I and others argue, is a social process and not an inert thing, and the social process involved – in reclaiming, maintaining, and even expanding the commons – is work.

The idea of working collectively to maintain common resources is not new. Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari have theorized “public work” as work that expands the democratic process and builds the “commonwealth” of society. They trace the history of public work in the United States, examining efforts like the land-grant college system, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and settlement houses. Taking care of the commons, they argue, is one of the purposes of public work (1996). Public work is not necessarily paid, and can take many forms. For instance, the unpaid “leisure” work of maintaining a community garden can be a way to build a neighborhood commons and foster cross-racial understanding (Shinew, Glover et al. 2004), thereby improving

the ability to make collective decisions in a democratic manner in arenas beyond the garden. Public work is necessary for making, reclaiming, managing and expanding the commons. And for Boyte and Kari, engaging in public work is essential for democracy. They quote Simone Weil to this point, who in the 1930s wrote admiringly of the relationship between collective work and democracy:

“[A] team of workers on a production-line under the eye of a foreman is a sorry spectacle, where it is a fine sight to see a handful of workmen in the building trade, checked by some difficulty, ponder the problem each for himself, make various suggestions for dealing with it, and then apply unanimously the method conceived by one of them, who may or may not have any official authority over the remainder. At such moments the image of a free community appears almost in its purity” (in Boyte and Kari 1996 212).

Weil’s description is of a community of people who have learned to work together in non-coercive, non-hierarchical ways. It is through doing this kind of collective work of the commons, I argue, that people may learn to collectively self-govern. Democracy, as Dewey, Jefferson and others have noted, is learned by doing (Dewey 1916; Hardt 2007). For Hardt, what made Jefferson so radical was that he believed people could learn to self-govern through engaging in the act of self-governance. This, Hardt argues, was in contrast to the thinking of a fellow revolutionary, Lenin, who believed that people needed a “transition period” between a revolution and true self-governance, during which an elite group would lead people in learning to eventually govern themselves (Hardt 2007). Hardt takes Jefferson’s ideas and applies them to the idea of the common. The common, he and Negri argue, is both the means and the end of democracy (2009). And, I argue, it follows that it is through laboring together in managing the commons that people learn how to “do” democracy.

The challenge of self-governance in the urban commons is intimately bound up with the question of time. Capitalism structures people’s lives in such ways that they seem to have little

time to participate in the development, management, and expansion of the commons. Under capitalism, time is reduced to a medium of exchange: time is broken into pieces (e.g. a “workday”) that can be bought and sold on the market. Time becomes a precious commodity that is carefully doled out. Commons members are busy working in paid and unpaid realms, raising children, and dealing with the details of their lives. The effort to govern in common, to add yet another task to their already overburdened lives, could be seen as a form of self-exploitation. Yet somehow the effort to collectively self-govern must still be made.

The time of the commons is different from capitalist time. Lefebvre contrasts linear capitalist time with the time of everyday life: this is a time of cycles and recurrences, of seasons, a time that repeats and cannot be accounted for. As an example of the time of everyday life, Lefebvre posits music:

“Music is movement, flow, time, and yet it is based on recurrence; all transmissible themes are potentially recurrent ... There can be recurrence of motif, of theme and of combined intervals in a melody. Emotions and feelings from the past are re-evoked and moments recalled by and through music (and by the imagination and art in general)” (Lefebvre 2007 [1971] 19).

Like music, the time of self-governance in the commons is everyday – it is cyclical and repeats. As will be seen in future chapters, this is the cyclical time of housework and childrearing, of work that has historically been done by women. Embracing the commons as a political concept requires faith in the ability of ordinary people to create the time to do the work of self-governing: to break, to a certain extent, from capitalist time. As will be seen in the case of limited-equity housing cooperatives introduced below, many people raised in a society of landlords are not used to self-governance in housing, and are sometimes frustrated by the time it takes to govern their own living spaces. Recognizing these facts while nevertheless working to enlarge the ability of ordinary people to self-govern must be part of the project to realize the

commons in everyday life. In fact, I argue that the act of realizing the commons is precisely this: realizing the ability to collectively self-govern collective resources. Ultimately, successful self-governance of the urban commons is intertwined with the ability of members to realize new forms of non-capitalist time; I return to this idea in my final chapter.

### **Housing as an urban commons: the case of limited-equity housing cooperatives**

Limited-equity cooperatives, I argue, are a manifestation of the commons. I define limited-equity cooperatives as a commons because they fit the two main traits of the commons: collective ownership and noncommodification. First, LECs are collectively owned and managed by their members. LECs share the trait of collective ownership and/or management with many other housing forms, like market-rate cooperatives and condominiums, homeowners associations, and gated communities, all of which have also been theorized as commons (Nelson 2005). But to conceive of the latter forms of housing as commons, I argue, is incorrect, because these are all commodified housing forms. For the second trait of the commons is that they are valued by their members for their everyday use rather than their potential exchange value. A limited-equity co-op, unlike other forms of collective homeownership and management, is structured to remove the profit motive from housing. The value of the housing is in its use, not in its exchange; it has been decommodified.

Limited-equity cooperatives, I argue, also fit my definition of the *urban* commons. One, they are commons that exist in an environment of relatively intense pressures on land, manifested by the fact that they normally take the physical form of apartment buildings, a form designed to maximize efficiency of space usage. The greater pressure on land values in cities vis a vis non-urban areas translates into greater pressure on commons that exist in cities than those in rural areas. Two, LECs are commons that tend to be populated with members who don't

necessarily have anything in common other than the fact that they all used to be renters in the same apartment building. Though they may share similar income levels, they do not enter the commons with a particular shared background or politics. These are unintentional communities, and therefore more difficult to enact than a commons in a more rural area in which people presumably have more in common. Importantly, an LEC serves as a commons for its current members, but also serves as an affordable housing stock for future, as-yet-unknown members. While in some LECs, new members gain access to the housing through family and community ties, LEC membership is open to a wide array of strangers. Being open to incorporating strangers as members is part of the heterogeneity of the urban commons. Because LECs exist in a climate of relatively intense land pressures and heterogeneity of membership, they form a distinctly urban commons.

In my research, I investigate the urban commons as manifested by a group of ten current and former limited-equity housing cooperatives in Washington, D.C. Through a thick examination of these co-ops, I seek to understand the work involved in enacting the urban commons. Collective self-management is no easy task; this may particularly be the case for co-op members who are accustomed to renting from private landlords, or have lived much of their lives in city-run public housing. The urban commons require constant work, and they sometimes collapse. Yet a commons that thrives can provide its members with a steady basis for their lives, as well as the opportunity to learn collective self-governance. In my research, I ask co-op members how they understand their unique form of ownership, how they participate in collective self-governance of their housing, what obstacles they face in maintaining their housing, and what benefits they receive from membership in their housing commons. In the end, my research does two things: it explains the experiences of low-income people who participate in a particular

manifestation of the urban commons, LEC housing in Washington, D.C.; and it helps theorize the urban commons more broadly as a subject for further investigation.

## **Conclusion**

The real “tragedy of the commons,” Blomley writes, is “less its supposed internal failures as its external invisibility” (Blomley 2008 322). Yet the commons exist, often in plain sight, in the thick of the capitalist “growth machine” that is the city (Molotch 1976). Capitalism, Gibson-Graham argue, is not a monolithic being that swallows up the whole world and frames every experience. Rather, capitalist economic structures have always been shot through with the “ethical spaces of decision-making” that constitute the (noncapitalist) commons (Gibson-Graham 2006). The task at hand is to recognize the commons that already exist, learn how people are reclaiming and managing them, figure out how to expand them, and theorize how doing the work of reclaiming, maintaining and expanding the commons can help create more just and democratic cities. A theory of the urban commons, I argue, would explicitly address the challenges of forming commons in cities: places of relatively intense competition over land and resources, and places of relatively heterogeneous populations. In the next chapter, I examine how scholars are studying the commons, and how I have designed my own research on the urban commons.

### Chapter 3: Studying the Commons

In order for the commons to be taken seriously as a place of political possibility, more research is needed on how actually existing commons form, continue, and even collapse. As seen in the last chapter, study of the commons has been approached in two ways: from a largely economic standpoint, exemplified by the CPR theorists; and from a largely political standpoint, exemplified by the alterglobalization theorists. The CPR approach has most commonly made use of fine-grained case studies of commons. The alterglobalization approach has most commonly theorized the commons more broadly. But a combination of approaches is necessary. A good way to understand both the political possibilities and everyday realities of the urban commons, I argue, is to use a grounded theory approach based in case study research, in which cases inform the building of larger theory. In this chapter, I lay out an approach to studying the urban commons that I hope will be useful to other scholars interested in similar research. I begin with my research question, and then move to a discussion of grounded theory. Next, I detail my case study approach, which included four distinct methods: quantitative analysis, archival work, in-depth interviews, and direct and participant observation. Finally, I conclude with discussion of the need for thick description of the commons.

#### **Research question**

How does the urban commons function? This is the overarching question of my research. The question requires theorizing what I mean by the urban commons and why I consider limited-equity housing cooperatives to be a form of urban commons; and ultimately it requires theorizing the work of the urban commons. I began my research, however, with a smaller question: what are the benefits and costs of living in limited-equity cooperatives? The latter question is

important because the jury is still out on the value of limited-equity cooperatives as an affordable housing model. Some policymakers and theorists argue that removing homeownership from the speculative market is a good way to ensure long-term affordability; others argue that the resale restrictions inherent in this form of ownership deny low-income homeowners the ability to build wealth, thus denying them one of the main benefits of homeownership (Davis 2006). As I described in Chapter 1, I was privy to an up-close observation of this argument as it raged in Washington, D.C. during the housing boom of 2004-05, when affordable housing advocates were debating the extent to which the city should enact resale restrictions on newly developed affordable housing. But though advocates on either side of the issue offered heated arguments, it did not appear that anyone was asking people who owned and lived in resale-restricted housing – people like limited-equity cooperative members – about what they themselves thought about the question of wealth building. I determined, therefore, to investigate the question of how limited-equity co-op members understood the benefits and the costs of their particular form of housing – and, more specifically, to find out why they valued a form of homeownership that would never provide them with direct financial gain. But because I used a grounded theory approach to my research, my question shifted and grew over time, to the larger question of the work of the urban commons.

### **Grounded theory**

The idea behind grounded theory is to begin with data, and see how theory emerges from the data, rather than beginning with theory, and testing whether data fits a hypothesis based on the theory. The grounded theory approach was first developed by sociologists Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s, and played a critical role in sociology's "qualitative revolution." Grounded

theory requires an iterative research process: one shifts back and forth between analyzing data and constructing theory. Some of the tenets of grounded theory include simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis; deriving categories from data, not from preconceived ideas or hypotheses; comparing data at each stage of the analysis, instead of waiting until the end; doing theoretical work throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data; and conducting a literature review *after* analysis of the data has begun (Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2008). Approaching research by grounding theory construction in data provides a way to tease out realities that might be missed were one to begin with an overarching theory. Basing commons research in grounded theory, I believe, is a smart way to elucidate the as-yet-unknown complexities of the commons.

When I began my research, I did not know I was going to be investigating the urban commons; indeed, I had not developed an overarching theoretical framework at all (which admittedly was cause for quite some consternation). I was thinking more narrowly, in terms of my question about the costs and benefits of living in limited-equity cooperatives in Washington, D.C., and why co-op members valued this particular form of homeownership. It was not until after I began my interviews that I realized that these co-ops could be theorized as a manifestation of the commons – and, further, that they appeared to be a manifestation of an *urban* commons, a topic which had been little theorized in the research to date. While I continued with my original set of questions about how co-op members valued their housing, I also began asking more about how co-op members managed the commons of their collective housing resource. In keeping with the grounded theory approach, I developed my theoretical framework of the urban commons and wrote my literature review *after* I had begun conducting and analyzing interviews. As I continued with my interviews, I took note of the themes that emerged, and one of the most

consistent was the theme of work: the hard work of managing these cooperatives. The work of the urban commons, it became clear, would be a useful topic of study, and worthy of theorization.

### **Case study methods**

Grounded theory is a general approach to research design, but it does not define a particular methodology. In my research, I use a set of case studies as a lens for examining limited-equity co-ops in Washington, D.C. The case study method involves intensive focus on a small number of cases, and is particularly good for understanding complex processes that a larger-scale study might miss. The case study has been the principal method used by CPR theorists in their study of natural resources commons. In a recent book on researching the commons, prominent CPR theorists explain why the case study has been an important method:

“Case study research has... been a significant source of contributions related to collective action for the management of common-pool resources. By challenging the conventional wisdom related to property rights and possibilities for collective action, case studies reset the terms of the debate. Case studies contribute to theory building by directing attention to the complexity of relationships between social and ecological systems, and by facilitating efforts to disentangle these relationships” (Poteete, Janssen et al. 2010 45).

Case studies, as indicated here, lend themselves well to a grounded theory approach. Through case studies, a researcher may discover truths that disrupt established understandings of the way the world works. For the CPR researchers, performing detailed case studies on how people managed natural resources allowed them to see that resources could be regulated by people without the institutions of private individual or state property. “Case studies left little doubt,” Poteete, Janssen et al. continue, “that, contrary to theoretical expectations, collective action on the commons *is* possible and *not* merely a vestigial form” (2010 46, emphasis in original).

The principal critiques of the case study method are that it can be difficult to generalize a larger truth from a small number of cases, and it can be difficult to replicate the research. While I concede that my research would be difficult to replicate, I argue that case studies can, in fact, illuminate larger truths. Case studies explain the mechanisms that produce a phenomenon: in this case, my cases studies explain the work necessary for producing the urban commons. While case studies may not be statistically representative, they can be theoretically representative (George and Bennett 2005).

I decided to focus on ten case studies of current and former limited-equity cooperatives. I selected a sample to encompass a diversity of co-op size, geography, age, and demographics. Seven of the projects are current, ongoing LECs, one converted to a market-rate condominium ownership structure, one converted to a market-rate cooperative structure, and one now sits empty and boarded up after having briefly converted to market-rate condominium. The projects range in size from 4 to 90 units. They are located in six of the city's eight wards. They were founded between the years of 1979 and 2004. A few are virtually entirely African-American; several have high concentrations of immigrants from the Caribbean, Central America and Africa; two have significant white populations. Some are mostly low-income and working-class, while others are home to middle-income people as well, and one has significant numbers of middle-class residents. I reached out to four of the co-ops through my personal connections with co-op members that I had made through my previous professional work with limited-equity co-ops; and to five through recommendations made by a lawyer, a developer, and an organizer who had helped many LECs form. The tenth project is one where I myself live.

Case study data collection often combines interviews, focus groups, observation, and archival work, and can also involve survey distribution or other data collection. I used four

principal methods: quantitative analysis (including spatial analysis), archival work, in-depth interviewing, and observation (both direct and participant). I examine each method, and how I made use of it, in turn.

### *Quantitative analysis*

Quantitative analysis can provide an understanding of the broader context for in-depth case studies. I thought it important to conduct quantitative analysis of the experience of D.C. LECs at the scale of the city as a whole. The first phase of my research was therefore to put together a complete list of all the limited-equity co-ops that had ever existed in the city since the law encouraging their formation was passed in 1980. One of the early challenges of my research was simply coming up with a complete list of D.C. LECs. Because the city office that handles tenant purchase suffered what its director called a “catastrophic data loss” in the late 1990s, the city could not give me complete information for co-ops founded in the twenty years between 1980 and 2000. Given that the tenant purchase law is nearly unique in the United States – and the city administration knew they that they were being pioneers when they crafted this legislation – it is rather unbelievable that no effort was taken to track the co-ops that were funded over the years, and to ensure that this data was kept safe. I spent many months tracking down data for limited-equity co-ops in the city, and ultimately came up with a conservative list of 134 projects. There are several dozen more addresses that are “likely” LECs, but the existence of which I could not confirm. Quantitative analysis allowed me to determine survival rates for LECs in the city, and determine actual affordability levels of LECs compared to rental housing. Without this basic analysis of LEC affordability and survival over time, my positioning of LECs as urban commons would be weak.

As part of my quantitative analysis, I conducted spatial analysis of all 134 co-ops, in order to determine patterns of location (see Appendix 2). I selected my ten sample projects based in part on an attempt both represent the spatial concentrations of co-ops in the city, and also to cover a wide range of neighborhoods.

### *Archival work*

Archival work can help determine the contexts out of which the commons arise. Understanding the social and political history of a place can help a researcher see why commons may have been reclaimed in particular places. Though the information available in an archives is necessarily incomplete, archives can be an importance source of historic primary documents that cannot be found anywhere else (Hill 1993).

I began my research into the commons in the archives: both the literal archives in the local public library, and the stacks of paper in the offices of many individuals who had helped limited-equity co-ops form in D.C. since 1980. I used the records of lawyers, tenant organizers, and nonprofit housing developers to help put together the data set of all the limited-equity co-ops that were ever formed in the city of Washington, D.C., described above.

I conducted much of my historical research into my ten case studies in local archives in Washington, D.C. – principally in the Washingtoniana Division of the city’s central public library, the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library. As a (somewhat) separate project, I worked in 2009-10 to organize the papers of Washington Inncity Self Help, or WISH, an organization that existed over the years 1978-2003, and spent much of its most active time working with low-income tenants, helping them purchase their buildings and form limited-equity cooperatives. I created this archive under the auspices of a local grassroots organization,

Empower D.C., that was founded in 2004 after the disintegration of WISH, and that retained two of WISH's staff members. My work was funded by a grant from the Humanities Council of Washington, D.C., and was aided by the help of an extremely capable library science archivist student, Lauren Kanne, who served as the project intern. WISH was involved in the formation of five of the ten projects in my sample, so having access to its papers, once I had finished organizing them, was quite useful to my research.

Archival research is, I think, particularly important given the time period during which many D.C. LECs were created: the late 1970s through the late 1990s. This is the time period right before the internet became the primary source of much information. There is almost zero information on D.C. LECs online, while, in the archives in which I worked, there are hundreds of folders containing hand-written notes, newspaper clippings, memos, flyers, staff reports, training materials, photographs, and other documents relating to the formation of limited-equity cooperatives in Washington, D.C.

### *In-depth interviews*

In-depth interviews allow a researcher to hear the life stories that collectively make up the phenomenon under investigation. The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to test theories, but to understand other people's experiences, and how they make meaning of those experiences; it is also to discover how things actually work in practice (Seidman 1991). Previous research into limited-equity co-ops indicates that, because so many LEC leaders tend to be women, a feminist approach to research makes sense. One element of feminist research is an emphasis on allowing the voices of those being studied to be heard (Saegert 1989); interviews are therefore an appropriate methodological choice for a feminist approach.

The bulk of my research is based on a series of 50 in-depth interviews conducted over the course of about a year. Ten of these interviews were with professionals – lawyers, developers, and organizers – who have helped LECs form in Washington, D.C. The remaining forty were with current and former members of D.C. LECs. I typically began my research at each project by interviewing the co-op president or another co-op leader, such as the tenant association president who helped form the co-op. In some cases, I began by interviewing the person I knew best in the co-op, even if this person was not formally a co-op leader. In most cases, I then asked this person to recommend other people in the co-op for me to interview. In eight cases, I interviewed between four and six members and leaders of each co-op. In one case (the case of the building that now stands vacant) I was only able to interview three people. Finally, in one case (a four-unit building that as of my research only had two occupants) I was only able to interview one member, though I was also able to interview the non-profit developer who helped found this co-op. My interviews were relatively open-ended and tended to last between an hour and an hour and a half. I conducted all but three in person (the remaining three I conducted over the phone). I tape recorded the 47 in-person interviews and then transcribed them.

I analyzed my transcripts slowly. While I started off using the qualitative software program Atlas-TI to analyze their responses, I found that repeatedly combing through the transcripts manually was a more effective way to elucidate themes. Eventually, I conceded that making sense of my hundreds of pages of transcripts would inevitably be a personal process. As Marshall writes,

“It’s my assumption that there is some sort of order in the data that can emerge. My job as a researcher is to be an open and receptive medium through which this order comes out. I’m trying to understand what’s there, and to represent what’s there in all its complexity and richness” (1981 395).

I, too, wanted to let order emerge, and did this through repeatedly soaking myself in the data. And I was keen to make use of the actual words people used to analyze their own situations, and to let individual respondents speak for themselves in these pages, albeit in circumscribed ways. For this reason, I have chosen to include relatively substantial blocks of text that I think capture the meaning of what my respondents shared with me in our interviews. Respondents' names have been changed to protect their identities; in addition, each quote is identified by interview number.

### ***Direct and participant observation***

Direct observation can be a crucial complement to interviewing, as evidence from direct observation can either support or challenge what people say in their interviews (Corbin and Strauss 2008). I engaged in direct observation of all ten of the co-ops and former co-ops in my sample. Interviews were normally conducted in the apartments of co-op members, co-op offices, or co-op community rooms, which gave me the opportunity to observe the material space of the co-op. (In the case of the one co-op in my sample that is now vacant, I interviewed one former member in her current rental apartment, and two others in the offices of a community organization that has helped LECs form in the city.) In addition, I attended co-op membership meetings of five of the seven LECs in my sample that still exist today. At these meetings, I was able to see how co-op members interacted, and how they talked to the group about various co-op matters.

When possible, participant observation is also an excellent way to understand the nuances of the commons. In his study of the commons in Vancouver, for instance, Blomley is an active participant, describing his own work to help paint a reclaimed abandoned building in downtown

(2008). Participant observation is useful in that it allows the researcher to understand the commons from the inside. I engaged in participant observation in one of the projects in my sample, which I moved into in August 2010. I was elected to the co-op board in August of 2011, and in that capacity have participated in monthly board meetings and occasional membership meetings, and have also participated in many issues that arise in between meetings. In this position, I am privy to the inner workings of the co-op at the smallest scale. Because I only engage in participant observation in one of the projects in my sample, I do not want to overemphasize what I have learned from this experience. This experience, however, has greatly deepened my appreciation for the work of the urban commons.

### **Thick description of the commons**

In surveying the research on commons, McCay and Jentoft conclude that descriptions of commons management regimes are either too thin or oversimplified. Thin description does not provide enough information about how a commons is actually self-regulated. Oversimplification may result in the commons being romanticized; a good narrative takes the place of more rigorous analysis. “Good story lines,” they write, “are easily applied to many situations with the risk of misrepresenting the more complex and shifting social, cultural, and ecological relationships and processes at stake” (1998 23). They call for using thick description in studying the commons. What I am after in my research is not a tidy story line with a neat conclusion. Rather, I want to explore the complexity of conceiving and managing the urban commons.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues that one can begin to understand culture through speaking with the people whom one is studying. But conversing with people who come from another culture, he writes, while it may seem simple enough, is actually quite difficult. Even if

one speaks their language fluently, one may still have great difficulty in comprehending them. In my research, I spoke the same language as the people I interviewed (most interviews were conducted in English; a few were conducted in Spanish, in which I am fluent). I grew up in and currently live in the city where all my respondents live; many of them grew up there as well. Yet culturally, we are worlds apart in important ways, most obviously in that most of my respondents are low- to moderate-income African-American women in their 50s and 60s. They have a different perspective than I, and most other middle-class researchers, have. Because, perhaps, of their different perspective on the world, they see home ownership quite differently from a middle-class person. “[T]he aim of anthropology,” Geertz writes in his essay on thick description, “is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse” (1973 14). I would argue that this is the aim of much of social science; it is certainly the aim of my own research.

I agree with McCay and Jentoft that thicker description of the commons is necessary. Appendix 1 tells the specific stories of each of the ten limited-equity co-ops and former LECs in my research. While this thick description is included as an appendix, my goal is that it supports the larger story of the commons in Washington, D.C. The history of any one of these projects could be fleshed out into a full-length paper. My hope is that I have been able to bring the stories of these ten co-ops and the perspectives of their members to life in a way that contributes to a theory of the urban commons. I hope that future scholars of the urban commons will take seriously the need for thick description. In the next chapter, I set the stage for a thick description of the commons by telling the story of the emergence of limited-equity housing cooperatives in Washington, D.C.

#### **Chapter 4: Reclaiming a Commons in Washington, D.C.: the Emergence of Limited-Equity Housing Cooperatives in the 1970s and 80s**

It was a warm spring day in 1978, and the Penn Branch Tenants Association was throwing a block party. The Penn Branch apartment complex, made up of six three-story buildings in the Glover Park neighborhood of Washington, D.C., was home to a diverse group of working class tenants. The previous Christmas Eve, they had been struck with crisis: that day, they had all received eviction notices in their mailboxes. Their landlord's plan was to tear down their buildings and erect ten-story luxury apartments in their place. But the tenants were determined to keep their housing, and organized the block party to build neighborhood support.

A *Washington Post* reported described the scene:

“Tenants and neighbors sat on the grass sipping beer and munching snacks as rock bands played and a mime entertained the children. [The tenant association president] said the block party had a more serious purpose. It was, she said, a show of solidarity with other tenants across the city who face evictions as their projects are withdrawn from the market for various reasons – typically, for costly remodeling, or conversion to condominiums” (Eisen 1978).

The Penn Branch tenants were successful in their quest: first, to stop the demolition of their buildings, and soon after, to buy the buildings collectively themselves. Though they wanted control over their housing, they did not want to own the buildings as condominiums. The city had been experiencing a rash of condominium conversions in the 1970s, resulting in the displacement of low-income renters, and the Penn Branch tenants did not want to participate in a housing form that they saw as harmful to working people. Instead, they decided to own Penn Branch as a limited-equity cooperative. A limited-equity co-op would give members control over their housing, but would limit the amount shares could be resold for, thus ensuring that the housing was kept affordable over the long term. The tenants purchased the building in 1979, making Penn Branch Cooperative perhaps the city's first limited-equity cooperative. The next

year the city council passed a law – partially informed by the experience of Penn Branch – giving all tenants the opportunity to purchase their buildings should their buildings go up for sale. This law, part of the Rental Housing Sale and Conversion Act of 1980, is commonly referred to as the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, or TOPA (Committee on the District of Columbia 1980).

When the tenants of Penn Branch banded together to buy their housing and create a limited-equity cooperative, I maintain, they were reclaiming a commons.<sup>4</sup> As I argued in Chapter 2, limited-equity co-ops are a form of commons in that they are owned and managed collectively by their members, and are valued not for their potential exchange on the market, but for the immediate use they provide their members as housing. When the D.C. government created the TOPA law in 1980, it enabled scores of tenants associations to reclaim a commons by removing their buildings from the private real estate market and owning them collectively as noncommodified housing. Importantly, LECs are set up with a long-term goal of maintaining housing as affordable over time, and for future, as-yet-unknown members, as well as for current ones. LECs in D.C., I argue, operate as a commons both at the scale of the individual cooperative, and at the scale of the city, as part of the housing stock the city considers to be affordable and available for housing low-income people.

I further argue that the political will to allow for the reclamation of a commons in the city was a product of the collision, in the mid-1970s, of questions of political self-representation and land speculation in the District of Columbia.<sup>5</sup> Washington, D.C. residents, because they live within a territory over which the U.S. Congress has direct jurisdiction, have long lacked

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<sup>4</sup> I write in terms of “reclaiming a commons” in order to emphasize the historical context of the commons and enclosure: land and resources were common at one point, and at a later point were enclosed for profit. The task is now to reclaim them.

<sup>5</sup> Following custom, I use the following names for the city interchangeably: Washington, D.C.; Washington; D.C.; the District of Columbia; and the District.

fundamental electoral rights granted to the residents of the fifty states, and therefore lack basic control over their own local affairs (Smith 1974; Jackson 1986; Meyers 1996). And because the city's economy is based on the federal government, which has been a reliable economic engine and source of employment, the city has a history of tight housing markets and land speculation (Downie Jr. and Hoagland 1969; Diner 1983; Paige and Reuss 1983). In the mid-1970s, District residents gained a modicum of self-representation for the first time in nearly 100 years, just as the city was beset with a wave of gentrification (Feinberg 1975; Paige and Reuss 1983; Wilson 1984). Just as this majority-black city was gaining the right to govern itself, low-income people, mostly black, were threatened with displacement from the city. One way to stem this displacement – and therefore keep blacks and poor people politically present – was to enable the reclamation of a housing commons through the limited-equity co-op model.

In this chapter, I first provide a brief history of political self-determination and race in Washington, D.C., and next give a history of land speculation and housing costs in the city. I then delve into gentrification in D.C. in the 1970s, looking first at the phenomenon itself, and then at the response of the newly elected city government, which came to power in January 1975. Finally, I examine the emergence of the limited-equity cooperative, and theorize this housing as a kind of commons that has been reclaimed from an urban landscape of privately owned, for-profit housing.

### **Political self-determination and race in Washington, D.C.**

The political history of Washington, D.C., is marked by conflict over to whom the city belongs, for whom it should be developed, and who should control its governance. In 1791,

President George Washington chose the site for the new national capital at the juncture of the Potomac and Anacostia rivers, and in 1800, government workers moved there from Philadelphia (Green 1967). In 1802, the first city council was elected by a voting populace of white male property owners; in 1846, voting rights were extended to all white males who paid a one dollar school tax (Meyers 1996). It would be 21 more years before voting rights were extended to the city's black men.

Voting rights in the District have long been intertwined with questions of race. Slavery had played an important role in the city's economy; in the first part of the 19th century, the city had the most active slave depot in the United States (Corrigan 2001/2002). The Civil War prompted a huge boom in the city's growth; between 1860 and 1870, its population grew from 61,000 to 109,000, or by nearly 80%. But while the white population increased by 40% in this decade, the black population increased by 222%, to 32% of the city's total population. Most of these black newcomers were migrants from southern plantations, either escaped slaves or recently freed. Washington, D.C. was the nearest metropolis where they could find work, and feel some, albeit limited, protection against racism (Green 1967). After much debate, black males were in 1867 given the right to vote in city elections, three years before the 15th Amendment gave all U.S. men the right to vote. This right was granted despite warnings from the *Washington Star* newspaper, which editorialized that:

“while willing to grant the negro every right due to him before the law, [Washington's leaders] are not prepared to make a farce of the right of suffrage, by giving it to an ignorant mass of negroes, who know no more how to exercise it than the cattle of the field they so lately herded with” (in Gillette 1991, 51).

This attitude towards Washington's growing black population would eventually lead to the undoing of voting rights for the city as a whole. In 1874, Congress abolished all local self-rule, and the mayor and city council were replaced with a three-man commission appointed by the

President, even as city residents themselves were disallowed from voting for president (Green 1967; Gillette 1991). According to historian Constance McLaughlin Green, the city's terrible indebtedness at the time, coupled with the resentment whites felt towards black suffrage, led Washington's white business leaders to strike a deal with Congress: if Congress paid half the city's debts, the city would give up its voting rights (Green 1967). In explaining his argument for the abolition of home rule, Alabama Senator John Tyler Morgan, a member of the Senate's District Committee, said later that it had been necessary to:

“burn down the barn to get rid of the rats... the rats being the negro population and the barn being the government of the District of Columbia... [Negroes] came in here and took possession of a certain part of the political power of this District... and there was but one way to get out – so Congress thought, so this able committee thought – and that was to deny the right of suffrage entirely to every human being in the District and have every office here controlled by appointment instead of by election... in order to get rid of this load of negro suffrage that was flooded in upon them.” (in Jaffe and Sherwood 1994, 24-25).

For the next 100 years, the city remained without any form of locally elected representation. While the city was technically run by the three-man commission, its affairs were also directly overseen by committees of the U.S. Congress. In 1944, Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo, an open Ku Klux Klan member and author of the book *Take Your Choice – Segregation or Mongrelization*, became chair of the Senate's District Committee (Jaffe and Sherwood 1994). In 1948, South Carolina Representative John McMillan, an avowed segregationist, became chair of the House District Committee, a position he held until 1972. These two white southerners took an inordinate interest in local city affairs. Under their leadership, for instance, Congress included riders on bills to impose myriad restrictions on the city, from legislating swimming hours at city pools, to preventing the city from installing meters in cabs, to preventing the city from decriminalizing gay sex. The city's laws and budget were directly controlled by Congress (Fauntroy 2003).

In the late 1950s, Washington became the first major U.S. city to become majority African-American. And slowly, the city made progress towards greater self-rule. In 1961, residents of the District were finally granted the right to vote for president, under the 23<sup>rd</sup> amendment. In 1967, President Johnson took a step towards home rule by replacing the three-man commission with a presidentially appointed mayor and city council (Diner 1983). The following year, District residents were allowed to elect their own representatives for the first time in decades, for school board. Three years later, the city received the right to elect a nonvoting delegate to Congress, and elected Walter Fauntroy to the position<sup>6</sup> (Diner 1983). And in 1973, Congress passed the Home Rule Act, which finally gave the people of the city the right to elect their own mayor and council. Elections were held in November 1974, and the mayor and 13 members of the city council were sworn into office in January 1975. By this time, the city was about 70% African-American (McQuirter 2003), and all but two of the newly-elected city leaders were black.

1975 was a watershed year for Washington, D.C. The vote had been a long time coming, and it was particularly important in this majority-black city, given the context of historic disenfranchisement of African-Americans. In the United States, voting rights and the question of self-determination have always been intertwined with questions of race and racial inequality. And that was – and is – even more the case in the nation’s capital.

### **Land speculation and housing costs in Washington, D.C.**

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<sup>6</sup> In the many years he held this position, Fauntroy explicitly staked out positions of interest to the pan-African world, from statehood for D.C. to debt relief for Haiti to divestment from South Africa. Oppression of D.C. residents was equated with oppression of blacks in other parts of the world. In a 1986 newsletter to constituents, he notes as an introduction, “During this second session of the 99<sup>th</sup> Congress, I have vigorously pursued the agenda I announced at the start of this Congress. The agenda is: to free D.C., free South Africa, and free Haiti. We have had remarkable success as reflected in the items in this newsletter” (Fauntroy 1986).

Washington, D.C. is a city formed on speculation, and housing costs there have historically been quite high relative to other American cities. Historian Sarah Luria argues that the capital city, which in the 18<sup>th</sup> century represented a speculative leap in the relationship between a government and its people, would achieve its physical form through real estate speculation (Luria 2006). The cost of building the capital city, including the governmental buildings, was to be borne by the sale of plots of land from the government to private individuals (Green 1967). In the 1790s, speculators like James Greenleaf had convinced the nascent government to let them purchase thousands of lots for well below the asking price, with the hope of developing them at a handsome profit. Though Greenleaf had no particular tie to the new city of Washington, he did find it an excellent place to invest, given that thousands of acres could be bought up at once (Arnebeck 1991).

Washington's population boom in the years following the Civil War put intense pressure on the city's housing market. The introduction of electric street cars in the 1880s enabled the development of outlying parts of the District, and real estate investors snatched up land along the new lines, driving up housing prices (Gillette 1991). Wealthier newcomers moved to the newly developing streetcar suburbs like Columbia Heights, where the local all-white citizens' association touted the neighborhood's relatively high elevation and the "soothing zephyrs" that cooled weary commuters as they rode the streetcar up the hill towards home. "Nowhere in the District of Columbia," the citizens' association assured prospective homebuyers in a 1904 pamphlet, "can be found a community freer from the objectionable classes than on the 'Heights'; and there is every assurance that present conditions in this regard will continue in the future development and building up of this section. All are alive to the importance of co-operating to that end" (Columbia Heights Citizens Association 1904, 17). The high elevation, the cooling

breezes, and the assurance of upper-class neighbors were just a few of the elements that combined to make the neighborhood an excellent financial investment. The “objectionable classes,” at least those of the non-white variety, were kept out through racial covenants that homeowners in many white neighborhoods signed, pledging to never sell their property to a buyer of color (Green 1967).

But the poor and non-white needed a place to live, too, and in the years after the Civil War, the pace of construction of the city’s alley dwellings grew substantially in order to accommodate them. Alley dwellings, considered Washington’s equivalent of New York tenements, were tiny houses constructed in the alleys behind the larger houses that faced the street. The alleys were highly segregated spaces, with blacks and whites generally staking out separate alleys. But regardless of race, alley dwellers were defined by their poverty. Very few alley dwellers owned their small homes, and alley dwelling ownership was highly profitable for landlords. Borchert cites an 1865 newspaper report that observed that just a few years of rent payments could cover the cost of acquiring land and constructing alley housing. Surveys of alley housing revealed that owners made “substantial profits” from their investments. As Borchert writes, “Nearly every survey reported that return on the investment for alley property was at least twice that for street property” (1980, 39). Alley dwelling construction boomed in the 1860s, and again in the years between 1884 until 1892, when Congress banned further construction of the dwellings (Borchert 1980).

The housing crunch was felt again in the years leading up to the United States’ entrance into World War Two. The city’s population began to swell due to wartime preparations, growing by 36% between 1930 and 1940, and by 22% between 1940 and 1950 (Ammon 2009). In 1940, the Housing Committee of the Congress of Industrial Organizations emphasized the

high cost of housing in the city, claiming, “The citizens of the District pay a higher proportion of their income for rent than the people of any other U.S. city (including New York)” (quoted in Diner 1983, 20). Because of racial segregation and lack of housing options for non-whites, the effect was felt particularly by low-income blacks. A 1945 Washington Daily News article titled “Fabulous prices paid here for low-cost homes” reported on an analysis released by the Washington Housing Association, which showed “[h]ow low-income Washingtonians – and Negroes especially – are being victimized into paying fabulously high prices for down-at-the-heels dwellings as a result of the housing shortage” (N.a. 1945). Both the housing shortage and the fact that the city’s public housing authority had historically targeted black neighborhoods for destruction caused African-Americans to worry that they might soon be displaced from the city. As Geneva Valentine, a black resident and member of a civic association, testified before the Senate in 1944, “I can see the government acquiring land and taking over whole Negro communities... and the trend has been to wipe them out in the District of Columbia, rebuilding and changing its occupancy altogether” (in Gillette 1991, 149).

Valentine’s fears of displacement were realized just a few years later, when nearly the entire Southwest quadrant of the city was razed as part of one of largest urban renewal projects in the nation. 23,500 people (about 6,000 families) lived in Southwest before urban renewal. After renewal was completed, about a quarter of Southwest residents were able to stay in the quadrant, with almost all of them moving to the new public housing that was built as part of the renewal project. The rest, according to a 1966 study, scattered all over the city – although notably, not a single family ended up in the wealthy white part of town (Thursz 1966). Though the city’s original contract with the developer stipulated that 40% of the new housing in Southwest be allocated to low-income residents, the developer later convinced the city that it

could not include the affordable housing, due to unanticipated cost increases (Ammon 2009).

One of the architects of the Southwest redevelopment, Louis Justement, outlined his vision for modern city planning, emphasizing its interconnection with profit:

“Let us not be afraid to plan the city... Our cities were built for the sake of making money. If we wish to rebuild them with the same energy we displayed in the first instance, we should make it profitable for the entrepreneur to undertake the task, unless we are prepared to make profound changes in the profit system” (in Ammon 2009, 183).

The city, for Justement and others, was a machine for profit-making. But in the 1970s, many of Washington, D.C.’s residents – along with its newly elected leaders – did not necessarily agree.

### **D.C. in the 1970s: gentrification, displacement, and tenant response**

In the early 1970s, gentrification began hitting selected American cities. Gentrification – the return of the “gentry” to disinvested urban neighborhoods – was documented closely in 1970s lower Manhattan (Zukin 1982), and it was also affecting Boston, San Francisco, Washington, and a few other cities (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 1974). The process described by gentrification was not, however, new in the District of Columbia. In the 1930s through the ‘60s, for example, the Georgetown neighborhood lost most of its large black population due to periodic influxes of young whites who could afford higher rents (Lesko, Babb et al. 1991). When, in the 1970s, other D.C. neighborhoods began to experience rising housing costs, influxes of young whites, and displacement of blacks, they were said to be experiencing “Georgetownization.”<sup>7</sup> But the new term “gentrification” was important, because it described a broader phenomenon beyond just the experience of a particular neighborhood. In

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<sup>7</sup> I owe this insight to my student Adam Rubin.

D.C., home sales prices in central neighborhoods increased by 96.6% between 1975 and 1978 – nearly doubling in just three years (Paige and Reuss 1983). Centrally located neighborhoods like Adams Morgan, Mt. Pleasant and Capitol Hill were the subject of scholarly research examining the “back-to-the-city” movement (Gale 1976; Gale 1977; Henig 1982). Local leaders like H.R. Crawford, assistant HUD secretary and 1978 city council candidate, expressed concern that the “back-to-the-city” movement had pushed the price of housing beyond the reach of the poor (N.a. 1978).

The displacement associated with gentrification in the District was framed explicitly in racial terms, and as a civil rights issue. In February of 1981, the District of Columbia Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights issued a detailed report, entitled *Neighborhood Renewal – Reinvestment and Displacement in D.C.*, using data from the years 1976-1979. Based on a public fact-finding meeting, historical research, and case studies of three gentrifying neighborhoods, the committee concluded that the racial patterns of displacement framed how many District residents saw the “revitalization” of their neighborhoods. “Revitalization,” the committee members warned, “came to be viewed as a destructive and racist force by some neighborhood residents” (D.C. Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights 1981 24).

But concerned tenants were also getting to work, organizing to protest terrible housing conditions, evictions, and rising rents. The City Wide Housing Coalition was formed in 1974 to organize tenants and do education around housing issues (Reed 1981). Also in 1974, the Metropolitan Washington Planning and Housing Association held a public forum on speculation, and from the forum organized an Anti-Speculation Task Force that worked to change city law to protect low-income residents (Paige and Reuss 1983). The Southern Columbia Heights Tenants

Union worked to organize tenants in the Columbia Heights neighborhood and also pushed for changes in city law to protect low-income residents (Institute for Community Economics 1982). Concern about gentrification and its effects on poor, mostly African-American tenants dovetailed with the citizens' newly granted ability, in 1974, to vote for their own local representation. As two local researchers wrote of this period:

“During the 1970s the swift residential change known as gentrification became so disruptive of inner-city neighborhoods that questions as to why this process was occurring, when and where it could be expected to occur, and what the role of government should be in encouraging or restraining it became a dominant citizen concern” (Paige and Reuss 1983 120).

### **Creating an anti-displacement strategy: the newly-elected city government responds**

The people elected to the District's new government were particularly attuned to the importance of self-determination, having lacked it for a hundred years. And they recognized that having control over one's housing was a crucial element of self-determination. They were concerned that low-income, mostly black, people would start to be driven out of the city in the very moment that the city had achieved a modicum of control over its own affairs. So they responded by passing a series of laws to counter displacement. These were laws that enforced ways of valuing land and housing that were about prioritizing the needs of low-income people over profit. Some of the first laws to be passed included laws imposing a moratorium on condominium conversions, levying an anti-speculation tax, and giving tenants the first right to purchase their homes should their landlords put them up for sale.

The rapid conversion of rental properties to condominium ownership during the mid-1970s was a significant element in the city's gentrification. The Condominium Act, passed in 1976, was a direct response to displacement of low-income people due to condominium conversion.

This act required that developers receive permission from the mayor in order to proceed with condo conversion plans. In order to qualify for conversion, a building had to be “luxury” or “high rent,” have a vacancy rate above 3 percent, or have over half its heads of household agree, in writing, to the conversion. The act also required that, if the conversion took place, landlords give tenants at least 120 days’ notice before they were forced to move; landlords were also required to give tenants relocation assistance (Diner 1983). A complete moratorium on condo conversion was passed by the city council as emergency legislation in March of 1978 (Camp 1978), and a new set of condo conversion permanent legislation, designed primarily to protect elderly tenants, was passed in 1980 (Eisen 1980).

The city’s Real Property Transfer Excise Tax, which went into effect in July of 1978, was aimed at stemming the flipping of residential properties. The tax was imposed on home sellers who held property for short periods of time and then resold it for gains above a certain percentage of the price for which they bought. Essentially, the shorter the period of time the investor held the property, the higher the tax on the property (Davis 2006). The D.C. tax was the first urban tax on real estate speculation in the country, and meant that up to 90% of speculators’ profits on house sales were taxable. Yet many sellers were allowed exemptions from the tax, and in October 1981, the city allowed the tax to expire (Meyer 1978; Paige and Reuss 1983; Davis 2006).

The Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, in contrast, has enjoyed a long and productive life. The TOPA law was originally passed in 1980 as part of the Rental Housing Conversion and Sale Act of 1980<sup>8</sup>. The TOPA law gives tenants the first right to purchase their buildings should their landlords put them up for sale (O’Toole and Jones 2009). The purpose of the law is to

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<sup>8</sup> An earlier version of the TOPA law, passed in 1977, allowed some tenants to purchase their buildings; the 1980 version of the law clarified the earlier law, and expanded tenant opportunity. Today, TOPA is generally dated to 1980 (Eisen 2011).

counter displacement, preserve affordable housing, and give tenants some control over what happens to their housing (Comeau 2011). In a statement on the proposed legislation before the U.S. House District Committee in 1980, Mayor Marion Barry argued for the tenant purchase legislation and for protecting the poor from displacement – even if doing so risked losing some city tax revenue. As he testified:

“When market forces create a conflict between goals that would offer increased tax revenue, but yet would cause substantial displacement of the poor, elderly and the handicapped, then this government will act on behalf of those needing maximum protection. To do less would sacrifice the poor, the elderly and the handicapped on the altars of increased tax revenue. I do not believe that we are at a point where consideration of revenue over people’s lives is up for discussion” (U. S. House of Representatives District Committee 1980 149).<sup>9</sup>

Barry’s rhetoric is indicative of the political tenor of the times: the poor would not be sacrificed for higher tax revenues. Especially in the early years of the TOPA legislation, the city spent substantial money on assisting low-income tenants in purchasing their buildings and becoming home owners in the District.

In most cases in the District, low-income tenants associations who purchase their buildings decide to convert to a limited-equity cooperative ownership structure (CNHED 2004). As described in earlier chapters, what distinguishes LECs from market-rate co-ops is that members pay a low fee to buy a share in the co-op, their monthly carrying charges are usually quite low, and when members move out, they are restricted in the amount for which they can sell their share, so that the housing will still be affordable to the next person moving in. This is a unique form of housing in that it is essentially removed from the speculative housing market, yet it is still controlled by the people who live in it and own it (Sazama and Willcox 1995; Davis 2006). Tenant associations in the District typically make the decision to form LECs because it is the

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Kathryn Howell for alerting me to the transcript of this hearing.

only way they can afford to become owners. While condominium ownership, for instance, would require individual residents to qualify for individual mortgages, the LEC structure enables tenant households to participate in a collective, or “blanket,” mortgage, and tenants typically buy into the co-op for very low amounts (O'Toole and Jones 2009). When tenants receive low-interest loans from the city to help them buy their buildings, they must keep those buildings affordable for the length of the loan. Once they have repaid the loan, they are free to change the ownership structure of their cooperatives. Perhaps surprisingly, many cooperatives have retained their limited-equity provisions even after repaying city loans. Rules on long-term affordability are written into the bylaws of the LECs.

Because of the tenant purchase law and city financial assistance in purchasing the housing, D.C. has a significant number of limited-equity co-ops – many more per capita than New York City, which leads the nation in absolute numbers of LECs (Sazama 2000; CNHED 2004). As of 2012, 86 LECs existed throughout the city, comprising over 3000 units (see Appendix 2). While making up a relatively small percentage of the city’s affordable housing stock, LECs have played an important role in maintaining affordable homeownership for low-income people. Perhaps more importantly, they have played a significant ideological role in demonstrating that low-income people can work collectively to create and preserve affordable homeownership, and control their own housing even in the midst of gentrification.

### **Limited-equity co-ops and the struggle to reclaim the commons**

Limited-equity co-ops are part of a larger universe of noncommodified housing, which also includes community land trusts (CLTs), that functions to keep land and housing off the speculative market, controlled by community members, and affordable in the long term (Davis

1993). In the U.S., the contemporary community land trust model was born in the rural South of the 1960s. Civil rights activists, including members of the National Sharecroppers Fund and the Southwest Alabama Farmers' Cooperative Association, organized to purchase land in order to ensure that African-American farmers could have control over the land they worked (Davis 2010). From the inception of the community land trust movement, gaining collective, nonspeculative control over housing and land has often been framed as a civil rights issue (Institute for Community Economics 1982; Community Economics 1992). Similarly, some of the people working on LECs in D.C. framed the cooperatives in terms of civil rights. One longtime organizer of D.C. LECs explains:

“D.C. was a center of the civil rights movement. In fact, probably D.C. had – a large number of the folks who were in [the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] – and when I think of the civil rights movement, that’s what I think of [laughs] – live in D.C.! So I would expect that some of the principles that they were involved in organizing below the Mason-Dixon line, which includes here, but even further south, around voting rights, around voting, around cooperatives – you know one of the leaders – the founder – of SNCC, Ella Jo Baker, was a leader in cooperatives. And Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer, which was one of our civil rights leaders, or human rights leaders, was very much involved in cooperatives in Mississippi. So a lot of those folks were involved in collectivism.” [#24]

Over the course of just one year, from late 1979 to late 1980, low-income tenants created 17 LECs comprising 1000 units; as of November 1980, twenty more tenants associations were in the process of negotiating to buy their buildings, for a total of 2000 more units (Bowman 1980). One reporter wrote admiringly of the tenant leaders in the *Washington Post*:

“Armed only with the [TOPA] law, these black women, many of whom have only high school educations, have found lawyers and organizations to help them unite tenants and arrange the complicated procedure of financing the acquisition and rehabilitation of the buildings. They have fought frustration, apathy and indifference among tenants who work as janitors, cooks, clerks, and others who either are retired or on public assistance -- people who never have owned property and never dreamed that they ever could. They have spent long hours baking pies and cakes, frying chicken, cooking dinners, organizing cabarets and trips to raise money needed to help pay engineers and make down payments. And they have learned about their rights, contracts and financing. While developers and

more affluent tenants have converted more than 9,000 apartment units to condominiums, lower-income tenants are converting to cooperatives where individual tenants buy stock in their building, which entitles them to a unit. Their more affluent counterparts look forward to their buildings increasing dramatically in value to push up sales prices, but these poorer tenants have written bylaws to limit the appreciation on their properties. With appreciation curbed, sales prices will remain relatively low, and a core of housing will be preserved in the city for those earning less than \$20,000 a year” (Bowman 1980).

The perspective of a contemporary limited-equity cooperative member helps explain why many low-income tenants have been committed to creating noncommodified housing forms as the city continues to gentrify around them. Brian, an African-American man in his 50s, lives in the Broad Branch Cooperative<sup>10</sup>, an LEC in the Adams Morgan neighborhood. Long known for its cultural diversity, Adams Morgan has experienced waves of gentrification since the 1970s. Today, but for a handful of subsidized rental properties and limited-equity cooperatives, it is almost thoroughly gentrified. Brian has lived in the Broad Branch since the early 1980s. He has worked full-time at a nonprofit organization for most of that time, while also working with theater groups around the city. Brian earns about \$60,000 a year and has no children; he is not low-income. While almost all his fellow co-op members use Section 8 federal subsidies to pay their monthly carrying charges, Brian earns too much money to qualify for the subsidy, and so pays the market rate. Yet he is still very committed to limited-equity housing. He and his fellow tenants first worked to purchase their building together in the ‘80s. He explains why the limited-equity concept has been so important to him and his fellow co-op members, and why they never considered market-rate condominium ownership:

“I think most of the people [in the Broad Branch] were very low-income. Condo was and is a bad word to a lot of people. Cause when they hear condo, that means – you get out, and other people move in. You get out, they fix the place up really nice, and other people move in, and good luck finding something else. And so much of that was happening in this neighborhood. Even now, people walk past, and it’s sort of a joke in the building,

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<sup>10</sup> The co-ops and former co-ops in my sample have been renamed to protect anonymity. Projects have been named for waterbodies that flow through Washington, D.C. As noted earlier, names of all respondents have also been changed.

when people stop and look at the building, and go *hmmm!* For a long time, when it was really bad, and the conversions were everywhere, it was just like an *explosion* of that, and everybody knew a lot of people who had gotten something saying, okay, 60 days. The building's sold, in 60 days, you gotta get out. And you know, you're renting, what can you do? You gotta get out, find something else. But at the same time that was happening, rents were going up, so getting out meant not just getting out of the building, it meant getting out of the neighborhood, it meant getting out of the city. A lot of people of course are in [Prince George's County], or Virginia. And I think people were very afraid. People were just afraid! People didn't have money. And they didn't know where they could go, or what they could afford. People had children, the elderly people, it was disorienting to them – what, what is this about? If they'd been in the building for a long time. And then there was the middle strata of people who were just politically conscious, and resented it, and were activist, and were involved in city – not running for city council, but were involved in grassroots political-type things. We had a handful, a sort of core group of those people, who were just very dogged that the whole city should not just become a city of luxury condos for lobbyists, or whatever. So I think it was never even really considered among the people who were living here that this should become a condo, and that you'd stay in it a while, and then you'd move out and get this big lump sum, and go and buy a big mansion or something. I don't think that was just anyone's mindset.” [#28]

What both Brian and the *Washington Post* reporter quoted above describe is, I argue, the reclaiming, of a commons. This is housing that was once owned by a private individual, who was able to use it for profit. Using the TOPA law, tenants have reclaimed their housing from private individuals, and, through a long process of collective labor, have removed it from the speculative market. The housing is now collectively owned and managed, and is not treated as a commodity by its members. Rather, as will be seen in the next chapter, it is valued for its everyday use.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued here that the confluence in 1970s Washington, D.C. of the newly-granted right to self-governance with a wave of gentrification created an environment in which the political will to allow for the reclamation of a commons could be built. Tenants, community organizations, and political leaders pressed to give low-income people the ability to take control

of their housing by purchasing it collectively, and removing it from the market so that it would remain affordable to other poor people in the future. The result has been that Washington, D.C. has the highest concentration of limited-equity cooperatives of any city in the United States.

The reclamation of this commons has not been without its challenges. Several of the city's limited-equity co-ops have gone into foreclosure over the years, because of a combination of financial challenges and members' inability to collectively self-manage. Others have chosen to convert to a market-rate condominium form, thus individualizing their ownership and putting the housing back into the commodified market. For the LECs that remain, the work of maintenance is an ongoing challenge. This is work that is often highly unequally distributed, and in the majority of cases is shouldered by a few very dedicated, organized, older African-American women. Yet the limited-equity co-op model provides a tangible way for low-income people to remain in their housing and gain control over it, and the model continues to have many adherents throughout the city. In the next chapter, I examine the benefits the commons of limited-equity housing cooperatives have provided their members.

## **Chapter 5: What the Commons Provides**

The commons supports a life less straightjacketed by the demands of capitalism. With the support of a commons, people can move towards a life that is both more autonomous and more collective, that allows them to make choices that otherwise might be impossible. The commons allows people to experiment with how they live their lives. The LECs studied here are imperfect commons. They do, however, mark the beginning of an effort to build lives outside of capitalism. In this chapter, I first analyze the characteristics of my respondents. Next, I describe the principal benefits a commons provides: affordability, control, stability, and community. I then examine the question of how people gain access to the commons, and who is excluded. Finally, I theorize how a commons might allow people to begin to live outside of capitalism, and introduce the contradiction at the heart of the commons: that, while it may open up opportunities for its members to live less capitalist lives, it makes demands on its members in terms of work and time.

### **Who lives in limited-equity co-ops in Washington, D.C.**

A commons is a set of resources that is owned and managed collectively by its members, for daily use rather than abstract exchange. One of the characteristics of traditional, “natural” commons, such as those studied by Ostrom et al., is that they have relatively homogeneous populations. One of the reasons such commons succeed, according to scholars, is because they share a common culture and understanding, and also because they have a common interest in the long-term health of the commons. Most of these commons exist in rural and underpopulated areas with stable populations. But cities, as noted in Chapter 2, have heterogeneous and shifting populations. An urban commons, therefore, would tend to be made up of a greater variety of

people than a “natural” commons. This variety may lead to conflict, but it may also lead to a greater diversity of skills necessary for commons maintenance.

The commons constituted by limited-equity cooperatives in Washington, D.C. are surprisingly diverse. In my study, diversity of commons membership may be seen in race, country of origin, age, household type, and class. In terms of race and country of origin, my sample of 40 respondents is relatively diverse. It includes 19 African-Americans, seven white Americans, five first-generation black immigrants (from various countries in Africa and the Caribbean), six Latinos (all but one are first-generation immigrants from El Salvador), two mixed-race Americans, and one Arab immigrant. In terms of age and household type, the sample ranges from the mid-20s to the mid-80s, with an average age in the mid-50s. The sample is split on the presence of children in households: half the respondents have raised or are raising children in their co-ops. Several additional members raised children long before they joined the co-op or long after they left it, but having children at home has not been part of their co-op experience.

In terms of class, my sample ranges from lower working class to middle class. Twenty-seven of my respondents – 2/3 – can be classified as working class. They range from very low to moderate income. Most are working, a few were unemployed at the time of our interviews, and several are retired. There is a fair amount of variation within the kind of work they do, or did before retiring. On the lower end of the pay scale, people work in hospital cafeteria food service, hotel housekeeping, demolition, and babysitting. On the upper end, people work as teaching assistants, administrative assistants, pharmacy technicians, and community organizers. My respondents have had clearly documented struggles with affordable housing: two lived in city-run public housing before moving into their co-ops (one had also grown up in D.C. public

housing), and an additional four received Section 8 housing subsidies to rent their units before their buildings converted to cooperative.<sup>11</sup> Thirteen of my respondents – 1/3 – can be classified as middle class. These are people who work jobs that require higher levels of education, and that pay more accordingly. These jobs include editor, IT administrator, legal secretary, and software engineer. The very poor are not represented in this sample, and nor are the wealthy.

Based on the five characteristics listed above, I can divide my sample into two broad groups: those with a relatively broad range of life opportunities, and those with a relatively narrow range of life opportunities. By “life opportunity,” I mean the somewhat ineffable ability to take control over the direction of one’s life. Both sets of respondents choose to live in limited-equity co-ops based on a range of political conviction and pragmatism. But in general, for respondents with broader life opportunities, the choice to live in an LEC tends to be more about political conviction; and for respondents with narrower life opportunities, the choice tends to be based more on pragmatism. The benefits of living in an LEC differ for respondents, depending on their degree of life opportunity.

### **The benefits of living in a limited-equity cooperative**

When considering the benefits of living in LECs, it is important to note that LEC members compare their housing situations with their previous experiences as renters, and not with the experience of market-rate homeownership. Only one of my 40 respondents had ever experienced market-rate homeownership as an adult, in homes he had owned together with his ex-wife. The rest had moved from rental housing, including public housing, into their co-ops, with the exception of a few young people who moved from college dormitory housing or their

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<sup>11</sup> This does not include the three respondents who lived at the Piney Branch Co-op when it was public housing, before the tenants bought it and converted it to an LEC.

parents' (owned) homes directly into the co-op. A middle-class perspective might tend to compare the LEC experience with market-rate homeownership, but since market-rate homeownership has not been a possibility for the majority of respondents, this is not a realistic comparison to make. The appropriate comparison is rental housing (previous research on shared-equity housing also makes this point; see Diamond 2009).

The story of one elderly Caribbean couple is instructive in this regard. I sit with Mr. and Mrs. Green in the living room of their one-bedroom unit in the Potomac Co-op. The Potomac is located in the northwest D.C. neighborhood of Brightwood, a historically stable black working- and middle-class area. Recently, the neighborhood has seen an influx of Central American and African immigrants and, to a lesser extent, whites. The Greens have furnished their living room carefully, and have painted the walls a brilliant teal. Mrs. Green immigrated to D.C. in 1971 from Trinidad, and worked as a babysitter all her life before retiring; pictures of her white children clients adorn the table where we sit. Mr. Green is from St. Vincent and the Grenadines, but worked jobs in Guyana, for a mining company and a construction company, among others, until retiring and moving to D.C. in the mid-1990s. Of their financial situation, Mr. Green says, "I'm just hanging on. We get our little pension." Before moving to the Potomac Co-op in 1999, the couple had lived in a basement apartment in a nearby house. Mr. Green says of their former landlady, with outrage in his voice, "[S]he raised our rent when she wanted to! She used our apartment to get more money!" As for the co-op, he says, "Moving in here was uplifting. An improvement in our lifestyle, living standard." [#9] This is not a couple for whom market-rate homeownership would appear to be an option. Yet they relish the affordability and stability of their home, and the control they have over it. Mr. and Mrs. Green, I argue, represent typical

limited-equity co-op members, for whom the LEC model is an “uplifting” alternative to rental housing.

Previous research on shared-equity homeownership, of which the LEC model is one example, concludes that such homeownership has five key benefits: it is affordable; it is stable; it allows owners to accrue some wealth; it can lead to improvement in owners’ lives; and it encourages involvement in the self-governance of housing (Davis 2006). In my research, it became clear that affordability is indeed the primary benefit provided by limited-equity co-ops. Stability of housing is also an important benefit. Wealth building, on the other hand, is not an immediate benefit of D.C. LECs, as will be discussed. LECs in D.C. do appear to lead to improvement in members’ lives, though the degree of improvement is difficult to measure. The degree to which LECs encourage involvement in self-governance in housing varies, and will be taken up in the next chapter. In addition, my interviews reveal two other benefits of LEC housing that are not considered explicitly in Davis’ study: control over housing, and community. I now consider each of the key benefits that my research shows are provided by LECs in Washington, D.C. – affordability, control, stability, and community.

### ***Affordability***

In November 2011, the *Washington Post* reported on an encampment on the streets of D.C. Hundreds of people were camping out, overnight, in the rain, and they weren’t going anywhere. This was not Occupy D.C. – that was taking place a few miles south. Rather, these were people waiting in line to win a spot on a waiting list for few subsidized units in an apartment building in the Columbia Heights neighborhood. Waiting is the name of the game: as of late 2011 the waiting list for public housing units and federal housing vouchers in the District

of Columbia had about 20,000 names (Gowen 2011). One of my respondents spent 16 years on a waiting list for public housing in D.C. before she finally gained a unit, and this experience is not atypical. As noted in Chapter 4, housing prices in D.C. are consistently high. The “fair market rent” for a one-bedroom unit in D.C. in 2011, as calculated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, was \$1289; for a two-bedroom unit, it was \$1461 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2011). Though the 2010 median income of District residents was, at \$60,900, relatively high, this figure masks a glaring disparity between the well-off and the poor. In 2010, one in five District residents lived below the poverty line, and one in nine lived below *half* the poverty line (D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute 2011). A minimum wage worker in D.C. must work 136 hours a week, every week of the year, in order to be able to afford the fair market rent for a two-bedroom unit (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2011). For low-income people, the lack of affordable housing in Washington, D.C. is a crisis.

Given this context, the single most important thing limited-equity co-ops provide their members is affordable housing. Previous research on D.C. LECs shows that, as of 2003, carrying charges for one-bedroom and two-bedroom units in LECs were about half the HUD fair market rents at the time (CNHED 2004).<sup>12</sup> My research corroborates that LECs typically provide their members with housing costs that are half the rate of market rental costs. In my sample of existing limited-equity co-ops, the mean monthly carrying charge in 2011 for one-bedroom units was \$672, and for two-bedroom units was \$759 (see Fig. 1). Carrying charges typically include any underlying mortgage on the building, heat and water, a share of the building’s property tax,

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<sup>12</sup> That research was based on a sample of 30 co-ops citywide.

the cost of hiring a management company, and money for operating and replacement reserves.

The only additional bill most members pay is for electricity.

LEC	studio	1-bed	2-bed	3-bed	4-bed	5-bed
Tiber	-	\$810	-	-	-	-
Watts	-	\$610	\$627	-	-	-
Potomac	\$750	\$876	\$900	-	-	-
Fenwick	-	\$696	\$750	\$800	-	-
Broad Branch <sup>13</sup>	-	n/a	n/a	-	n/a	-
Piney Branch	-	-	-	\$516	\$609	\$649
Penn Branch	-	\$369 <sup>14</sup>	-	-	-	-

**Fig. 1: Monthly 2011 carrying charges for sampled existing limited-equity co-ops.**

Across the board, respondents emphasize that one of the main benefits of living in an LEC is its affordability. For most respondents, this is clearly *the* most important attribute of LECs. Phyllis lives the Piney Branch Co-op, a co-op in the southeastern quadrant of the city, east of the Anacostia River in a relatively low-income neighborhood. The Piney Branch is a large, 90-unit co-op that was developed in 1971 as public housing, with the intent that the tenants, within two years of moving into the building, would be able to buy their homes. But the home ownership program disintegrated, and the tenants continued living in the development for years as public housing residents; believing they would one day be owners, they put their own work and money into fixing up their units. Finally, in 2001, the tenants were able to purchase the complex and convert it to a limited-equity cooperative. The Piney Branch is an extremely affordable cooperative: the units, which range in size from three to five bedrooms, have carrying charges that range from \$526 to \$649. Phyllis is an African American woman in her 70s who

<sup>13</sup> Since most of the Broad Branch's members make use of project-based Section 8 financing to pay their monthly carrying charges, their actual payments vary by each household's financial situation. This co-op is not included in the calculation of mean monthly carrying charges for this reason.

<sup>14</sup> The \$369 figure is for long-time co-op members; newer members have had to pay higher prices as the share prices have risen.

grew up in D.C. and moved into the complex with her husband in 1971; they raised eight children while living there. Phyllis echoes several respondents in emphasizing the importance of affordability for raising children, and compares living in an LEC to living in the private market:

“I have [grown] children, my children are out on the private [housing] market. You work, work, work, to do what – to pay your bills. And then when you get through paying your bills, and you retire, you get tired, you retire, you might have a little money to do things, if you’re not too sick at that time to do it, from working all your life. But I mean, to raise children in a cooperative, it’s good, because – limited-equity cooperative, let me say that. Because it’s affordable... I’d rather be here raising my children in something affordable, than be out there on the private market. I’m serious. Because some people do a lot of things for show. But I’m not that type of person. I’m just satisfied here. I’m not trying to impress anybody. I’m just satisfied here, raising my kids. As long as I can buy them some things they need, put some food on the table, and have a roof over their head, and direct them in the right way, that’s all that I’m interested in. They don’t have to have the best, as long as they got what they need. And that’s the problem, I think, with the world today, too many people want too much. If everybody decided to get a limited-equity cooperative, pool our money, and live there and raise our kids, it’s gonna be much cheaper than going out there on the private market, worrying about what they need, what they don’t have, working themselves half to death.” [#31]

Later, Phyllis tells me that living in a limited-equity cooperative is “less stress” than trying to find affordable housing out on the open market. In this statement and others, she focuses on the stress caused by the housing market and the waged work required to afford housing on the open market. Phyllis prefers a less stressful life in which she can raise her children, even if this means she has less money to spend on material things. For her, this is why living in a limited-equity co-op is beneficial, even though it does not allow her to build up financial equity.

It should be noted that the vast majority of limited-equity cooperatives in D.C. are, in terms of how they actually operate, in fact zero-equity cooperatives. Within my sample, it is only at the Penn Co-op that members pay in a significant amount of money to join the co-op, an investment that rises along with the Consumer Price Index, and that can be sold for a modest return down the line. In all the other co-ops, the initial share fee is so low that any return on an

investment, even after many years, is nominal – perhaps a few hundred dollars. LECs in D.C. simply do not provide members with an opportunity to build wealth through their housing investment. However, one argument for limited-equity co-ops and other forms of resale-restricted housing is that, while they may not provide owners with financial equity, they do, through providing them with below-market-rate housing, give them the opportunity to save money they would have otherwise spent on market-rate rents. Some of my respondents make this very argument. But in my research, I have found that most working-class respondents do not earn enough money to be able to save, even with their relatively low housing costs. Joanna, property manager and member of the Piney Branch co-op, is an African-American in her 50s who grew up in the complex when it was public housing, and now lives there with her teenaged son. She notes that if she had spent less money on her son, she might have been able to save:

“I haven’t really been able to save, because it’s hard with a 15-year-old. Where if I had been out there where I had to pay more, then the 15-year-old wouldn’t have gotten as much. So I just would’ve changed my lifestyle.” [#32]

Diane grew up in public housing and now lives with her husband and five children, also at the Piney Branch Co-op. She has worked for 23 years as a pharmacy technician in a drugstore far across town, but, despite only paying \$609 a month for her four-bedroom unit, she has not been able to save, either:

“Well to be honest, I ain’t really got no money, so I wasn’t able to save. I ain’t save nothing. I’m living paycheck to paycheck. No, I ain’t been able to save nothing. But I’m still fine with it. Like I said, it’s affordable. So I’m really fine with it.” [#34]

Nor has Claudia, a Central American immigrant in her 60s who lives in the Broad Branch Co-op. As described in the last chapter, the Broad Branch is located in the Adams Morgan neighborhood, historically a highly diverse and immigrant-rich area that over the years has

steadily gentrified. Claudia worked as a hotel housekeeper before retiring, and, as she explains, has not been able to save money through living in the Broad Branch:

“No. No, because – I have my two daughters, I was raising them alone, so even though I wanted to save, I couldn’t! [She laughs.] I couldn’t.” [#29]

Phyllis, Joanna, Diane and Claudia are among my respondents who I classify as having a relatively narrow range of life opportunity. All are older women of color who have raised children in their co-ops, and have worked relatively low-paying jobs throughout their lives. These women represent the most common experience of respondents with regards to the benefits of living in an LEC: the affordability of their housing has enabled them to live a bit more gracefully and securely.

For other residents with a broader range of life opportunity, affordability has in some cases allowed them to more substantially change their relationship to waged work. Daisy is one of these. She is a biracial woman in her 30s who grew up in the Penn Branch Co-op. The Penn Branch, profiled at the beginning of Chapter 4, is located in Glover Park, a neighborhood that once up on a time was white and working class but that is now increasingly upper-middle class, and still predominantly white. The Penn Branch seems to be the only affordable housing in the neighborhood. Daisy was raised, along with her twin brother, by their single mother in a one-bedroom apartment in the Penn Branch. She bought into the co-op as an adult after she graduated from college and needed an affordable place to live. She currently pays about \$700 a month for her one-bedroom unit. She describes how living in the co-op has enabled her to downscale her work life from working in a law firm to working in the human resources office at a local university:

“I was a paralegal, I was making pretty good money, but I just wasn’t happy, and it was completely stressing me out. And I was able to leave, and take a lower-paying job, without having to worry about, am I gonna be making enough? And a lot of my friends

who were attorneys who worked with me [in that office], they had law school debt, they had all this debt, and they had to make the big money. Which is good and bad. At my job [now], it's like, I don't have to make a ton of money, but I'm also not as motivated by the money, so you know to me, it's like, I wanna be happy. Which is good – it's not always realistic [laughs]! You know, like, I'm not having fun today, I could leave! ... But I think I could enjoy myself more. Because I'm not so stressed that I have a mortgage bill that's \$2000 a month. Cause I'd have to get a higher paying job. And I wouldn't be able to do that. Or I couldn't do retirement. I have a pretty good retirement plan right now. And I just turned 35, and I have stuff saved for the future... I was able to go on different trips, or different stuff like that, and not really worry about [paying the mortgage]. Which is huge.” [#37]

In her current job, Daisy has an annual tradition of taking off work every Monday in April. Her softball league starts up that month, and games are on Sundays, and she likes to go out for dinner with her teammates on Sunday nights, and relax on the following day. She spends some of each of those Mondays helping out her mother, who is the co-op's long-time resident manager, in the Penn Branch Co-op office, and simply enjoying the beautiful spring weather. Having access to the commons allows Daisy to structure her days by the cycle of the seasons, and not just by capitalist work-time.

For a few other respondents, co-op membership has enabled a more radical break from regular working life. Maria is one of these. Her grandmother immigrated to D.C. from the Dominican Republic in the 1940s, and lived in a number of different apartments in the Adams Morgan neighborhood, finally settling into the Broad Branch in the early 80s, when it was still a rental building. Maria grew up in another part of the city, but spent a lot of time at her grandmother's apartment, and considers the building and the neighborhood home. Unlike most LEC members, Maria's life choices have been relatively broad: her parents are well educated, she attended a private girls school, and later received a masters degree from a well-regarded private university in New York City, pursuing her dream of acting. Maria's aunt is the president of the Broad Branch. When Maria's grandmother died, her aunt encouraged her to move back to

D.C. and move into her grandmother's old unit. Because her income from acting is relatively low, she has been able to participate in the co-op's federal housing subsidy, which keeps her monthly carrying charges for her one-bedroom unit extremely low: the highest monthly rate she has ever paid was in the mid \$200s. Living in the co-op, as she describes, has enabled her to pursue her dream:

‘Technically, I work at... the restaurant across the street. But I haven't been there [for a year and a half], because I've been able to work [as an actor] and save in between. So I haven't had to have extra supplemental jobs here and there to support, because I live here, and I have this amazing set-up with our subsidy and our co-op, I'm really able to live the really *life* [she laughs], like an artist life. I don't have to do all these random job-jobs that make you unhappy, and stuff, in order to live, because I can work on a show, and save enough, and kind of plan out how much I'm gonna have, and what I need to do. So living here has been, just, amazing. Because I really do get to pursue what I studied, and what I want to do. That wouldn't happen anywhere else.” [#27]

For both Daisy and Maria, the affordability of the LEC gives them the opportunity to take on different kinds of work than if they lived in market-rate housing: work that is less stressful, in Daisy's case, or more meaningful, in Maria's case. Silvia Federici notes that participating in the commons should give people power to refuse wage exploitation.<sup>15</sup> In these cases, LECs appear to support people in making employment decisions that in other housing circumstances might be financially ruinous. Living in an LEC, for these members, gives them more control over their time, and in fact to a certain degree allows them to make a break from capitalist time. It's important to note, however, that, though both Daisy and Maria are women of color who come from working-class origins, they are both now relatively financially comfortable: they are young, college-educated, and without dependents. They are people with relatively broad life opportunities.

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<sup>15</sup> Silvia Federici, presentation at the “Beyond Good and Evil Commons” seminar, 16 Beaver, New York City, August 2011.

It's also important to note that not all co-op members take advantage of their affordability to pursue less capitalist endeavors. Todd is a middle-class African-American man in his mid 20s who grew up in suburban D.C. and moved into the Watts Co-op in 2006, right after graduating from college. The Watts Co-op is located in the Brightwood neighborhood in northwest D.C. Todd was familiar with the place because his aunt had lived there, and he had spent time there as a child. Todd works as a software developer. The monthly charges for his one-bedroom unit are \$610. With the money he saves, he says:

“I was able to buy a car, and recreational activities. I'm an electronics junkie, since I'm a computer software guy. You always seem to lose [money] as soon as you get it. But it's nice to have those options for the most part. I waste a lot of money eating out at lunch at work every day, that's probably something I wouldn't be doing [if I didn't have the extra money].” [#4]

After our conversation, Todd emails me to note that he also spends some of his extra money playing the stock market. In the long run, he says, he hopes to be able to save enough money living at his co-op to buy his own home in the city – to, he says, follow the path of his aunt, who helped found Watts Co-op and later moved out to buy her own house a few blocks away. But Todd is not just in it for financial reasons. He represents the co-op at community meetings in which neighbors are trying to organize against a Wal-Mart that is slated for construction in their neighborhood. And he tells me that he genuinely cares about the unique quality of his co-op, and the affordability it provides his neighbors whose life chances are more restricted than his own.

### ***Control***

Previous research shows that the ability to gain control over ones housing is important for limited-equity co-op members. A survey of Nashville public housing tenants given the

opportunity to convert their housing to co-op ownership found that one of the two main reasons they were most interested in co-op ownership was so that it would allow them to fix up their units the way they wanted: it would give them control over their housing (Rohe and Stegman 1995). In my research I found that, after affordability, the second most important thing that LECs provide members is a sense of control. Control manifests in three forms: control over the physical space of the building, control over decision-making, and social control over the people in the building. For many LEC members, having control over their housing is a welcome relief from prior experiences living in rental housing. Gloria, an African-American in her 60s, is one of the founders of the Watts co-op, and lives there today. She explains how the building changed after the tenants purchased it and residents were able to gain control over the space, both in terms of physical repairs and decision-making:

“It [had been] a rental. [Columbia] Realty owned this place then. And they – you know, you didn’t have heat during the winter, you didn’t have hot water, it was just a mess... I remember the first year I was here [as a tenant], and the refrigerator I had was practically – you went to open the door, you had to do it carefully, because you felt like the door was going to fall off, that’s how dilapidated it was [she laughs]! And it took me forever, constantly calling the rental office, saying I need a new refrigerator, I’ve got two little kids, the food’s going bad. But as owners, if somebody calls us – usually, they’ll call [the board president]. And say I need a new refrigerator. Well, she’ll have someone come out to check it, because we can’t change it just because you painted your kitchen green and you want a green refrigerator! But if someone checks it and says, yeah, they need a new one, then we just go out and get a new refrigerator, we don’t have to wait and jump through hoops. Or a new stove, or whatever. And that’s what makes the difference. We have a little power, I guess that’s the key word. As board members, and as owners, too. Because the owners who are not on the board, we have a democratic system... So that’s part of the benefit of being owners. Cause you can make a lot of your own decisions, you have the governing power.” [#2]

For Gloria, the democratic nature of the co-op’s self-governance is what makes it a better place to live.

Joanna, of the Piney Branch Co-op, also values the self-governance of the co-op. For her, the main difference between renting and owning has been in her ability to participate in

decision-making together with fellow owners. Her thoughts echo the thoughts of many respondents:

“I guess with me, it was just the knowing that, even though I know we don’t own our units outright, just that I have a part in it. That I do have now a part in this, and I can help on making the decisions of this cooperative, and not having someone standing over us telling us what to do. But we can sit down collectively and decide what we want to do. So that was the difference.” [#32]

The social control possible in the LEC is very attractive to most members. As noted in Chapter 2, Katz and Meyer (1985) warn that self-help housing movements take the responsibility for social policing from the state, and place it on the shoulders of members. Nearly all LEC members who mentioned their collectively imposed social control were grateful for it and thought it increased their quality of life. For Eduardo, a Salvadoran immigrant in his 40s, the social control of the co-op was very important. He came to Washington in 1980, and moved into the Potomac Co-op shortly thereafter, back when it was a rental. After the tenants purchased the building, he served on the co-op board, though he is no longer on the board today. Eduardo lives in a one-bedroom unit with his wife and 22-year-old son, who grew up in the co-op. He has worked for the athletic department at a local university for about 14 years. He describes the social control residents gained over their space after they purchased the building:

“Well, first of all, when we renting, it’s a lot of mess, it’s a lot of crazy everything. It’s too many people coming over here, we don’t know who it is, we don’t know what’s going on. People come and go, up and in, up and in, and everything, so we were lucky when we came into the board because everything changed. We have more securities... Soon as the rules and everything changed, it’s a lot of changes in the building. Now you can see, our building’s quiet. You don’t hear no people running in the hallways, or people making music on top of you, making noise and everything. So this one part has been nice. And everybody respects everybody.” [#10]

Social control can take various forms, including: monitoring who enters the building through cameras or through the work of residents who keep an eye on the front door; writing house rules that prohibit noise and other disturbances, and then enforcing those rules; being

selective about incoming members, which sometimes includes visiting a prospective member's current housing to see how well they maintain it; and not being shy about evicting members who repeatedly violate rules or do not pay their carrying charges. The Broad Branch Co-op appears to have some of the tightest social control of the co-ops studied; it also appears to be very well-run. Magdalena is the co-op president. In her 60s, she is an immigrant from the Dominican Republic who moved into the building in 1994 and helped lead tenants through the purchase of their building, which finally took place in 2004, after years of effort. We sit for an interview in the co-op office, where she is constantly checking a bank of security monitors above her desk. Magdalena is proud of the community that has been built in the building, and the social control it has allowed them to have:

“The way we are set up, and the location where we are – people have more care for the property. And anybody that's not falling in line gets a letter, or we have another meeting, and let them know, okay, you can't do this. This is our property. You can't do this. So there's more caring because we meet – in [rental] apartments, you don't meet, you come and go, whatever – because we meet, and we share the problems of the property or the problems of whatever situation we need to share – we become more neighborly, more family-like. If we don't see somebody for a while, we say, have you seen so-and-so? I haven't seen her. I think she's with her daughter. And you can call the daughter, cause we have numbers of relatives and stuff, you can call the daughter and say, I haven't seen your mother, is everything okay? So there is this other community of, kind of community, rather, of more neighborly, more friendly. If something happens, somebody calls and says, hey [Magdalena], did you see, did you hear? Somebody came up the [stairs]! In a [rental] apartment, maybe they *might* do that, maybe they might call and ask about each other, so maybe you have a nice apartment [building], where it's not too big, but a big apartment [building], nobody's paying attention. So for us, there is that little plus. When we were getting ready to purchase, we didn't have cameras, we did have the call up thing, it didn't work okay -- but it was unbelievable how we had a chain reaction of anything that wasn't normal, phones would start ringing. So-and-so just walked in the building! So-and-so, so-and-so! [She laughs]. It was like *major, major* policing and what-not, because we had to protect the building from any situation that would not allow us to purchase the building without a hassle.” [#26]

The “major, major policing” Magdalena describes was necessary, she thinks, in order to keep the building community strong. Any incursion of criminality or even misbehavior could

have weakened the building community and distracted the tenants from their goal of collective purchase. Social control is clearly important for LECs – and, as will be discussed below, is directly connected to who gains access to the commons.

### *Stability*

Previous research has demonstrated that housing stability plays a key role in supporting families. Stable housing here is defined as housing in which occupants are able to remain for the long-term, without fear of displacement. With stable housing, children are more likely to succeed in school, adults are better able to take advantage of job opportunities, and people generally experience greater emotional well-being (The National Housing Task Force 1988; Haveman, Wolfe et al. 1991; Bratt 2002). In my research, I found that the stability of co-op living has been important to members regardless of degree of life opportunity. Members valued the ability to will their units to their heirs; they also valued the stability that comes with knowing that their building will not be sold out from beneath them. Stability also meant co-op members did not need to worry about being evicted or having their rents suddenly raised. Though D.C. has strong tenant protections, illegal evictions and rent raises do happen, and tenants – particularly in gentrifying neighborhoods – worry about losing their housing.

Rachel is a single white woman in her early 40s who grew up in an LEC in New York City. She lives in the Fenwick Co-op, located in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of Columbia Heights. Unlike the other LECs in my sample, and the vast bulk of LECs in the city, the Fenwick was founded not when existing tenants got together to purchase their building, but from scratch, as an intentional community for social justice activists. Rachel pays just under \$700 a month for her one-bedroom unit. She is a poet who also works as an organizational

consultant to small non-profits, and teaches yoga and writing. The co-op, she says, has been a very supportive space for herself and other members to make career changes and pursue educational goals. The support comes both from relatively low monthly payments, but also from the stability of the place, and perhaps also from a sense that other co-op members are supportive of fellow members making life changes. She explains:

“I think there’s something about having a supportive space for this kind of thing here. You know, [one member, Bashir,] decided, I fucking hate being an engineer, and he went to get an MFA in poetry! And he’s having problems now paying all of his bills, but – [Tina] got her masters, [so did Sheila, Patsy]. [Kristy] got her undergraduate degree, [Amaya] as well, got her masters, so. There’s something about the stability of this place, and knowing that we can’t get kicked out, even maybe psychologically, that I think for many people has helped them make some sort of jump.” [#21]

Though Rachel is working class and could not afford market-rate ownership, she does, because of her education and work history, have a relatively broad range of life opportunity, as do several of her fellow co-op members. Because the Fenwick is explicitly designed as affordable housing for social justice activists, it attracts people who are politically committed to the limited-equity co-op model. For these activists, while affordability is crucial, the co-op’s stability and sense of support are also important factors.

Patricia, the president of the board of the Potomac Co-op, is another LEC member with a relatively broad range of life opportunity, for whom the co-op’s stability has been an important factor. She is an African-American middle-class woman who works a relatively high-paying job as a legal assistant in a corporate law firm downtown. Patricia is single and does not have children, and could afford to pay more than the \$800-something she pays for her one-bedroom unit. But part of the reason she values her co-op is because her sister lives in the building, and over the years has raised her daughter there, Patricia’s niece, who Patricia adores. Patricia

describes why it was important for her to help fight to stay in the building by purchasing it and maintaining it as a co-op over time:

“I think what kept me there, was my sister, at the time, she was in school, and she got involved with this guy and got married, of course, it didn’t work out, and she had a daughter. A five-month-old daughter. And I said, why don’t you move here. I’d never met [my niece]. And she moved, and that’s what really made me stay in the building. My sister actually got sick with sarcoidosis, which is an autoimmune disease, and so – and she’s doing okay now, but she has problems from time to time, she’s hospitalized, and – I tell you, [my niece] is the most magnificent young lady you ever want. So I was so happy to have helped her. She graduated last year from Temple University, degree in chemistry, so she’s going on to graduate school. So I’m working hard to help her get in. And she’s just – everybody loves her. I could take ten of her! I’d squeeze them all in one bedroom. I would say, oh god this is – because she is just a delight. And everyone who meets her feels that way. That’s what really kept me there, and really made me want to work hard to save the [building] – because it’s her home. Just to have everybody evicted, everybody have to up and move – we were working toward that goal, I guess [she laughs]!” [#6]

Patricia values the co-op in large part because it has provided a stable place for her ill sister and growing niece to live. While she herself could afford to live in market-rate housing, the co-op has enabled her to support her family in ways that might not otherwise be possible. For both Rachel and Patricia, stability of housing is intertwined with both affordability and community.

### ***Community***

Earlier research on limited-equity cooperatives has highlighted the importance of community within low-income co-ops. Leavitt and Saegert, in their study of limited-equity housing co-ops in Harlem, found that co-op members came together to share resources; these members formed what Leavitt and Saegert call “community-households” that stretch beyond the bounds of a typical nuclear family or self-contained apartment (1988). The idea that a housing cooperative could itself be a kind of household on a larger scale is evident in my research. One

of my respondents, for instance, refers to his co-op's basement community room as the "family room." In my research, community manifests itself in different ways. Co-op members may help each other out financially, socialize together, or provide emotional support during difficult times. Members describe doing things like: visiting fellow members in the hospital; sending gift baskets and cards to members in times of illness or sorrow; cooking meals together; throwing parties for one another, or for the entire building community; lending each other money; helping elderly members with technology; and spending time with each other's children. In these ways, co-op members engage in non-market practices such as those described by Pavlovskaya in her (2004) work on household economies in Moscow in the 1990s. Several interviewees said that the cooperative felt "like a family," in comparison to the more anonymous rental situations they had lived in before.

In several co-ops, community manifested in part through mutual financial support. At one co-op, if members need to make repairs to their units that they cannot afford to make, the co-op lends them the money for repairs, which members pay back in installments. At another co-op, members loaned each other money to help buy into the initial purchase of their complex. The case of Penn Branch Cooperative is illustrative. When the tenants were in the process of buying their buildings, they went through a period of self-management while they were still owned by their landlord. The tenants realized they needed to raise their own rents in order to cover their costs. So rents, which had been in the neighborhood of \$120-\$140, were raised by about \$100 – a substantial increase. Margaret is a white woman in her 60s who has lived in the complex since 1968 and currently is the treasurer of the co-op board. She explains how the tenants association supported their low-income members during this time:

"99% of the time people paid us the rent. We had no problem with that. But we did have people who didn't have much money. So we asked people for extra money each month,

to develop a fund so we could subsidize the people who didn't have money every month. Some people gave \$50, some people gave \$10. So people who were limited income, we supplemented them, we subsidized. The rent had gone up \$100 a month all of a sudden, and we told them come to us if you have problems, and we'll work it out. A number of people came, not a lot. This was enough to meet the monthly needs. People contributed! It was great." [#40]

Needless to say, this kind of tenant mutual aid probably would not be found in a typical rental apartment building. It was because the tenants were working together to purchase the buildings that they felt moved to contribute to each other to ensure that everyone could remain in the complex.

Socializing together is part of what builds community as well. For co-op founders, socializing was a very important part of coming together to purchase the buildings. In general, respondents seem to enjoy their neighbors, and appreciate the fact that they know each other and feel comfortable sharing space in their building. Alice is the board president of the Anacostia Co-op, a building in the Brightwood neighborhood that the tenants collectively purchased as a LEC in 1983, and that they later converted to market-rate cooperative ownership. Alice is an African-American in her 60s who helped found the co-op, and has served intermittently on the board over the years. For her, socializing was an important part of co-op life from the beginning, and it saddens her to see that today, the co-op community is less social. She says:

"We had parties *all the time* [thumping table for emphasis]. Even after we bought. If it was somebody's birthday, we had a party, if it was Christmas, Thanksgiving, New Year's, whatever, we had a party, and everybody came! It was like, okay, on Christmas day, somebody was cooking, and you went from this apartment to this apartment to this apartment eating food, people had open house. But then again, we basically were West Indians, southern blacks, you know – it's a different kind of spirit. I don't know. The younger people, I don't know, it's like we came out of that me generation." [#11]

Alice later notes that she appreciates the co-op because most of her family is in St. Louis and the Caribbean; in the Anacostia, she has something of a surrogate family. A number of members describe the family-like feel of their co-ops. In some co-ops, members literally *are*

family. In seven of the ten co-ops and former co-ops, members of an extended family live in different units. In two of these co-ops, both with long waiting lists, family members are given preferential treatment in terms of moving in. Mary's son moved into the Watts Co-op in 2009. Mary had already moved out, but she was still connected socially with co-op members. And then when her nephew Todd needed a place to live, she suggested that he move into the Watts, too. She described how she helped make that happen:

“[A]fter [Todd] graduated [from college], it was time for [Todd] to get out [of his parents' house], I couldn't think of a better place. And we were just lucky that they had a vacancy. So you know, I'm like, hey. I helped start it, so I should have some kind of pull! So I called them, '[Virginia, Opal], my nephew'--. And they know that when you get someone like that, you take a chance because, he's going to pay his rent. 'You don't pay your rent, I'm calling your aunt!' [she laughs]. Or, and, [my son]'s over here, and just like with [my son]. You can't stay there [if you don't pay] because it's part of *my* reputation too.” [#3]

Having extended family in the building builds trust among members – not only that the new family members will be good neighbors, but also that they will pay their carrying charges on time, lest they shame their family members who worked to find them a spot in the co-op.

Finally, co-ops can provide a supportive emotional community for their members that is less likely to be found in rental or condominium buildings. Brian's story is illustrative. Brian, who was introduced in the last chapter, is in his mid-50s, and lives in the Broad Branch Co-op. He is an African-American man who moved to D.C. after graduating from college. He has lived at the Broad Branch since the mid 80s, and has been part of several different tenant organizing efforts that have taken place in the building over the years, including the one that led to the tenants finally buying the building and converting it to a cooperative in 2004. Brian is an artist who has worked in theater for many years. He had been evicted from his last apartment before moving into the Broad Branch, because, he admits, he hadn't really been paying attention to his bills, and had gotten behind on his rent. He was homeless for about two weeks, staying nights in

a park and also at his place of work. That brief experience of homelessness had a profound impact on him, and having a stable home has been of keen importance to him ever since. In the mid 1980s, Brian learned he was HIV-positive. He decided to keep his day job at a non-profit organization in order to have health insurance and financial stability, and to pursue his art on the side. He now earns about \$60,000 a year, and is one of the only people in his co-op who does not receive a federal housing subsidy, but pays the full HUD-determined amount for his unit, which is about \$1200. He does not have children, and, as of recently, lives alone. When Brian first moved into his unit it was a studio apartment; it was later enlarged to a one-bedroom during a building renovation. Though he does not personally receive a housing subsidy, living in a community that is dedicated to providing affordable housing for low-income people is of deep importance to him. He describes why living at the Broad Branch has been so important for him:

“It’s been *very* important for me. [He pauses.] In terms of – for three reasons. It’s been important – it’s important to have a home. I’ve – that little teeny period of time when I was evicted, and didn’t have a place to stay, doesn’t even count as homelessness. That was maybe like two weeks. But because I’m an artist, I know a lot of artists, and I know a lot of low-income people through my work and just socially – I know a *lot* of people who are in the shelters. So having a home is important to me. And since that time, that’s been the scariest thing to me. Maybe the only thing scarier would be getting caught up in the legal system and locked up. After that, my biggest fear would be being homeless. So it’s been important to me to have a home. Then, for my own political feelings, it’s been important to me to live in a situation where it’s mixed economically, I like that it’s low-income, even if I’m not low-income, and I don’t benefit from it directly in that sense, I like the concept of that. I don’t mind paying, if people who couldn’t pay get to stay here, because it’s just *so hard* in this city, affordable housing is so hard to find, and is drying up faster and faster. And it’s important because in a way it has had a family feel to it. I have a close, extended family, most of them are in St. Louis, and I have a family of artists that I’ve worked with over the years. But in addition to that, this building, the tenants in it, we have a building family. And that feels very good. It feels very good. People care about each other, they watch out for each other.” [#28]

He goes on to tell a story about how he has felt cared for in the building:

“I had a roommate, a very close friend here, for almost twenty years, who passed away in December. And this is a teeny, tiny apartment, imagine, for half the time it was half this size. So that’s a long time to be in a small space with someone. So it’s very different

now. And I'm just getting used now, to basically living here alone. And so it helped to be living in a building where I knew the people, people sort of knew what was going on with me, and were very kind about that. Even the little boy one day, downstairs, a 13-year-old boy, just came up to me and said, how *are* you? And I was so amazed that he – I didn't even know what he was talking about, because it just didn't even occur to me that he could be expressing concern because he knew my friend had died. He said, well, how are you doing? Are you okay up there? And I was so touched by that. Because this kid is 12 or 13. I wouldn't even guess that he even knew I was in the building [he laughs], or paid any attention to me whatsoever, any of that. But people *do* care about each other.”  
[#28]

Compared to many other LEC members, Brian has a relatively broad range of life choices. His HIV-positive status, however, narrows them. Having the emotional support of the Broad Branch co-op community has been deeply important for him.

### **Accessing the commons**

In my research, I operate from the understanding that no commons is open to all. As Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop (1975) insist, a commons is by definition open only to members; for them, an “open-access” commons would be a contradiction in terms. The question of who has access to the commons, therefore, is paramount. In D.C. LECs, access varies. Of the seven existing LECs studied, five are filled to capacity and maintain waiting lists for units. Two, in contrast, are desperately searching for members. The two that are searching for members appear to be in that situation because, in one case, most of the available units are studios, which are too small for families; and, in both cases, the co-op carrying charges, while below market rent levels, are not substantially lower, given the less-than-central locations of the respective properties. The two co-ops that are actively searching for members do not have the luxury of being particularly picky about applicants. But for the five co-ops with waiting lists, members must make decisions about who deserves to join the commons.

Decisions about who should be admitted to the co-op can be difficult. Co-op members must balance their desire to provide affordable housing to people who truly need it with the financial reality that they must have members who can pay their monthly carrying charges on time. Rachel describes the tension at the Fenwick Co-op, which was explicitly founded for low-income social justice activists:

“We obviously need to accept people who make below a certain amount, but we finally also decided that they need to make *above* a certain amount. They have to prove that they can afford to pay their carrying charges on time... So there’s also been this real internal debate around, what’s the benefit to living here? And I think for some members of the co-op, who gets to live in here is sort of a form – almost of charity. It’s like, we should really only accept members who really need this financially. And the truth of the matter is, everyone will benefit from living here. My opinion, shared by some members of the co-op, is that even if you don’t make a lot of money, because you’re pursuing activism or whatever, you should still have your [financial] shit in order. Or be willing to get there.” [#21]

At the Piney Branch Co-op, carrying charges are extremely low, and demand for units is great. The co-op requires that new members earn at least \$19,000 for a 3-bedroom unit because, as the manager says, “we don’t like to set anybody up for failure.” But as Phyllis describes, the board selects people in part based on need:

“[I]t was one young lady that wanted to come in at one time... she making like \$51,000 a year, and she was living by herself. Well, she can afford to go out and buy something, or get something, on the private market. Whereas you take a person with five, six children making \$51,000, they can’t do it. So I think it’s a good thing to have a limited-equity co-op, where – it’s good to have people to come in that maybe have more money or whatever, but I don’t think it’s good for the people that doesn’t have money that you’re taking units up that they could use. That they need, for their children, to raise their children. And that’s a good thing, under the cooperative form, as far as buying that way, it’s good. I don’t have any children here [anymore], but a lot of people out here that have children, they go through a lot out there trying to raise their kids. They’re doing very well here.” [#31]

But not all co-ops select members based on financial need. At the Broad Branch and Watts Co-ops, family members and friends of friends are given priority, regardless of their particular “need” for affordable housing. During my interview with the Broad Branch president,

we are interrupted by a phone call from a person inquiring about any vacancies in the co-op. Magdalena says into the receiver, “I’m sorry, we have no vacancies, for anyone at this time. You’re welcome.” She hangs up and rolls her eyes. “Girl, sometimes it’s twenty calls, oh my god, sometimes. Even if we were to have – having a [waiting] list. Twenty calls a day? How many a year? Why even bother?” People rarely move out of the co-op, but I ask her how they handle it when a unit does become available. She replies:

“We sort of start in the building first. The building is first. But legally, we supposed to have a list, because of HUD, but this is a *co-op*. And not because you’re on a list, you’re gonna get it! Cause you must qualify, one, and two, if you don’t come with some support for the co-op, [we] don’t take you because you’re first on the list. So the list is good, but – psht. It don’t mean a whole lot of anything.” [#26]

Instead of working from a waiting list, the board first determines whether anyone in the building has friends or relatives that they would recommend move into the co-op. This appears to be how most of the people who have moved in since the tenants bought the building arrived. At the Broad Branch, the fact that members pay based on their income means it’s impossible for a relatively high earner to get a great deal, as it is possible in the other co-ops, where carrying charges are set regardless of individual income. But it does enable people with *potentially* higher incomes, like Maria, to make life choices that lower their income and allow them to qualify for the subsidy, when from a policy standpoint the argument could be made that Maria’s unit should be reserved for someone who does not have the opportunity to earn a higher income. Similarly, it could be argued that Todd, the young software developer at the Watts Co-op, does not need the level of affordability his co-op gives him: \$610 a month for his one-bedroom apartment. For the co-ops that prioritize family and friends, regardless of need, social ties and feelings of responsibility help to ensure that members will pay their carrying charges on time, and participate in the work of the commons to a certain degree.

On the other hand, access to a commons based strictly on financial need – and not taking into account social connections – can be risky for the commons as a whole. The situation at the Piney Branch Co-op is illustrative. There, Joanna, the property manager, is concerned that, because the co-op is *so* affordable, it attracts many people who simply need affordable housing, and are not interested in doing the work of the co-op. She explains:

“[S]ome people come in here because they want to be homeowners. And some people just move here because it’s affordable. Oh, here’s a cheap place to move, let’s go... Even though they have to pay [the \$1000 share fee]. Because a lot of them have come from places where they were paying maybe twelve, thirteen hundred dollars a month, and they have only had two bedrooms. Well, if I can come here and get this three-bedroom for \$500, that’s \$700 the first month I’ve saved, \$700 the second month. So \$1000 is nothing, I can give it to you.” [#32]

I ask whether members participate in the work of the co-op. Her response:

“No. No. The ones that came in with the mentality of being a homeowners, they will participate. Those that came in just because it was affordable housing, they don’t participate... The beginning, I think we had more with the mentality of being owners. As we go along, I think [the attitude is] gonna be more – it’s affordable housing, let’s move in.” [#32]

When asked why she thinks these attitudes are changing over time, she says:

“Probably one main reason is the city is closing up so many of their public housing. So people are scrambling to find somewhere to go that they can afford. And then if they come here, and we don’t take vouchers, then they gotta fend for themselves, so, oh this is affordable, let’s stay.” [#32]

When asked what this means for the co-op, she replies:

“It means that you have a small number that’s out here working hard to keep this place, and the others are just sliding, saying, well, if you fight for yours, then mine’s gonna be saved too, then I don’t have to fight.” [#32]

Piney Branch’s carrying charge of \$609 for a four-bedroom unit is less than a *quarter* of the HUD-determined fair market rent for a four-bedroom unit in Washington, D.C., which for 2011 was \$2466. The Piney Branch is one block from a subway station, and its units are townhomes, each with its own small front and back yard. This is desirable housing. Yet,

precisely because it is so affordable, Joanna argues, members have less of a sense of ownership, and the co-op – so Joanna fears – may suffer in the end. What Joanna is describing, of course, is a version of Hardin’s tragedy of the commons: many members use the housing, and only a few work at maintaining it. The end result is possibly failure, and destruction of the commons. Here, then, is one of the primary challenges of a commons that exists within the larger structure of capitalism: an affordable living environment attracts people whose main concern is affordability, but who are not necessarily interested in collective responsibility for maintenance.

The larger problem is that, in a capitalist society, the commons becomes a scarce commodity. In a city in which public housing is being torn down and affordable housing of all kinds is in short supply, a commons of 86 limited-equity cooperatives is hardly enough to meet the need for affordable housing.

### **Life outside capitalism**

But for those who gain access to them, these 86 LECs create something of an oasis: not just from the capitalist housing market, but also from a more general capitalist aura that Maria, as will be seen in Chapter 7, describes as “yuppie.” One longtime co-op leader, Sheila, sees the value of limited-equity cooperatives in creating affordable housing for people so that they do not have to constantly worry about their housing, and can instead turn their attention to other things. Sheila is an African-American in her 60s who lives in the Fenwick Co-op. As she says:

“I have always seen cooperatives as being an opportunity to create housing for people – housing for people that they can afford, and don’t have to worry about their housing! Then they give you the opportunity to do a whole bunch of other stuff! Cause you don’t have to worry about the primary worry that people have, and that’s housing.” [#24]

Later, she continues:

“So you’ve got a nice decent place and you don’t have to worry about your housing. So now, you can do other things, education, whatever you need for a job, you can – that’s the opportunity! And that’s how I see limited-equity cooperatives, as creating that opportunity.” [#24]

For Sheila, the “other stuff” LECs allow her to do is social justice activism in her community. She had come to D.C. in 1978, moving into an African-American women’s collective, and working on issues of violence against women and women’s rights, particularly black women’s rights. Later, she went to work for the grassroots organization that helped the Rock Creek Co-op form, and she has personally helped many tenants associations throughout the city form LECs. She continues to work full-time as a housing organizer.

But the contradiction here is that, even as the commons *provides* its members so much, it also *requires* quite a bit on the part of its members. It in fact requires members to “worry,” as Sheila says, about their housing in significant ways. It is to this question of what the commons requires that I now turn.

## Chapter 6: What the Commons Requires

Discussions of the commons in the anti-capitalist literature are highly hopeful. The commons, it is suggested, can provide the basis for a life outside of capitalism. Gibson-Graham, for example, envision the commons as a space where people can collectively engage in ethical decision-making around new economic structures (2006). As suggested in the last chapter, the commons provides people with support to begin to live in ways outside of capitalism. For people with relatively narrow life opportunities, the commons provides a level of affordability that allows them to live more gracefully and securely than they could in a market-rate rental situation. For people with broader life opportunities, the commons provides members the opportunity to more fully alter their relation to waged labor. But the commons does not only *provide*; it also *requires*. In this chapter, I take up the challenges of the work the urban commons requires. First, I outline my understanding of the work of the commons as taking place in two distinct stages: the work of both restoring and maintaining the commons. Next, I look more closely at the problem of participation in the commons. Finally, I discuss how the work of the commons is gendered.

### **The work of the commons: two phases**

Review of the literature and my own research reveal two phases of work associated with the commons. First, there is the work of *reclaiming* the commons. This can happen on multiple scales. In Chapter 4, we saw the work that went into reclaiming the commons at the scale of the city, in terms of creating law that enabled tenants to do the work of turning their rental buildings into housing co-ops. Here, I look at the work required to reclaim the commons at the scale of a single project. This is often the most exciting work, the work for which people have the most

energy, because it is geared towards the concrete goal of saving their housing. Second, there is the work of *maintaining* the commons. This is the work of maintaining the co-ops over the long term. This is much harder work, because it has no end in sight: the goal is simply to survive, perhaps to thrive, to keep the co-op functioning over time. This is the hard ongoing work of the commons that tends not to be recognized by proponents of LECs or of commons more broadly. While alterglobalization theorists have focused more on the political implications of the reclamation of the commons, and common property regime (CPR) theorists have focused more on how commons are maintained over time, I attempt here to analyze both phases of the work.

### ***Reclaiming the commons***

The initial work of reclaiming the commons is of a particular nature: exciting, intense, and suffused with energy. The idea that a group of people – often, people who have had little power over their work and home lives – can collectively take over space and make it their own is powerful enough to buoy them through months, even years, of hard work. Interestingly, the CPR literature has very little say about the act of reclaiming the commons. My reading of the CPR literature leads me to suspect this is for two reasons. First, CPR theorists have tended to be interested in ongoing commons, and in understanding how long-term commons have existed over time, rather than how they start. And second, CPR theorists do not seem particularly interested in the politics of reclaiming space; while no doubt many of them are politically supportive of commons efforts, they tend to couch their work in economic, rather than political, terms. But the reclamation of a commons is necessarily a political act: it is a taking of power, and it can be deeply thrilling for participants. Blomley describes the intense activities that surrounded attempts to reclaim the commons in the form of the takeover of an

abandoned building in downtown Vancouver. People cleaned up the building, painted it, designed and hung posters declaring their collective right to the building, and attempted to occupy the interior of the building itself (Blomley 2008). In Harlem, New York and Echo Park-Silverlake, Los Angeles, tenants worked very hard to found their limited-equity co-ops. They held countless meetings with fellow tenants, negotiated with their respective city governments, and worked hard to fix up their buildings and devise their own management structures (Leavitt and Saegert 1990; Heskin 1991). Because this early phase has such clear and tangible goals, it tends to be deeply meaningful for participants. More generally, the rousing call to “reclaim the commons!” (cf Klein 2001) resonates with people who yearn for collective control over common resources.

I have found that when tenants work together to purchase their buildings, they do so under intense pressures of time and money. They work together because they fear that, if they do not collectively purchase their buildings, they will lose their homes to condominium conversion or higher rents. The tenant purchase process often takes over a year, time which is riddled with meetings, fundraisers, worry, and excitement. During this time, some tenants may voluntarily leave the building, frustrated with the process and fearing that the purchase will fail. This puts the remaining tenants in the difficult position of attracting new members to a co-op association that does not yet own its building, and has not yet completed renovations. But the intensity of the process keeps a core of members going. In the stage of reclaiming the commons, members have fairly clear goals: purchasing the building, overseeing renovation, and coming up with rules and procedures for living together.

Many co-op members look back on the early days of their projects with fondness, even as they recognize the intensity of the work at that time. Margaret remembers the early days at the Penn Branch Co-op, which began formation in 1978:

“The early years were the best part. They were they hardest, but they were the best. The board of directors would get together Sunday mornings once a month, and somebody would always make breakfast. With lots of coffee and cigarettes, and we always found solutions. In those first couple of years we would even pray, at times. We had Jewish and Christian and Muslim people, and we’d sit there and say this prayer. And we *needed* prayer!” [#40]

Sarah, also a white woman in her 60s, was an early leader of the Penn Branch purchase effort. She worked at organizing the complex non-stop, and finally had to take some time off; in the fall of 1978, she went to go visit her brother in Canada. While she was away, she stayed abreast of the purchase and renovation process through exchanging letters with fellow tenants, with whom she had developed close friendships. I sit with Sarah in her living room and, in a hushed voice, she reads to me from a letter she received from a fellow tenant in November 1978:

“I would have written sooner but I’ve really lacked both time and energy. Right now there seems to be a lull, after a prolonged period of almost constant meetings. I am trying to relax a bit, but find it hard even when I am doing nothing. Somehow it’s unreal. We are, however, plodding along, and if you were to tell me that this craziness was going to turn out fine, I guess I wouldn’t have any reason to argue with you. Right now we are going through our monthly membership crunch, looking for people to populate [two former tenants’] apartments. We are also beginning to figure out what will happen during rehab, and how we will ever survive it. We are also still waiting for the [city] money. Any day now. How are things in Canada? Any idea when you’ll be returning? We miss you.” [#35]

The intensity of the process conveyed in the letter Sarah received is illustrative of the kind of work that starting a limited-equity co-op involves. Sarah and Gretchen are both looking back at the formation of a co-op that took place over thirty years before our interviews. The passage of time, of course, can make for nostalgia. But even members of co-ops that have been

formed relatively recently still exhibit the same enthusiasm for the initial phase of gaining control of their housing.

Sandy, an African-American in her 60s who grew up in D.C., is the president of the smallest and most recently formed co-op in my study, the Tiber Cooperative. The Tiber Co-op is located in D.C.'s Trinidad neighborhood, an area that in the 1990s was beset with gun and drug violence, and that was long considered one of the city's more dangerous neighborhoods. That reputation has begun to change with the resurgence of economic development along nearby H Street Northeast, a major commercial corridor that was devastated during the 1968 riots and is now beginning to recover. The Tiber Co-op is in an area that is on the edge of gentrification. It is a four-unit building; each unit has one bedroom, as well as a back porch that could be enclosed to create an extra room. The tenants purchased the building in 2005, and Sandy led the effort. While as of our interview the purchase was completed, the building was still largely unrenovated, and only two of the four units were occupied. Though the co-op association owned the building, the building was yet to stabilize. In a sense, then, this was a commons still in the midst of the work of reclamation. Sandy describes how, while waiting for renovation money from the city, she has taken it upon herself to fix up the other units in an attempt to attract new members:

“I had renovated the apartment upstairs. I took my income tax money one year, and said, lemme start renovating. Yeah! Why not? Get somebody up in here, cause I can't be in here by myself. So I had to make it look appealing, and I did the one that [the second member is] in. I'm gonna be working on this one [points to the unit across the hall] cause that's a vacant unit, and [points upstairs] that's a vacant unit, but it's a storage – man, I gotta get all that stuff outta there. So basically I started renovating.” [#1]

Sandy is currently unemployed, and has worked most recently cleaning houses. She does not have much extra money, and it seems remarkable that she spent her tax return one year on fixing up a unit in which she does not live, in an ownership situation that will not allow her to

reap the financial rewards of increasing home values. But her entire demeanor in describing the work of getting her co-op started is one of high-octane energy. She is dedicated to this project. But it is also clear that she is still in the initial phases of co-op ownership. She is still working to reclaim the commons. It is unclear how, once renovations are completed and new members are firmly ensconced in the building, they will move on to the next phase of maintenance.

At another co-op across town, tenants were similarly suffused with the initial excitement of the work of purchasing and renovating the building. In the late 1980s, the Oxon Run tenants association started trying to buy their building and convert it to a co-op. The Oxon Run is a 15-unit building located in the Columbia Heights neighborhood. At the time of their purchase, Columbia Heights was still reeling from the disinvestment that had followed the 1968 riots, which had devastated the neighborhood's commercial core. Yet the Oxon Run tenants, who had worked hard to drive drug dealing from their block, were determined to own their building. A 1990 staff report from the non-profit organization that was assisting the Oxon Run tenants association in forming a co-op describes their process:

“The members have been meeting as a whole, with an average of nine members attending each meeting, to discuss the development plan, what carrying charges would be affordable, what scope of rehab work is desired, to approve By-Laws, and discuss House Rules. They interviewed three management companies, and in the process discussed many issues related to management such as on-site cleaning and management duties, the process for approval of co-op expenditures, and roles of management company v.s. Board. In sum, a lot of groundwork has been laid for a basic understanding by most of the members of how a cooperative works.”

This brief report describes much of the work of co-op formation. The fact that the planning meetings at Oxon Run regularly drew nearly two thirds of the tenants attests to the degree to which they felt invested in the purchase process. One of the tenants who attended virtually every meeting was Abai. Abai is an Ethiopian man who immigrated to Washington in the 1980s, and shortly thereafter moved into a one-bedroom apartment at the Oxon Run. He

shared it with his brother, as well as with other immigrant friends who occasionally needed a place to stay. For Abai, the founding of the Oxon Run Co-op was a very special time. Abai, who speaks English with a heavy accent, jokes that even though one of his early fellow tenants, Mrs. Jones, could barely understand his speech, they grew close through working together to buy the building:

“The first thing that was a beautiful thing really, that happened, [Mrs. Jones] – still, still, you have to live with me to understand me – she couldn’t still understand me. ‘What did he say?’ she says to [my partner], ‘What did he say?’ [He laughs.] Still but she loves me, still she likes me, still she likes me. So there were many people that relate. [Working on the process of co-op formation] brings you together as a unit, fifteen families, as a unit, it brings you. You discuss, you share their problems. This is the innermost thing. So it brings you as a collective, and it gives you confidence too, really, to decide on things.” [#18]

But Abai found that once the hard work of getting the co-op started was over, and there was less of a need for collective work, people became less interested in participating in the joint work of the co-op. Abai compares the founding of a co-op with a political revolution – and the revolution’s aftermath:

“[I]t is as any – for example third world countries, with these leaders. [Starting the co-op] is like a revolution, in many ways. Every revolution – when they step to power, period, they forget everything, they become reactionaries, really. The same thing with our [co-op] – really it is, because you are not thinking it through. After you become a cooperative, then it is a new problem. Then you have to maintain it. It is easy, really, to bring people, you tell them, they come, but then you have to maintain it, it is [not] the same.” [#18]

Maintaining the cooperative over the long term, for Abai and for other co-op members, is a different problem – and in some ways is a much more difficult one. It’s apt that Abai compares the founding of his co-op with a revolution, as he is essentially wrestling with the same question that has vexed revolutionary leaders throughout history: once a revolution takes place, how is a new society formed in its wake (cf Hardt 2007)? Years later, as will be detailed in the next

chapter, the Oxon Run Co-op voted to convert to market-rate condominium ownership status: thus losing its affordability, and, for some members, its sense of stability and community as well.

### *Maintaining the commons*

Reclaiming the commons requires a certain amount of intense work with the clear goals of purchasing the building, renovating it, and coming up with rules and procedures for living together. Maintaining the commons, on the other hand, is a much murkier affair. The problem is that there is no one goal, no ending in sight. As discussed in Chapter 2, much of the existing research on commons self-management comes through the CPR literature, which has tended to focus on natural and digital commons (cf Ostrom 1990; van Laerhoven and Ostrom 2007). Far fewer studies, however, examine the particular nature of maintaining an urban commons.

Eizenberg examines management of community gardens in New York City, looking at a model in which gardeners are given collective legal ownership of their space, and therefore have more responsibilities in terms of managing it. Her study, however, does not focus on the daily maintenance of the gardens as much as the politics of collective ownership (Eizenberg 2011).

For most co-op members, the goal of maintaining the commons is simply to hang onto that for which they have worked so hard. There are many elements of this work. These include conducting physical maintenance of the co-op; staying on top of co-op finances, including taxes, utilities, and loan payments; ensuring that members pay their carrying charges on time; selecting new members and sometimes evicting others; and periodically revising house rules and doing other ongoing work to address issues of collective living as they arise. The challenge of all of this work is that it is ongoing, and never ends. Here, I highlight my respondents' reflections on this work.

Revising rules for living together is one part of the work of maintaining the commons.

As Hardt writes, collective revising of laws to fit the needs of the current generation is an eminently Jeffersonian act. He quotes Jefferson on this point:

“it may be proved that no society can make a perpetual constitution, or even a perpetual law. The earth belongs always to the living generation... Every constitution, then, and every law, naturally expires at the end of 19 years. If it be enforced longer, it is an act of force and not of right” (quoted in Hardt 2007 56-57).

Co-op members recognize that collective self-governance requires periodic revision of rules for living together, which requires time and work. Magdalena, the president of the Broad Branch Co-op, explains:

“Anything that we see that we need to do create a new policy, to bring something in, something simple, like a bike rack – cause all of a sudden people are riding bikes, and they just parking them under a thing, and the mud and dirt and – oh, no, no, no, we need some controls. So get a meeting, and make a policy about bringing in your bikes, where you gonna put them, and lock them up, and so on. Everything now, one person used to have a pet, now we have a few people with pets, we need a pet policy that makes sense, you can be fined if you don’t follow. Parking, there’s a parking policy. But it’s all additional to what we started out with. So as you go – it’s a work in progress, it just never stops.” [#26]

Magdalena’s description of the co-op as a “work in progress” that “never stops” underscores the constant and consistent work required of maintaining the commons. Her comment also speaks to the need for a commons to adapt to changes over time. It is clear that the Broad Branch membership is learning as they go: they are engaged in experiential learning. Writing from a psychology perspective, Borkman theorizes collective self-help/mutual aid groups as a commons, and emphasizes the need for experiential learning to maintain these commons (1999). Successful LECs engage in experiential learning, adapting to new circumstances, figuring out which approaches work best, and constantly working to create a better system for living.

One of the difficult parts of the work of the commons is making sure fellow members contribute to the co-op. At the bare minimum, this contribution is financial, in the form of paying their carrying charges in a timely manner. While many respondents dreamed of fuller participation by co-op members in co-op affairs, it was sometimes even difficult to get members to pay carrying charges on time. For much of Whitney's seven and a half years at the Fenwick Co-op, she has been the treasurer, a position which has demanded a great deal of work – including, importantly, the emotional work of dealing with members who could not or would not pay their monthly carrying charges. As she describes:

“Because we're not authoritarian and don't have one leader that tells us what do to, people can get lax on paying. We had a very big problem with two members who didn't pay their carrying charges. One didn't pay for a year, and one didn't pay for nine months. And those were *intentional*. And we had three other members who got behind and weren't paying. You have to be this confrontational figure. And you're constantly confronting people about money! And it's hard, and they sometimes get really nasty to you. Not only do you have so much work to complete, and it's on a regular basis – and then you're having to deal with people that don't pay and are angry about it and get up in your face about it. And it wears on you after a while. You're watching other people not doing anything!” [#23]

Whitney is running up against one of the primary contradictions of the commons within capitalism: though these spaces may have been created as a way to try to shelter their members from the harshest demands of the housing market, they still require financial contributions from members who maybe have difficulty paying the bills. Co-op members sometimes find themselves in the very uncomfortable position of demanding payment from their fellow members. Even though the money now does not go to a landlord's profit but rather to keeping the co-op alive, sometimes members still, for whatever reason, will not contribute. And other members have to do the hard, emotionally draining work of making them pay up.

But if members continually refuse to pay their co-op fees – to contribute to the commons at the most basic level – then other members must take on the work of exclusion, for the sake of

the overall health of the co-op. At the Broad Branch, people almost always pay fees on time, but occasionally someone does not. Magdalena, the co-op president, describes the hard line she had to take against one member who had not paid fees for several months running:

“So I have to get really hard on them, and tell them, you need to get a lawyer, and set up the papers. And so then I had a private meeting with the member. I says, okay. You have a decision to make. If you don’t think there’s a good opportunity here, to live, that means you have another plan. This is what happens when you don’t pay. You get notice, and if you don’t adjust, everything that you have in here, goes outside on the sidewalk. So you can start packing everything that you think you want to have, make sure you have it ready to go, grab it and run, because, this is what’s gonna happen. You’re going to be outside on the thing. [She pauses.] Next month, everything was paid up! Isn’t that a shame! [She laughs.] It’s like you think you can take advantage, you’re not supposed to take advantage of this kind of situation. No, no. So we don’t get that often. But there’s always one that you have to open their eyes and [let them know] – can’t do that!” [#26]

Magdalena’s insistence that members not “take advantage” of the unique situation of the co-op is telling. She and others have worked hard to create their co-ops, and will not lightly countenance fellow members not recognizing that work by trying to get away with not paying – without, that is, contributing to the ongoing maintenance of the commons.

A key aspect of maintaining the co-op is simply dealing with the tiny details of everyday life. Magdalena’s work, similar to the work of most co-op presidents, runs from the major – working out management company contracts, dealing with delinquent members, organizing meetings – to the mundane everyday. Over the course of an interview in the co-op office, we are interrupted by phone calls several times: people calling to inquire if the co-op has units available, an insurance agent calling to sell insurance plans. The last call is from a co-op member calling from elsewhere in the building. Magdalena speaks for several minutes to the woman in Spanish, and then hangs up, laughing, repeating what the woman had been concerned about:

“‘[Magdalena], two machines are working – but there’s no clothes in it!’ Okay, what you want me to do [she laughs]? I says use it till it runs out! She says two dryers are running, but there’s no clothes in it. It’s because I’m home. But that’s okay, that’s fine. That’s the disabled lady, anyway.” [#26]

It's because Magdalena is home, and available, that this woman feels free to alert her to her concern that two dryers in the laundry room are running, without clothes in them – in the grand scheme of co-op maintenance, not a particularly pressing problem. Magdalena's response is generous – she's home anyway, she says, and the lady is disabled. Responding to concerns and requests, however minor, is the constant work of co-op presidents, and often other board members as well. Alice, the president of the Anacostia Co-op, is also often bombarded by minor requests of members that add up in terms of time and headspace. She relates one instance of a co-op member who was upset that the lotto machine wasn't working in a shop that rents storefront space from the co-op:

“Like today Mr. [Carson], the older gentleman on the second floor – I was in the office and he came and he said to me, the people in the store's lotto machine was down, and they needed to get down here to fix it. I said, well, Mr. [Carson], I'm on my way out. Do you want to come and stay with them while they – [but he said] no, no, no, no, no! But he was persistent on them coming down here, cause he needed to play his numbers [she laughs]! I'm like, well *I'm* not gonna stay down here [and wait for them]! I'm getting ready to go to Macy's!” [#11]

Saegert notes that much of the work of the LECs leaders in her Harlem study required “constant attention, both of a physical and social nature, to repetitive and unending tasks” (Saegert 1989 304). She likens it to housework. The experiences of Magdalena, Alice, and other co-ops leaders indicates that this type of constant work suffuses D.C.'s LECs as well. This is work that is largely unseen and unaccounted for – and like housework, traditionally performed by women.

It is perhaps because of the relentless, everyday nature of the work that, though most of the co-ops in my study make use of outside management companies, co-op members are still left with much of the everyday work of running a building. The Tiber Co-op self-manages because it is so small; the Penn Branch Co-op has, virtually since its inception, hired one of their members

to manage the complex. The other eight all hire outside companies. It might seem that, if ongoing maintenance of the commons can be contracted out, it should be less of a challenge for co-ops. But all co-op presidents interviewed are quick to note that the failings of their management companies, and they all emphasize that they have to work hard to stay on top of the companies. As Patricia, president of the Potomac Co-op, puts it, “[A] lot of times you have to manage the management company.” [#6] Management companies that do not specialize in limited-equity co-ops do not always understand the particular nature of LECs, especially if HUD is involved in the building. And management companies, no matter how attentive, cannot play the role of Magdalena or Alice, women who absorb the everyday complaints and concerns of members. A number of attempts have been made in Washington, D.C. – including one that will be described in the next section – to found management companies with particular expertise in LECs, in an effort to reduce the burden on board members. Yet all of these attempts have ultimately failed. (The question of why these attempts have failed, and what would make for a workable management company for LECs, would be a fruitful subject for future research.)

The work of maintenance, as I have attempted to show here, is time-consuming and often frustrating. This is not to say that co-op members cannot derive pleasure from this work. Sophie is a white woman in her 80s who has lived at the Anacostia Co-op since 1984, shortly after the tenants purchased the building. She sits in her co-op’s basement community room, and describes the work that co-op members put into the space:

“[One member], among others, decided to dress it up a little bit. I don’t remember whether it was a wedding, or a christening, I don’t remember what it was. But there was an occasion, and we wanted to dress it all up for that occasion. So they painted it – they didn’t paint it quite the way it is now, but they did paint it... But that was a tremendous improvement, tremendous. And then people began to bring the furniture they didn’t want down here, leaving it. But that turned out to be an advantage, too, for the board, and the meetings. So it’s just kind of, kind of grown, like Topsy, are you familiar with that expression, like Topsy? Topsy was a little girl who, no one paid any attention to her, she

just grew. She just took care of herself. And then a lot of people worked together, not everybody, but a lot of people worked together to do the painting. It was a cooperative effort among friends.” [#13]

For Sophie, the “cooperative effort among friends” happened easily and organically, and did not feel like work per se. If anything, this cooperative effort helped build community. While the work of maintaining the commons is often a struggle, Sophie’s story illustrates that it can also be a source of joy.

### **Participation**

All the work of the commons, of course, only takes place if there are people willing to do the work. The work of housing co-ops is normally referred to as “participation.” In reviewing a series of studies of housing cooperatives, Clark and Saegert find that participation is most commonly linked with verbal communication: members participate by sitting in meetings and talking through issues, and solving problems. Although participation can also be made up of performing particular tasks, like maintenance or record-keeping, these tasks always stem from discussion about what needs to be done. Participation, that is, is based on communication among co-op members (Clark and Saegert 1994). Much of what the commons requires, then, is communication among members: communication that takes time and patience.

Threaded through nearly all of my interviews is concern about low levels of co-op member participation. While some research has shown that some LECs have extremely high levels of member participation (cf Saegert 1989), my research found that co-op work tended to be skewed towards a minority of co-op members. While a few co-op leaders had devised methods of encouraging members to participate that seemed to be working, others were frustrated at the fact that so many members seemed to take their housing for granted.

Diane, of the Piney Branch Co-op, has served on the co-op board for one term. She is of the opinion that all co-op members should serve at least one term on the board, so that they can gain an understanding of all the work the board does. But recently Diane has not participated in co-op affairs. She is an African-American woman in her 50s who has five children and works full-time as a pharmacy technician in a drugstore in suburban Maryland, on the other side of town. Ironically, it is because she became frustrated at lack of participation that she herself stopped attending meetings. She explains:

“I shouldn’t have [stopped attending] but I did, get away from going – because it’s like every time you go, it’s the same people. When we all are out here, and you know, we *got* to stick together. Because we’re definitely not going to go anywhere in this city, and find what we have. And we’ve got a good location and everything. We’ve got the subway just down the street, we can’t beat it. And it just really frustrates you that everybody wouldn’t take the time, at least an hour to two hours. And I understand, you come home from work, you tired, but they got chairs, it ain’t like you standing up, you setting there. So I would get frustrated at that, sometimes, at those meetings, so I did slack up, I really did, I really did.” [#33]

Despite her current lack of participation, she is adamant that participation levels need to rise:

“But it’s important to all of us. Cause what affects one is gonna affect us all. And that’s the thing about it. And I know nobody wants to be homeless, cause I sure don’t. You know. My sister had a one-bedroom apartment for \$725. I mean, \$725. I’m like, I could pay my rent with that and still have some left.” [#33]

Members need to participate, Diane thinks, in order to ensure that the co-op continues to thrive, and provide its members with affordable housing. But over time, she herself has lost patience with attending meetings, with the time it takes to work out problems and come to joint decisions.

Rachel has been an active member of the Fenwick Co-op board since she moved in in 2003. Her co-op is unique in that all 15 members are required to serve on the board; this decision was made explicitly to encourage active participation by everyone, and to reduce

hierarchy in the collective. Despite this intentional effort to involve all members, Rachel's experience is that participation in the work of the co-op is highly uneven. This has led her to feel some resentment against the members that participate only minimally or not at all. She explains her recent decision to try to cut down on the amount of work she does for the co-op:

“I think some of us have consistently given a lot. It's one thing if occasionally you have to give a lot. But some of us consistently have just given so much time. So I just made a decision that I was going to do what I could do, and step back. As much as I could. Because I *can't* step back, because I'm so fucking responsible. But I would say a lot of people – there are some people that have gotten a really nice free ride here. Really. Which is a shame, and I always used to say, if people would just spend like five hours a month. An hour a week, I mean it doesn't have to be that much, but just *consistent!*”  
[#21]

Rachel's concern that co-op members who do not participate are getting a “free ride” echoes Hardin's tragedy of the commons thesis. Whitney is similarly concerned about uneven participation at the Fenwick. She says bluntly:

“In an ideal world, if everyone did what they were supposed to do, it would be wonderful. But the reality is some people don't want to do the work. They just want the cheap rent. It's sad because the good people get burned out, because there's not enough people to help. If everyone shared the work, it would be wonderful.” [#23]

Whitney echoes Joanna's point from the previous chapter: that some people are attracted to living in the co-op mostly just because it is affordable, and not because they are interested in doing the work of the co-op. This can hurt the co-op in the long run.

In some co-ops, however, leaders have figured out effective ways to encourage more participation. Magdalena says that the Broad Branch Co-op tried a committee system, but it didn't work very well. Now, she is encouraging people to take individual ownership over different tasks. She describes:

“We have the board. Anybody that we feel would be the best person to be in charge of something, we approach that person, or at least I do. And I ask if they would be willing to do that. And I say we'll work together, but it's your charge. Pretend you're the president. It's your charge, it's your initiative, and whatever you do, you have to share,

you don't just go and do it on your own. You need people's initiative to pull this together. As we grow, as we keep moving along, we come up with better ways to work things out... So my new strategy is, we're all presidents! This president is in charge of security – I don't call it president, but I let them know when I say to them, now, you are the president of security. You are the president of maintenance. You are the president of cleaning, and keeping the landscaping, and whatever. So what they do is, two presidents communicate, landscaping and security. So we become two presidents. It's the only way I can see it, to wake up the masses, say like, I can't do it alone! Even if I can do it, it's not good for me to do it alone!" [#26]

Part of the work of maintaining the co-op, it appears, is figuring out ways to encourage participation: that is, to distribute the work. The willingness of Broad Branch members to change their approach to their work – to learn as they go – seems to be a crucial component of their success in increasing participation.

### **Women's work**

By now, the observant reader will have noticed that most of the people quoted in my research are women. Of my 40 interviews with LEC members and former members, 29 were with women and 11 were with men; 3/4 of respondents, that is, were women. Of the 15 co-op leaders<sup>16</sup> interviewed, 12 were women and 3 were men – 80% of leaders, that is, were women. As described in Chapter 3, I approached most of the co-ops in my study by first interviewing a co-op leader (normally the board president), who then suggested other members to interview. Most of the co-op leaders I first approached happened to be women. It is likely that, because of social ties, my sample of 40 is therefore skewed towards women. Because I did not ask board presidents for exact member breakdown by gender, I have no way of knowing the gender makeup of the average D.C. LEC. While it is probably safe to assume that, given the large presence<sup>16</sup> of elderly people in LECs, the average LEC has more women than men, it is unlikely

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<sup>16</sup> The following types are defined as co-op leaders: current or former board presidents and vice-presidents; and tenants who led the co-op formation process.

that the average LEC has a population that matches my sample in being nearly three quarters female. (It would, however, be very interesting to look more closely at the membership makeup of LECs by gender.) My assumption, therefore, is that the percentage of women in leadership roles is disproportionate to their percentage in the overall LEC population. It appears that women tend to play more leadership roles than men in limited-equity co-ops. This confirms other studies of limited-equity co-ops that show women in leading roles (Saegert 1989; Leavitt and Saegert 1990; Heskin 1991). The work required of LECs, it appears, is disproportionately carried out by women.

Feminist theorists have taken up the relationship between women and the commons broadly. Mies and Benholdt-Thomsen argue that, under capitalist wage relations, the work of the commons, like the work of women, has been rendered invisible. Women, they write, are treated like commons, while commons are treated like women: both perform such essential functions in basic survival that the roles they perform are not even noticed or acknowledged (Mies and Benholdt-Thomsen 2001). Their argument is manifested in the co-ops I examined, in which, as noted, women do much of the unrecognized work that Saegert compares to housework. Federici take the argument a step further, arguing that the commons is the basis for social reproduction: the work that keeps people alive in the world. This is work that is performed disproportionately by women. Women, she argues, rely on the commons more than men do in order to take care of their families and communities (Federici 2010). If women are more likely to be custodians of the commons generally, it follows that they would be more likely to do the work of the LECs.

Though it was notable to me that women performed much of the work of LEC life, few of my male or female respondents brought the point up in our interviews. (Perhaps this is because they are so accustomed to women doing the work of the home.) Patricia, the president of the

Potomac Co-op, is one of the only ones who mentioned it. She acknowledges that most LEC leaders are women, and that there is an inherent inequity in so much unpaid female labor going into supporting the continuing existence of co-ops. She frames this inequity in terms of the question of whether her co-op may someday convert to a market-rate ownership structure, which would allow long-time members to finally realize financial equity gains on their housing. In mulling over this question, she asks:

“And plus is it fair, for people who have been there, say as long as I have, and have put in all this blood, sweat and tears, to not have any equity at all? In the end. As [famed financial advisor] Suze Orman said, women are always volunteering their services. Where men have to get paid for everything... Because men will not do what we do. For nothing, for free. They just wouldn't.” [#6]

Several co-op members, however, *do* perform work around the co-op for which they are paid or compensated in some other way. In all but one case (noted below), these members are men, and the work they do is the physical work of maintaining the buildings. Mr. Green is the elderly Caribbean immigrant who was introduced in the last chapter as a member of the Potomac Co-op; he is retired and rarely leaves the building. For some time, the co-op gave him full concession from his carrying charges in exchange for him being at home to let in contractors, for making minor repairs in the building, and generally for keeping an eye on the building. While Patricia appreciates the work Mr. Green has done, she is planning to cut back on what the co-op offers him in exchange for his services:

“[W]e've got to renegotiate his agreement. And he thinks it's gonna go on forever. And he's wonderful, but we've been quite good to him as well. He gets free parking, we used to pay his phone. And then he got a full concession... We always take him out for his birthday, and we used to pay him for vacation!” [#6]

The co-op board has since cut Mr. Green down to a half concession. In some ways, the co-op's willingness to hire this elderly man (now in his 80s) to help care for the building is an indication of an economy of care that a co-op can create: they are making decisions based in part

on what the co-op needs, and in part on the needs and abilities of members. But it is also telling that the co-op long gave this man a full concession on his carrying charges, and has never given the board president, who works long hours on the organizational and financial matters of the co-op but does not usually do the manual labor associated with the building, any compensation at all. Patricia tells me that, between the years 2005 and 2010, she racked up 5,000 email exchanges related to co-op business. This kind of organizational work is almost never paid, probably because organizational work is harder to see and quantify – but perhaps also because organizational work tends to be performed by women. Only at the Penn Branch Co-op is a member – a woman who has lived in the complex since it was a rental – paid a full-time salary to do the management work of the co-op. Paying her is justified because the Penn Branch, nearly alone among LECs in the city, does not hire an external management company.

It is clear, both from my study and from previous research, that women tend to do the bulk of the (unpaid) work associated with founding and running limited-equity cooperatives. This finding squares with Mies and Benholdt-Thomsen and Federici's assertion that the commons more broadly tends to be cared for by women. But Federici in particular is not bemoaning this fact; nor is she arguing that it is in women's *nature* to do the work of the commons. Rather, she wants women to appreciate their historic contribution to the care of the commons, which she hopes can lead to its further expansion. She writes:

“Arguing that women should take the lead in the collectivization of reproductive work and housing is not to naturalize housework as a female vocation. It is refusing to obliterate the collective experiences, the knowledge and the struggles that women have accumulated concerning reproductive work, whose history has been an essential part of our resistance to capitalism. Reconnecting with this history is a crucial step for women and men today both to undo the gendered architecture of our lives and to reconstruct our homes and lives as commons” (Federici 2010).

Federici's insistence on looking towards the future of the commons is critical. She is not content to defend what commons exist, but to move outward into a continued expansion of the commons. She is also clear that, moving forward, expanding the commons is an opportunity for both women and men to take apart the expectations of gender that have shaped their lives. Feminism, as multitudes of theorists have argued, is about opening up new ways of being for both men and women (cf Kaufman and Kimmel 2011). The task of working the commons, Federici suggests, is an explicitly feminist project. Part of what the commons requires, then, is not only work, but a feminist approach to work.

In Chapter 8, I return to the importance of a feminist approach. But first, I turn to the question of commitment and collapse in the commons. Why do some LECs last over time, while others convert away to market-rate ownership structures? In the next chapter, I present my findings on LEC longevity in Washington, D.C.: why some co-ops maintain their commitment to the LEC ownership form, and why, in other cases, the noncommodified approach to housing collapses – and with what results.

## Chapter 7: Commitment and Collapse

Why do some LECs continue to exist for decades, while others collapse, moving out of the commons? In this chapter, I examine how and why LECs in D.C. have continued to exist, or conversely, have ceased to exist, over time. First, I examine the survival rates of LECs in D.C. broadly. Next, I delve into the question of ownership: what exactly does it mean to “own” a home that is part of the commons? I then examine existing LEC members’ attitudes towards maintaining their affordability, looking at why some members are committed to retaining noncommodified ownership, and why others decide to convert to market-rate ownership. I end with a discussion of the difficulty of maintaining an urban commons under capitalism.

### Survival rates of Washington, D.C. LECs

134 limited-equity co-ops have been founded in D.C. since the tenant right to purchase law went into effect.<sup>17</sup> Of this group of 134, 86 still exist in limited-equity form as of 2012<sup>18</sup> (see Fig. 1). Twenty-one LECs have converted to market-rate condominium or cooperative ownership forms<sup>19</sup>; 19 have reverted to market-rate rental<sup>20</sup>; two have converted to an affordable condominium ownership form; four are affordable rentals operated by non-profits; and the fate of two is unaccounted for (see Fig. 2).

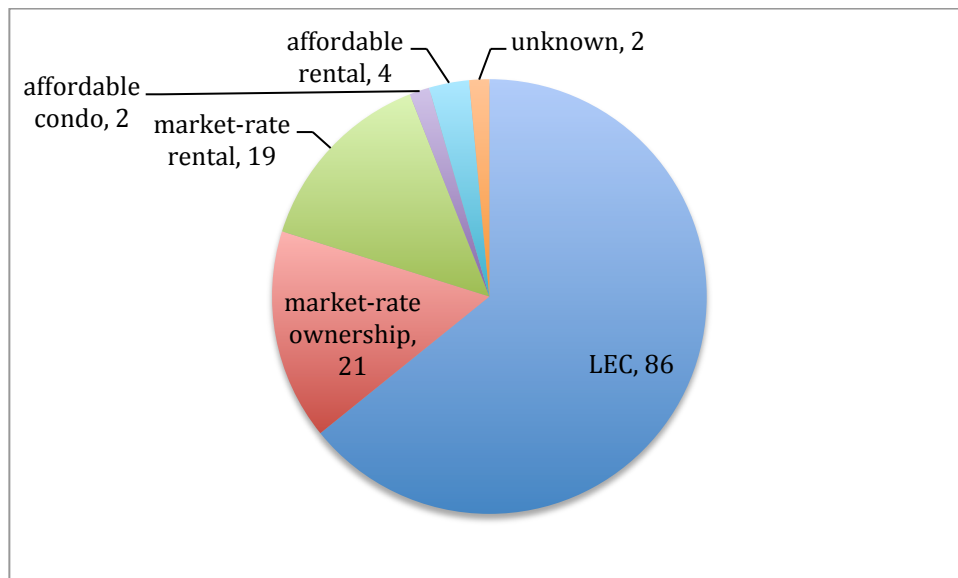
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<sup>17</sup> The 134 figure is a conservative estimate based on painstaking review of documents and consultation with multiple leading figures in the LEC community in Washington, D.C. The city itself has not kept consistent records of LECs, even though it has partially funded almost all of them.

<sup>18</sup> Two of these 86 are in fact a mix of LEC and condominium units; I have counted them as LECs because the LEC units represent the majority of the units.

<sup>19</sup> But one of these 21 is no longer in operation as a condominium, having been bought up by a hotel developer, and as of 2012 remaining boarded-up.

<sup>20</sup> One of the 19 is a market-rate/affordable rental mix, but I have counted it as market-rate because the majority of units are rented at the market rate.



**Fig. 2. Ownership status of Washington, D.C. LECs, 2012.**

In addition to looking at current ownership, it is perhaps more useful to examine LEC success over time. 73 limited-equity co-ops were founded in the city before 1992 (20 years prior to this writing). Of the 73 projects, 48 survived in limited-equity form for at least 20 years. This represents a 20-year survival rate of 66%. There is little previous research on survival rates of LECs; one previous study of LECs founded under HUD's 236 program found that they had a 20-year survival rate of 78% (Calhoun and Walker 1994). Because it is difficult to find comparative data for this relatively unusual homeownership form, it is hard to know whether a 20-year survival rate of 66% can be considered a good rate. Recent research on low-income homeownership generally, however, shows that between 43% and 53% of low-income homebuyers will not sustain homeownership for more than five years (Herbert and Belsky 2006). Compared to low-income homeownership broadly, a 20-year survival rate of 66% for limited-equity co-ops seems quite good.

It is important here to note that the “survival” of 66% of LECs does not necessarily equal the “failure” of the remaining 34%. Of the 25 projects that converted away from limited-equity status within 20 years, nine did so after receiving a notice of foreclosure (8 cases) or tax delinquency (1 case).<sup>21</sup> Of these nine cases, five later reverted to market-rate rental status, two were taken over by nonprofits and became affordable rentals, and two were later converted to condominiums by developers. Three additional LECs reverted to market-rate rental status for unknown reasons. Because in all twelve of these projects, the original LEC members lost ownership of their housing, they can be considered failures (although the argument could be made that the two projects that became affordable rentals may serve their tenants well, which may be especially true when low-income residents age in place).

The remaining 13 projects that converted away from limited-equity status within twenty years all converted to market-rate ownership, taking either the condominium (10 cases) or cooperative (3 cases) form. It is therefore clear that, over the course of twenty years, 66% of D.C. LECs continue in their current form; 16% fail; and 18% convert to market-rate ownership. But conversion to market-rate ownership requires further parsing, as this does not always benefit long-time LEC members. In some cases, LEC members have been able to participate in these conversions, and have benefitted financially; in other cases, members bought into the market-rate structure but later lost their homes to foreclosure; and in some cases, members were not financially able to buy into the new ownership structure, were paid small amounts of money to leave the building, and ended up living back in rental housing. As will be seen in the three cases of market-rate conversion I examine below, results for LEC members can be highly varied. But first, it is necessary to tackle the question of just what ownership means.

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<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, determining the circumstances that led these co-ops to experience foreclosure was beyond the scope of this study.

### **The question of ownership**

Home ownership in U.S. society is so bound up with the promise of future exchange value that it can be difficult to conceive of a form of ownership that cannot be commodified. Previous research indicates that, at the time they gain control of their housing, LEC members are not typically thinking in terms of ownership per se. As Kolodny and Gellerman found in an early study of LECs in New York City:

“Ownership in and of itself is not the major attraction of the conversion formula... The tenants’ main interest is in gaining control over their residential circumstances in order to improve them” (1973 ii).

Kolodny and Gellerman here conflate ownership with commodification. Other research on New York City LECs suggests that, by taking over their buildings through purchasing them collectively, tenants are subverting the traditional ideology of homeownership. Tenants, Clark finds, use the ideology of homeownership to convince the city that they should be allowed to buy their buildings:

“Promoted as providing homeownership, cooperatives could be presented as socially and political desirable, although the meaning of ownership in that context was very unlike its traditional meaning. Cooperative residents view ownership as a source of political legitimacy, secure tenure, collective control, and permanent low-income housing... They do not view it as a commodity from which they may profit or as a symbol of individuation” (1994 947).

My research finds that LEC members understand ownership as Clark’s respondents did. Contra Kolodny and Gellerman, ownership in fact *was* a main attraction for tenants who were looking to convert their buildings into LECs. But the purpose of ownership, for most of my respondents, was not to gain the ability to sell their unit on the market. Tenants who worked very hard on collectively purchasing their buildings were not focused on turning their homes into commodities. Far from it: they were interested in transforming what had been the commodity of

rental housing into a space over which they had control. But they were very interested in being owners, and felt like owners, even if ownership did not include the right to sell their unit on the market.

Mary's analysis of the matter is typical. Mary is an African-American woman in her 50s who helped found the Watts Co-op in the late 1980s, but moved out in 2000 to purchase her own rowhouse a few blocks away. When I ask Mary if she felt like an owner in the years she lived at the Watts Co-op, even given the limited-equity restrictions, her voice rises in pitch, and she sounds indignant that I've even asked the question:

“I most certainly *did!* I was happy! I was elated. And at work – I was proud. It was something to boast about. And I did. I was very proud of the fact that we as tenants took it on, and it was a lot of hard work, it was a lot of arguing, but we took it on, and we made a success out of it. So I was very proud, I was very proud of it, yes. Because I feel like it's – the idea of you owning a piece of it, it's not the same thing as purchasing a house or something like that, but at least you have some say-so in it. You have some say-so as to if you want flowers around, or we need a fence for this, which those are the kinds of things that we did. Versus a separate owner coming in, doing different things, or not doing things that you need. So yes, I was *very* proud.” [#3]

I had not asked Mary whether she was proud of her ownership; rather, I asked if she had felt like an owner. But in her answer, she equates ownership with pride. Ownership, particularly in a black-majority city like Washington, D.C., is racialized. Though Mary does not speak explicitly of race, she tells me that the reason she moved to D.C. as a young woman in the first place was because “it was Chocolate City, it was the place to be!” Her living room, in which we conduct the interview, is filled with African art. Part of her pride appears to be a racialized pride in being able to take ownership of a piece of a city that was in its heyday a center of black culture and political power. Alice, who helped found the Anacostia Co-op in the early 1980s, speaks of ownership explicitly in terms of race when she describes why the tenants were so excited to buy their building together:

“The fact that you were going to *own* something. That you didn’t have an opportunity [before]. Blacks were afraid to go to the banks. Blacks were afraid they were not gonna be able to qualify for a loan, and that sort of thing. You didn’t have to go to the bank! All you had to do was fill out the paper! ... [I]t was a nice thing, and you were able to own something without having to go through all the government paperwork, and being afraid you weren’t going to get a loan, and all of that. So I think that made people more willing to act as a team. Cause they knew collectively they could get the loan.” [#11]

For Alice and her fellow co-op members, collective ownership was a way to bypass the individualizing scrutiny of institutions – namely, banks – that had a history of discriminating against blacks. When Alice and her fellow co-op members held a grand opening ceremony for the Anacostia Co-op, then-mayor Marion Barry attended. Photographic evidence indicates that he and his successor, Sharon Pratt Kelly, attended many LEC opening ceremonies throughout the 1980s and ‘90s. As noted in Chapter 4, low-income, primarily African-American tenants taking control of their housing through purchasing it collectively was seen as a politically important move in Washington, D.C., and black mayors wanted to make their support known.

But over time, as buildings stabilize, and as surrounding neighborhoods improve and even gentrify, LEC members’ thoughts may turn to the monetary exchange they could realize through the sale of their units on the open market. As noted above, 21 of D.C.’s 134 LECs have at some point converted to market-rate ownership. This is just over 15%, a not insignificant figure.<sup>22</sup> Yet many LECs have retained their limited-equity status over time. For some of the co-ops in my study, resale restrictions are in place because they hold city loans that require them. But others have their own resale restrictions that they enforce simply because they want to keep their buildings affordable.

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<sup>22</sup> One of the 21 converted to condo almost immediately after tenant purchase as an LEC; a lawyer who specializes in tenant purchase surmises that the group was never intending to remain an LEC, but purchased the building that way in order to gain tax benefits. The other projects all existed as LECs for at least nine years before converting to market-rate ownership.

A defining element of the commons is that it cannot be reduced to its exchange value, but exists only for the use it provides its members. In order to be committed to an ongoing commons, therefore, a sizable proportion of members must be committed to retaining the noncommodified aspect of their collective ownership. All 40 co-op members interviewed value the present affordability of their housing. Nineteen respondents (nearly half) are politically committed to the long-term ideal of the limited-equity cooperative form of housing. By “politically committed,” I mean that they emphasize the importance of LEC housing not only for themselves, but also for their fellow co-op members, and for as-yet-unknown co-op members who could benefit from living in their co-ops in the future. In addition, many of the politically committed members have a critique of the commodification of housing more broadly, and some critique capitalism as a whole. In contrast, five LEC members or former members (12.5%) are (or were) dissatisfied with the LEC form of ownership. By “dissatisfied,” I mean members who either had wanted the original purchase of their rental buildings to result in market-rate ownership, not an LEC, or who hope that their LECs will eventually yet convert to market-rate ownership. Sixteen of my respondents (40%) appear to be neutral on the question of LEC ownership. By “neutral,” I mean that they either have mixed feelings as to whether they would like their LEC to convert to market-rate ownership, or do not appear to have strong feelings about the prospect of either continuing their limited-equity status or converting to market-rate ownership.

### **Commitment to the commons**

As noted above, some co-op members are dedicated to their limited-equity status because of their larger beliefs about how the economy should work. Arnold is one of these. Arnold is a

white man in his 80s who lives in the Penn Branch Co-op. The Penn Branch Co-op has long restricted the resale price of its own shares, without any outside body requiring such restriction; the purpose was to keep the units affordable. But at the height of the housing boom of the early 2000s, a few members of the co-op organized to convince the membership that they should vote to double their share prices, from about \$35,000 to about \$70,000. Though the housing would still be quite affordable compared to prices for comparable one-bedroom units in the neighborhood, Arnold was outraged by this decision. He describes why he is committed the limited-equity concept:

“I worked all my life, and I just don’t like free money! I hate that! I hate people getting rich off of really manipulating figures! [He laughs.] I just don’t like that. It’s just a horrible feeling that I have. Cause I worked all my life. I just don’t like working a deal! Well, I worked in a shipyard, and was in the service in World War Two, and worked in Goodyear tire and rubber company, on piece work, went to college, and was an athlete, and came out, and taught school, and worked in the summer! [He laughs.] And hopefully if you worked, you got a paycheck! That seemed like an equitable thing to do! You worked, and you get paid. It’s just an equitable way to conduct a society, rather than figuring out how I can screw somebody and make money for me! I mean. And that’s what they did. They just screwed all the people that played by the rules. The equity they made, they took it for themselves! It’s your value system. Am I gonna make it off of someone else, and hooray for me, or, are we gonna live in a civilized society, where everybody’s gonna do equitable work and get equitable pay? The ideology is so different now, you know. From my perspective.” [#38]

Arnold couches his objection to “going market” in philosophical terms: he does not speak here specifically of the need to keep the Penn Branch Co-op affordable, but rather of his general objection to making money through “working a deal.” A number of LEC members spoke more specifically to their deep desire to keep their co-ops limited-equity over the long-term. Continued affordability is important to them because they believe low-income people should be able to live in decent, affordable housing in convenient neighborhoods. Previous research has shown that middle-class people are often in the lead of efforts to convert LECs to market-rate ownership structures (Saegert, Benitez et al. 2005). But when Maria, the young woman of color

who has a masters degree and a relatively broad range of life opportunities, is asked whether she'd like the Broad Branch Co-op to convert to condo when their Section 8 contract expires, she demurs:

“I would love to just retain what we have. Because it really does create community here. The majority of the people in the building – we have a lot of elderly people, single mothers with children, and artists. You know? So we really are people that kind of watch out for each other. And we don't have any Adams Morgan yuppie-type people coming in here, and trying to like, rule the world. It's just not the dynamic of our building at all. So as long as we can maintain this, it's beautiful. Like I said, my grandmother moved in, and I grew up in this neighborhood as much as my own, and I've *seen* the changes first-hand, and sometimes I walk down the street, and I can't even believe all the things that are here, because Adams Morgan, when I was little, was totally, like, ghetto! Nobody wanted to live over here! So now I see it. And the thing is, the buildings, the houses, everything is so beautiful and they always have been. And people, all of a sudden, *discover* these amazing buildings that have been here since the beginning of time! Yeah, as long as we can maintain what we have, that would be awesome. Not to say that yuppie people are mean or anything, but you know, it's nice the way it's structured here, because people can really raise their families in this amazing neighborhood that has everything. Especially because people are older, and are single moms, they may not have a car, or access to other resources if they were living in another neighborhood, where, here, you can step outside your door and have everything... And as long as we can maintain that for people who may not have that living in another neighborhood, that would be amazing.” [#27]

The Adams Morgan neighborhood, as Maria describes, has almost thoroughly gentrified in the time since she was a child visiting her grandmother in the building. Today, her co-op is an oasis of affordable housing in a neighborhood that is defined by its large presence of “yuppie-type people” who often try to “rule the world” with their vision of urban life. The co-op, in contrast, is a place where people “watch out for each other,” and value the community they have created together. Brian, who lives in the same co-op, describes why the limited-equity form has been so important for himself and his fellow members:

“From the beginning it was always a low-yield – it was never the sort of thing where you could make money off of it. I think people – the tenants all sort of discussed it, and everybody agreed that they wanted to try to keep it a building for low-income people, affordable housing. And a lot of the people in the building weren't officially activists, but were sort of politically inclined, or artists, or people like that. And so that was a very

attractive prospect to them. Well, we're gonna buy a building, it's gonna be a co-op, we're all gonna pull together, it's not gonna go condo. Going condo was the big threat back then, I guess it still is... There were a lot of meetings just to educate people about this. This is not a condo, and you're never going to be able to – when you leave, you'll get the same amount of money you put in in the beginning, and all that sort of thing. And it took a while for people to sort of understand that.” [#28]

Like Maria and Brian, Daisy, of the Penn Branch Co-op, has a broader range of life opportunities than many LEC members: she is college educated, works a stable job, and has no dependents. But Daisy also wants others in the future to have the same opportunity she had:

“I just think it was so ideal when I moved in, that it was some place that I could afford to, that I would hate to have that opportunity missed for someone else. Cause it's a great starter-slash-permanent place. Whereas I'd hate to think that you could only get in if you had enough money.” [#37]

But many LEC members with narrower ranges of life options are similarly committed to the limited-equity form of ownership. Sandy is the board president of the Tiber Co-op, introduced in the previous chapter, who at the time of our interview was unemployed, and worked most recently cleaning houses. Sandy is adamant that incoming members understand the limited-equity nature of the housing:

“I never want to sell this for money-market. I wouldn't, but I'm only one person on the board, and I don't think – when they come in, that's the adamant thing that I tell them, that we're not trying to lose our limited-equity stance. It's stable as it is, just live comfortably, if you need something fixed, just fix it, or we go to the board and get it fixed and all that. So that's the kind of attitude they have to come in with. They can't sell – if you sell your share, you sell your share. But you can't change the structure of this complex, period.” [#1]

Sandy and I discuss the fact that, for many people, ownership is intimately bound up in the ability to sell one's unit at the market rate. How could Sandy and her fellow co-op members be real owners, if they didn't have this option? She responds energetically:

“[S]ee, they never got the concept, of ownership, to me. Say for instance, you have nothing, you're renting, that's *nothing* – you can't get anything out of that, to be tangible for you... See, the sad part about it, people just want to obtain things to make themselves richer. They know they buying something cheap, or getting into something cheap, and

then they wanna sell it for profit. That's not what this is about. When you come from nothing, or having nothing, and somebody offers you something that you need to hold onto until you can do better! Now you can always leave this co-op, but you come in with the full knowledge and agreement that this is not for profit! And I can live comfortably and still do what I want with my property! I paint, I did everything I wanted to do! I cannot argue with that. As opposed to, if I paint this stuff in an apartment, I have to fix this stuff back up when I have to leave. Even if I leave here, I have to fix it back, paint it, all like that, but this is mines! That's enough! I don't need no financial gain, and then the next person who comes in, they can have the same opportunity! People just take advantage of wanting to make something out of something they've been offered, instead of looking at the bigger picture – this is your ownership. It's like a house! It's really a house. And I can't argue with that. I'm content. And I know every year that [carrying charges] go up, that's fine, I'm in control of that. It's not [like] the rent increases – you can't fight em. What's the point?" [#1]

Sandy, who has three adult daughters, grew up in a poor neighborhood in the Southeast part of the Capitol Hill neighborhood and has lived all over the city. She is comparing her ownership to her previous experiences as a renter. She is not comparing it to market-rate ownership, since that has never been a possibility for her, and never will be, unless, she notes later, she wins the lottery.

Tina is another working-class woman who raised several children in her co-op unit at the Penn Branch Co-op. A white woman, she was one of the original tenants, and has worked as the co-op's onsite manager for decades. Her daughter Daisy now lives in the co-op, too. Tina adamantly supports the co-op's limited-equity structure. When asked why her co-op has never converted to condo, she says:

"I think it would take a couple of us dying off [she laughs], and my daughter too. Because we incorporated to preserve affordable housing in Glover Park. That was kind of our mission. Other than our co-op, I don't know of any affordable housing in Glover Park, and maybe not even in Ward 3. And the location is excellent. And those of us who went through the early stuff, which I guess there are maybe four of us, are still really committed to preserving affordable housing... It's been a lot of work over the years, and I don't think anybody wants it to kind of end up like – we want to stay special. That's how I see it. We want to be for people who would like to own, and maybe don't even think it's possible." [#36]

Tina notes that she wants the co-op to “stay special” – that is, she does not want all the work that has gone in to creating this unique living situation lost to rote commodification. Todd, the young African-American software developer who lives in the Watts Co-op, is also concerned about preserving what he calls the “unique” nature of his co-op. Todd does not emphasize the affordability of the co-op, but rather, its sense of community:

“I *do* care about what happens to the co-op, because it’s pretty unique. A lot of individuals that are real estate oriented, would like to see these co-ops gone. And I’d like to see it proceed so the next generation can take advantage of it... It’s unique in that you are instantly part of a community, and there’s a cultural tie. We’re all bought into the same thing. Nothing is done to benefit one person more than another. It’s a community tie, if you have a problem, it’s pretty much everyone’s problem in these sense that if it costs money. It’s kind of like you’re a buying into a community.” [#4]

Todd’s emphasis on community speaks to the argument of CPR theorists that one of the requirements of commons maintenance is a membership that has a long-term approach towards their collective resource – and also towards each other. Members must, as Ostrom writes, have “shared a past and expect to share a future” (1990 88). Often, a long-term approach is theorized as one in which current members are cognizant of the fact that their children and grandchildren will need access to their resource in order to survive. This is an attitude that assumes lifeworlds in which children do much the same work – and in the same places – as their parents. One of the hallmarks of urban life, in contrast, is relatively rapid change. Despite the malleability of urban life, one of the reasons LECs succeed is because of long-term relationships that already exist in their buildings, and that members, like Todd, trust will continue to exist into the future. The fact that Todd is the nephew of one of the founders of his co-op, and that his cousin lives in another unit in the co-op, undoubtedly strengthens his sense of community and dedication to the co-op. Several respondents noted the importance of long-term relationships in their co-ops. Mary explains the importance of long-term relationships to the functioning of the Watts Co-op:

“[T]he board did a really decent job of being accountable to the [members]. And if something went wrong, not taking forever to fix things, and stuff like that. They were very good. And I think one of the advantages of that was because everybody knew practically everyone in there, and folks had been there for a while, and so there was a certain amount of trust, and respect, and you weren’t gonna be doing anything to try to intentionally hurt someone that you’ve been living in a community with for, you know, a period of years. So that was a good thing.” [#3]

Many LEC members whose adult family members live in other units in their co-ops appear to be more likely to be committed to the continued existence of the limited-equity co-op. Maria, Daisy, and Todd are all young people with broad life opportunities who may some day move out of the co-op to purchase homes on the open market, but they value retaining the limited-equity structure of their homes. Similarly, Brian, a middle-class African-American, though he does not have literal family in his co-op, feels a strong sense of family there, and wants the co-op to remain affordable for the sake of his neighbors.

On the other hand, it is sometimes precisely because they are concerned about the long-term health of their housing that some LEC members have mixed feelings about whether they should retain their limited-equity status. As previously noted, LEC members pay about half the rate for their housing as do renters on the open market. Low monthly fees, of course, mean a small pool of money to draw on in order to cover co-op expenses – and even the danger of losing the co-op entirely. If these co-ops went market-rate, they might be able to increase the amount of money coming in to the co-op. Joanna, the on-site property manager and Piney Branch Co-op member, considers the pros and cons of her co-op’s limited-equity status:

“I guess the good part is that you do keep it affordable. The bad part is -- sometimes when I sit in the office, and I know that it’s affordable, but then I look at, like this year, I might have a surplus of – well, a record number of air conditioners break. And then I’m like, okay, are we gonna start exhausting our funds, and losing – so that becomes a problem. So that becomes a problem. Sometimes you scratch your head, say, where’s the money gonna come from? Cause you don’t wanna go belly-up.” [#32]

Like Joanna, Patricia also struggles with the problem of rising costs in her co-op. She worries that its low-income residents may not be able to afford to stay there in the long term if the co-op maintains its limited-equity status and cannot raise funds through selling some of its empty units at the market rate. As she says:

“[P]lus we don’t wanna displace people either. The people that have been there 10 years, what if they retire? Or 15 years, what if they retire? All these questions are on the table. What do you do? I think a market-rate structure is much better, in the long run, but will they be able to pay the taxes? And the co-op fee? ... And plus will you have to go out and get your own loan? It’s just like a condo... And what if you try to get your own loan, and no one will finance you?” [#6]

On the one hand, she worries that the low-income people in her building might be displaced if the co-op retains its limited-equity structure, and its costs continue to go up without sufficient income. On the other hand, she worries that, if the co-op converts to market-rate ownership, the low-income members will not be able to buy into the new structure – or will not be able to afford property taxes and fees, even if they can afford to buy in. It is sometimes worries like these – worries about the collective financial health of the co-op community – that lead LEC members to decide to convert to market-rate ownership status. Other times, conversion to market occurs because members are convinced that they will profit individually. Either way, the commons collapses.

### **The collapse of the commons**

In three of my ten cases, limited-equity co-op members eventually chose to convert to a market-rate form of ownership, thus destroying the commons of noncommodified housing. In two cases, members chose to convert to condominium, and in one case, to a market-rate cooperative. Each of the three cases presents a substantially different outcome for the original

LEC members. I begin with the case with the most devastating result, and move to the case that appears to have perhaps improved the lives of its members.

The first case is that of the Rock Creek Co-op. The Rock Creek was a 27-unit building located at the very northern edge of downtown D.C., in the historically African-American cultural center of the Shaw neighborhood. Throughout the 1980s and '90s, the building was situated a block from an enormous parking lot, which took up about six city blocks. The weed-choked parking lot represented the disinvestment experienced by the neighborhood, beginning in the post-1968 riot era through the 1990s. As a rental, the Rock Creek had been in bad shape; its low-income, African-American tenants began organizing against poor housing conditions as early as 1981. In early 1986, a pair of brothers bought the building for \$425,000. Three months later, the brothers decided to sell the building, putting it on the market for \$1.6 million. The tenants organized to buy it, and were finally able to do so in 1989, for \$864,300, with assistance from the city. They formed a limited-equity cooperative, performed renovations, and held a grand opening ceremony, attended by the mayor, in March of 1992. In the meantime, a subway station had opened a block from the co-op, and concerns about gentrification were in the air. The Rock Creek Co-op kept its carrying charges affordable: they ranged from \$475 for a one-bedroom to \$745 for a three-bedroom, but, because most members received Section 8 assistance, they were each paying substantially less.

In 2000, construction was completed on a massive convention center in what had once been the vast parking lot just to the east of the co-op. It was at this time that the D.C. housing market began to boom, and some members of the co-op began to push for converting the building to a market-rate condominium ownership structure. The exact course of events is unclear, but it appears that one member in particular pushed for conversion, believing that she

would be able to sell her unit or rent it out for a hefty sum. In 2004, the membership narrowly voted to convert to market-rate condominium ownership. The co-op association worked with a local developer that specialized in doing tenant purchase deals, and in helping limited-equity cooperatives convert to condominium ownership. Most of the co-op members were low-income people who could not afford to participate in the conversion. They were paid minor amounts of money to leave; some received nothing.

Pearl was one of the low-income co-op members who had to leave. She is an African-American woman in her 50s who grew up in D.C. She had been living with her children in public housing in the Southeast part of the city when she learned about the Rock Creek Co-op in the early 1990s, and promptly moved in. She describes the day she was interviewed to move into the co-op as “the happiest day of my life.” She lived there for the next twelve years, and voted against converting to condominium, knowing that she could never afford to buy into it. Ultimately, Pearl was paid \$4700 to leave the Rock Creek. She describes the disintegration of the co-op as “devastating,” and tells how it happened:

“[T]hey offered different people different amounts [to leave]. You didn’t know what nobody was getting. Some people got, like I know one neighbor, she told the – which was good – she told them that she wanted her car paid off, and the rest she’ll take in money. So when she moved, she wouldn’t have no car note. So that was smart. And you know, it’s like, I think it’s still going on today. Like they getting rid of a lot of public housing, and giving the people money. And you know, a person that hasn’t had, never had anything, that’s a lot of money to them. But you know, when you’re not used to stuff, you just go buying, and buying, and buying, you don’t think about investing and saving and stuff like that.” [#30]

Pearl has lived in two different rental apartments since she left the co-op in 2004. At the time of our interview, in 2011, she was packing up to move into yet another apartment. Only three of the original Rock Creek LEC members were able to buy into the new condominium structure. But within three years of the condo conversion, the condominium structure had been

terminated, with the condo owners bought out for undisclosed amounts of money. The building is now owned by the Marriott Corporation, which reportedly plans to develop a boutique hotel on the site. As of 2012, the building sits empty and boarded up, awaiting redevelopment. For a building to have moved from collective ownership by its low-income tenants to a vacant shell awaiting redevelopment by an international hotel conglomerate is almost too much to bear. The case of the Rock Creek has served as something of a warning to other LECs throughout the city that might be considering “going condo:” a symbol of loss. The Rock Creek appears to be a straightforward case of losing the commons.

The case of the Oxon Run Co-op is a bit more complicated. The Oxon Run is a 15-unit building situated in the Columbia Heights neighborhood. A culturally diverse group of low-income tenants purchased the building in 1992 and ran it as a limited-equity co-op for 13 years. On the advice of their management company, the members voted to convert to condominium in 2005. Their developer apparently worked very hard to ensure that all the LEC members who wanted to buy into the condo would be able to, and indeed, they all bought in for \$36,000 for a one-bedroom unit or \$42,000 for a two-bedroom – unbelievably low prices, considering their location in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. At the time of the conversion, 13 of the original co-op members still lived in the building; but within five years, only five of the original members remained. The rest had sold their units – all after first heavily refinancing – and moved out. According to interviews with former members, none of the members who sold their units went on to buy another housing unit; all returned to renting.<sup>23</sup> The story of one member, Pedro, is instructive.

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<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, I have not been able to make contact with all the former members in order to verify this.

Pedro came to the U.S. in the early 1980s from El Salvador, fleeing that country's civil war. He had lived in the Oxon Run for years back when it was a rental, and his sister and father had been two of the leaders of the tenant purchase effort. After the purchase, Pedro owned a two-bedroom unit in the co-op, for which he paid about \$450 a month for many years. After the condo conversion, Pedro suffered a series of personal setbacks. First, he split up from his wife. Then, he lost his job – he works in demolition, which is low-paying and back-breaking work – and was unemployed for about a year. He refinanced his unit for \$135,000 in 2007, and finally sold the unit in 2008 because he could no longer make his monthly payments. He estimates he made about \$8,000 or \$10,000 on the sale, all told. He now lives in a rooming house a few blocks from his old co-op, a row house that has been split up into individual rooms to house Central American immigrants like himself. His room is small. It fits a bed and a dresser; a toaster balances on a shelf, and it's clear that he does all his eating as well as sleeping in this space. Pictures of his teenage daughter, who lives with her mother, adorn the room. Pedro pays \$475 a month for the room, plus an extra \$50 a month in the summer, because he needs to run the air conditioner in order to sleep, and he must pay the landlady separately for that. It is clear that, for Pedro, the dissolution of the commons has landed him in worse housing circumstances, with less control over his life.

Yafeu, like Pedro, was another longtime Oxon Run Co-op member, but unlike Pedro, he is one of the five original LEC members who still own their condominium units today. Yafeu, an immigrant from Ghana, is happy he still has his housing, but he is not particularly pleased with how the building has changed since going market. He reminisces about the community spirit of the co-op. When asked whether that feeling still exists in the building, now that it has gone condo, he replies:

“Oooooooh. Hah! *Noooo*. Well, now, let me take it back. I think -- changes. I am a believer that life don’t stay the same forever... But do I have that same feeling as yesterday? *Noooo*, no. *Noooo*, no, no, no. No, it’s not there. But I just look at it, people are people. You never gonna see the same. That’s what I say. But if you ask me, do I want to go back to those days, with those – oh, yeah. It was a community. Oh, yeah! Oh yeah. It was a community. Oh yeah. I mean, it was like a family event... You feel, somebody got your back. Do somebody have my back now? No! Hell, no! Hell, no! Sorry about that. Now you on your own, high and dry. I mean, I’m sorry to say – I know we’re not all going to see things the same. I always see things different.” [#19]

When asked why he thinks the building feel has changed, he responds:

“Well. I would be vague to say it’s life. But, as you know, life. There’s no guarantee. It changes every day. But I think, money. I think [long pause] – I don’t know, life changes. But money, the neighborhood is changing itself, all these high, big stuff going. I receive a letter, going, two months ago, from the tax property, whatever they call it. And they’re telling me my property valued for some \$200,000. I’m like, wait a minute. Because they tax you according to your [property value]... So I think it’s money. It’s the city itself changing.” [#19]

He further explains this by describing the difference between the original co-op members, and the people who have bought condos in the building since condo conversion:

“Well, you look at these people who come in and say, well, they purchased their property for \$100,000-something. And they expect – they expect the world out of it. So that’s a big change of itself. You’re not gonna sit and invest \$100,000, and then you think it’s chicken change. Unless if you win the lottery for a hundred million dollars... They expect that people who live here, have to be upgraded. Have to be *unique*, have to be *special*.” [#19]

Yafeu is hinting at some of the conflict that can arise in buildings that have converted from LEC to market-rate, and that thus, for at least a certain period of time, are home to people of different incomes and class positions – and who consequently may have different priorities. After the Oxon Run Co-op went condo, Yafeu’s monthly housing costs increased from the mid-\$400s to the mid-\$700s. This is still, he admits, a good deal, considering the building’s location in Columbia Heights. But it still represents a significant jump in cost. Before, he was working only one job, at the front desk of a downtown hotel. Since going condo, he has had to take on a second, part-time job, with a towing company, where he works a few nights a week. Still, Yafeu

has been able to hang onto his unit, and presumably he is building some wealth. He may miss the community feel of the old days, but he is still benefitting from his housing, as are the other original LEC members.

The third LEC in my study to convert to market rate ownership is the Anacostia, a 44-unit building in the Brightwood neighborhood. The tenants completed the purchase of the building in 1983; the LEC members then voted to convert to market-rate cooperative about twelve years later, in 1995. Because the Anacostia did not change to a condominium form but merely voted to end the limited-equity restriction on their cooperative, existing members did not need to pay extra money into the ownership structure, as was the case for both the Rock Creek and the Oxon Run. Conversion to market-rate, therefore, did not mean any members had to move out or go into additional debt. The changes at the Anacostia have therefore been more subtle than at either the Rock Creek or the Oxon Run.

At the time the Anacostia converted to market-rate, 10 of its 44 units were vacant, having been abandoned by their residents, either because they could no longer pay their carrying charges, or because they had died and their families were not interested in dealing with the units. So the co-op took ownership of the units and sold them at the prevailing market rates, using the proceeds to pay off their collective mortgage and renovate the building without taking out any additional loans. Because the co-op went market, it has been able to stabilize itself financially and become autonomous and debt-free. None of the original LEC members have a mortgage on their housing, and they are all now only paying co-op fees of about \$340 a month. The fee includes their share of the property tax, the salary for a full-time maintenance worker, and all utilities except electricity. For those long-time members, many of whom are older or on fixed incomes, this is a very good deal.

But the housing has become recommodified, and the co-op has felt the effects. In the early 2000s, as housing prices began creeping up, and then shooting up, new people started buying into the building who didn't necessarily have the time to work on the co-op's affairs.

Alice, the co-op's current president, who was also one of its founders, describes the change:

“If you end up being on the board for life, which is what normally happens, not just with our co-op, but you know, it's a lot of work, and it's volunteer work. And the people who started [the co-op], they continue, because they know they have to do it. And so it's like, those who will do it will do it, and those who can get away with not participating, will not participate. And then I understand a lot of people, especially now with the market, when the market boomed, a lot of young people – our whole demographics changed. In terms of, there were a lot of young people buying into the building. And they were just getting started in their jobs, and they bought in because they didn't want the house, single people, you know. It was a good investment for them, because they didn't have to worry about taking care of a house while they were on the fast track. But it is a lot of work. It's an amazingly lot of work. And it can be very frustrating at times. But what are you gonna do.” [#11]

She explains further:

“I think times have changed. Times have changed where people have become more busy. And travel more extensively, so they're always looking for someplace else to go, or something else to see, or something else to do. Whereas you guys are coming out of school making more money than we probably would have made in twenty years, just working and getting raises. You guys get out of school and you get what we got after ten years of working! ... Our generation... we didn't think so much about coming out of school and buying a house, buying an apartment. We rented for years, or we were in communes, or whatever. But your generation, you're coming out like, okay, let me build my portfolio, let me buy something, this is my stepping block to my next thing. That's the way it is. I guess we were more into having fun [she laughs]... But I would like to see [our co-op] not lose that camaraderie.” [#11]

So while the co-op has remained affordable for its long-time, mostly low-income members, the units, because they now sell at market rates, are only affordable to people with higher incomes, which has meant a slow shift in the kinds of people who live in the building. This has led to a lessening of the people who prioritize doing the work of the commons. It also, Alice fears, will lead to a lessening of the community within the co-op.

### **Maintaining the urban commons within capitalism**

The commons can provide people with alternatives to capitalism in an immediate sense; it can also open up a way of thinking about resources more broadly that is based more on use than on exchange (cf Gibson-Graham 2006; Blomley 2008). But the challenge of the commons – we might say its contradiction – is that, for the present moment, it necessarily exists within capitalism. Thus while the commons challenges capitalism on a material and ideological level, it is simultaneously susceptible to capitalist forces. All of the limited-equity co-ops in this study received some initial assistance from the city in the form of low-interest loans to help tenants purchase and renovate their buildings. But all of the tenant associations had to pay their landlords a “fair market price” for their buildings when they first purchased them. They were not wresting control of their housing through claiming it outside of the market: they were fully participating in market transactions, and in most cases handing a pretty sum over to the landlords who had, sometimes for years, denied them basic maintenance and decent living conditions. The case of the Rock Creek Co-op stands out in this regard: the owners had purchased the rental building for \$425,000, and then just three years later – after severely neglecting the building’s upkeep – sold it to the tenants for more than double the price. In the end, the landlords made their tidy profit, and the tenants were faced with the daunting task of running their cooperatives. As DeFilippis (2004) argues, LECs are not immune from the challenges of existing within a capitalist real estate market. They must, for instance, repay the debts on their collective mortgages, which in most cases have been issued by for-profit lenders (in addition to low-

interest loans they receive from the city). They also struggle with the effects that individual circumstances like job loss and illness may have on the health of the co-op.

As I have argued, cities should be particularly difficult places to restore and maintain the commons, for it is in cities that market pressures on land are felt most strongly<sup>24</sup>, and the heterogeneity of urban populations may make collective work more difficult. Given this pressure, it is not surprising that over time a number of D.C.'s LECs have failed, succumbing to foreclosure or tax delinquency – or have converted to market-rate ownership structures. Yet what is surprising is that so many people resist the cooptation of the commons for which they have worked so hard. In my next and final chapter, I look closely at what the experiences of D.C. LECs can tell us about the work of the urban commons. A rich understanding of the nature of this work, I argue, can point to ways that the urban commons can be reclaimed, maintained and even expanded, ultimately leading to a world in which more people have collective control over their everyday lives.

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<sup>24</sup> There are, of course, exceptions to the idea that cities are places of relatively intense land pressures: for instance, Detroit. Detroit, I would argue, is one of the exceptions that proves the rule.

## Chapter 8: The Work of the Urban Commons

My research began with a question: how does the urban commons function? My answer is that the urban commons functions through the everyday work of its members. The commons, other scholars have emphasized, is not an a priori resource to be consumed, but is rather socially constructed, constituted through commoning (Linebaugh 2008; De Angelis 2010). *Commoning* is a suggestive, even poetic, term, which conjures up a range of ways of being in community. Though commoning can be joyful, I wish here to emphasize the difficult and sometimes frustrating work of collective self-management of noncommodified resources. My close examination of the experiences of ten current and former limited-equity housing cooperatives in Washington, D.C. has made clear to me that, while the urban commons can provide much to its members, it also requires much in terms of work. While ultimately I am hopeful about the potential for people working in common to collectively self-manage noncommodified resources, I want to treat the practice of the commons realistically.

To conclude, I emphasize three points, and make one suggestion. My first point is that the urban commons be taken seriously as a theoretical framework. My second point is that the work of the urban commons must include the work of *expansion*, along with reclamation and maintenance; the work of the commons, I argue, is a dialectical process that moves between expansion and maintenance. My third point is that it is through doing the work of the urban commons that people may begin to learn to self-govern; for some LEC members, participating in the work of the co-op is a remarkable opportunity to learn to live democratically. My suggestion is for future research into the work of the urban commons: specifically, I would like to see researchers take up the idea of postwork and the time of the urban commons. I flesh out this idea

through telling the life story of one woman who lived nearly forty years in one of the co-ops I studied.

### **The urban commons as a framework**

First, I argue that the urban commons needs to be taken seriously as a theoretical framework. Enacting the urban commons is both more difficult and more necessary than enacting the other forms of the commons – namely, the natural and the digital – that have been theorized to date. Enacting the urban commons is more *necessary* because people are increasingly living lives shaped by cities: the urban is becoming the normal state of human existence. And because cities are the locus of capitalist activity, it is more necessary to enact commons in them so that people can begin to resist or escape capitalism, and gain some control over their collective lives. The urban commons are necessary, in other words, because of what they can provide their members. But it is also more *difficult* to enact the urban commons: because cities are made up of diverse people who will inevitably come into conflict over the city's finite land and resources. It is precisely because of the city's nature as a center of capitalism that it is more difficult to enact the commons there. It is both because of the need and the difficulty of the urban commons that it is so urgent to theorize this form of life.

I have argued that limited-equity housing cooperatives represent one manifestation of the urban commons, and therefore present a good opportunity for understanding how the urban commons works in practice. A commons is defined as a resource that a) is collectively owned and managed by its members; and that b) is valued by its members for the way it meets their everyday needs, rather than for its potential future monetary exchange. Limited-equity co-ops fit this definition on both counts. LECs also fit both counts of my definition of the urban commons:

they have usually been developed in densely populated areas with relatively intense pressures on land, and, at least in the case of Washington, D.C., have generally been populated with heterogeneous groups of people.

As manifested in D.C., urban commons play both material and ideological roles. Washington, D.C.'s LECs provide a modest amount of housing – in a city with nearly 300,000 housing units, there are slightly more than 3100 units of LEC housing, meaning they make up just over one percent of the city's total housing stock (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). But LECs create affordable and stable housing for mostly low-income tenants who had never before had an opportunity to have control over their housing. And they provide proof that low-income people can collectively self-manage their homes, even in the midst of high-pressure housing markets. This has been particularly important ideologically because historically most low-income people in the city have been African-American, and black self-determination has been of paramount importance in the city's identity since it became the nation's first majority-black city in the late 1950s. While the material support an urban commons provides its members is crucial, the ideological role it can play in demonstrating possibilities for living (at least partially) outside of capitalism may be equally important.

### **The work of expanding the commons**

My second argument is that the work of the urban commons must include the work of expansion. One of Harvey's (2012) main concerns about the commons is whether it can work at larger scales. I do not frame this problem as one of whether an urban commons can "jump scale" vertically; rather, I frame it as a question of how an urban commons might expand outward, horizontally.

Sheila is one of my respondents for whom the ideal of collective self-determination has long been a driving force in her work with housing co-ops in the city. Sheila, who was introduced in Chapter 5, is an African-American in her 60s who moved to D.C. in the 1970s, lived in a collective house of black women, and worked against violence against women. She lived in the Rock Creek back when it was a rental apartment building, and helped organize her fellow tenants to found the Rock Creek Co-op in the late 1980s. She later went on to help found the Fenwick Co-op in the early 2000s, and continues to live there today. She is a strong believer in limited-equity co-ops, and in the ways they can give people power over their lives. But ultimately, she views the co-op as a springboard for other work in the world, outside the home.

As she describes:

“I would even like to see – and that’s what I’m hoping eventually to do – is create other cooperatives out of limited-equity cooperatives. Cause to me then that would help further people’s dreams, or whatever it is they want to do. If you have cooperative buying clubs, so you don’t have to pay as much. I’ve always had this interest in creating a laundry detergent buying club, for people who live in limited-equity cooperatives. I have this idea in plan to create a janitorial cooperative out of – from – people who live in limited-equity cooperatives. To help folks, one, feel begin to live the concept of working together, pooling resources together, to help better everybody. And of course I know we live in a society where we’re indoctrinated on individuality and that kind of stuff. But just as we were – we are – indoctrinated – I mean we can work on educating people that that’s how we can all survive, and not just survive but have a real quality of life.” [#24]

Sheila has never been satisfied simply with the collective self-provisioning of housing, as difficult as that process is. Her dream is to use the co-op as a basis for other work that will give low-income people more power over their lives: to, as she says, “help further people’s dreams.” Sheila, in other words, wants to *expand* the commons constituted by limited-equity cooperatives. I argue that expanding the commons is, after reclamation and maintenance, the third phase of the work of the commons. Without expansion, the commons stagnates, and may ultimately collapse.

To expand the commons is to build on what Eizenberg (2011) calls “actually existing commons” to create more spheres of common life – be it in the realms of work, play, learning, childrearing, or any number of other parts of life that have become commodified under capitalism. As theorists like Gibson-Graham imply, it is ultimately through continued expansion of the commons that capitalism dissolves. But Gibson-Graham’s is relatively theoretical work; it is more of an expression of a desire for the expansion of commons than an investigation of how it could actually happen. Clark hints at possibilities for expansion of the commons in her discussion of the development of nascent networks among LECs in New York City: these co-ops were beginning to turn outwards, claiming adjacent empty lots for community gardens and planning murals for empty public walls. But it is unclear to what degree these efforts at expanding into other spaces succeeded (Clark 1994). When it comes to the co-ops in my study, the work of expanding the commons is largely theoretical. Most of the time, it is all these co-ops can do to keep themselves going, given the fact that they exist in a capitalist system.

Despite the challenges, members of a few of the co-ops in my study have attempted to expand their work beyond the immediate needs of their own housing. The Oxon Run Co-op is a case in point. Once the purchase and renovation of the Oxon Run was completed, Abai arrived at the realization that the co-op needed what he called a “cause” in order to thrive. He hit on the idea of establishing a collective management company for fellow limited-equity co-ops. He explains his thinking:

“Then later [after the renovations were completed], everybody has an apartment, now everybody is satisfied. So we have the cooperative. Now comes – the cause is done! Now people start fighting [he laughs]. About everything and anything. For example, thinking [a co-op leader] wanted to have the power. This started creating some problems... So I was thinking later, I said, no, this cooperative is not going to go anywhere unless we have some causes. We have money. So why not to create a management company collective? We started working with about ten cooperatives, to create this management company. Doing some questionnaires, and mobilizing people,

and they came up with about ten people, ten cooperatives, under [an outside nonprofit group]. So we'll hire some people there, we'll create our maintenance people, we'll create even stores, small stores, I was thinking about that. I said, let's *create* something." [#18]

Abai even went back to school, majoring in financial management, in order to pursue this idea of creating a kind of employment commons generated from the Oxon Run and other likeminded LECs. But he was never able to find a for-profit partner for the project, and the idea ultimately never got off the ground. Abai eventually moved out of the co-op. Years later, as detailed in the last chapter, Oxon Run voted to convert to a market-rate condominium ownership structure – in part, perhaps, because the members no longer had a cause to keep them united.

Reflecting on this, Abai says:

“Long after the cooperative was established, there's not another cause to mobilize it... And [the management collective idea is] forgotten, really. Simply a bunch of idealists, all of them.” [#18]

He shakes his head as he says this, and there's a note of regret in his voice. He appears to include himself among those naive idealists. Abai's story is a sad one, in a sense: a tale of possibilities lost.

But in at least one case, the commons created by an LEC has successfully extended outside the cooperative and its membership, and into the surrounding community. In the early years of the Fenwick Co-op, members were eager to use the co-op as a basis for larger community work. A prison abolition group met in the co-op's community room, as did a reading group critically analyzing the charter school movement. The co-op membership organized a citywide campaign to change how limited-equity co-ops were assessed, so that their property taxes properly reflected their limited-equity status. One member, Bashir, represented the co-op in supporting a public boys and girls club a few blocks away, which was threatened with condominium redevelopment. Bashir is a Mideastern immigrant man in his 40s, and has lived in

the co-op since 2003. As he says of the activist groups that met in the co-op's community room, "[T]hey liked that people were meeting at this oasis from gentrification, this oasis of activists, and so on." [#22] At the Fenwick, members have been able, to a certain extent, to maintain their co-op while also working to expand the commons in areas outside their own housing.

But Bashir also describes a tension within the co-op membership over putting energy inwards, into the co-op, and outwards, into the larger community. He personally values more external, political work, and worries that the internal work of the co-op is sucking away time and energy for external work. As he says:

“[O]ur involvement in the boys and girls club and the tax issue and other issues – it wasn't a burden. It was kind of like shifting... a lot of us were trying to shift back away to the community, and say, this is not a burden. So there were people who wanted to say, we cannot shift outwards, until we fix our [internal co-op] problems. And I don't [agree] – I think dialectically. If we shifted away, then our problems, people would have been forced to streamline their problems, and it would have been in context of what was happening in the city. So that's the struggle there.” [#22]

Here, Bashir captures the difficulty of expanding the commons. If the commons is marked by self-management, and self-management requires ongoing work, then to add to that work by attempting to take on other work might actually work against the good of the co-op itself. This was apparently the concern of some Fenwick Co-op members, who wanted to prioritize internal co-op work over doing work in the community at large. Yet ultimately Bashir thinks, as he says, “dialectically,” believing that it is only by engaging in work with the broader world that the co-op can be successful internally. Abai thinks similarly: it is only by working to expand the commons that the co-op itself will survive.

Sheila, Bashir and Abai all believe that it is only through turning outward that the co-op can maintain its inner integrity. For these co-op members, efforts to maintain the commons must be twinned with efforts to expand it: one must engage in a dialectical approach that encompasses

both. This, of course, is much easier said than done. But as theorists like Graeber and Hardt and Negri argue, working in common can only be learned by doing the work itself: and it may be that working dialectically is also something that must be learned by doing. I turn now to how co-op members are learning to work in common, and may ultimately be learning collective self-governance.

### **Learning to work in common, learning self-governance**

My third argument is that it is through doing the work of the urban commons that people may begin to learn to self-govern. I qualify this statement with a *may* because my research shows that the extent to which members participate in the commons is uneven, and not all members engage equally in the activities of self-governance. Still, my research gives me hope that the model of the urban commons provides a way to expand the ability of members to self-govern, even if this has not always happened fully in practice. Previous researchers have argued that living in LECs and community land trusts teaches people how to work together, and helps people become more politically engaged with their larger community. Through working together to keep their housing functioning, people learn how to engage in democratic processes, and become empowered to take action in areas of their lives outside their homes (Clark 1994; Saegert and Winkel 1996; Saegert and Winkel 1998; DeFilippis 2001). The sense of empowerment that many co-op members develop through their work represents a shift in consciousness. It is a double shift: both towards realizing they can have control over their housing, and also towards the awareness that having more control over housing requires taking responsibility for that housing.

But in Washington, D.C., tenants who band together to purchase their buildings from their landlords often do not know exactly what they're getting into, and are not often prepared to take on the self-governance necessary to operate their co-ops. The vast majority of D.C.'s LECs have not been created as intentional communities, but are rather made up of tenants who just happened to be living in the same building when that building was put up for sale. At the time their buildings are put up for sale, the tenants are desperate: they want to save their housing. And if they are low-income, their only option for purchasing their building is to do so collectively, with assistance from the city, and creating a limited-equity cooperative. Tenants therefore do not necessarily enter into the process of cooperative formation with what Sheila calls "a collective owner consciousness." She explains:

“[In] my experience when housing converts, and people choose, or go to a limited-equity co-op, it's not because of a commitment to the concept of cooperatives, because that's the only option we have. And if that's the only option, without the education, then yeah, it gets to be a problem. And it might be sustainable for a while, but then if people don't have the cooperative education in concept, and have a consciousness, for me that's what education is about: to create a cooperative, a collective owner consciousness – then yeah, something else is gonna happen, and we're gonna lose that housing... So that's a major challenge in the city that I see.” [#24]

Although a few tenants in a given building might embrace a cooperative vision of collective ownership and self-governance from the start, most will need to learn it over time. While there may be a role for political education in building cooperative consciousness, as Sheila suggests, most co-op members build a cooperative consciousness slowly and over time, through the everyday work of their co-ops. Whitney, of the Fenwick Co-op, explains that a number of her fellow co-op members entered into the co-op without an understanding of how to collectively self-govern, which can be time-consuming and difficult. As she explains:

“It's just us. There's no leader or organization that tells you what to do. It's just us. So if you have a problem and you want something done, we have to do it ourselves. And a lot of people came in here not used to that way of working. They came into this used to

being in a position of submission. And they would complain that this is happening, and no one is doing anything! The only way this is going to happen if one of us does it. But I don't think some people could ever adjust to that." [#23]

Magdalena, the president of the Broad Branch Co-op, echoes Whitney's point. She explains that co-op members are still getting used to understanding that they alone are the ones responsible for their housing. As she says:

"Like I told them in the last meeting, we don't have a bigger guy to go to. Our bigger guy is us. If something goes wrong, *it is us*, you need to understand that. So basically that's the thing, a lot of people still think they're in a [rental] apartment... We are the owners, we don't go to a bigger person. The only bigger person is the bank that's gonna take the property if we don't pay [she laughs]!" [#26]

Sheila, Whitney and Magdalena all worry about the lack of a commons consciousness in their co-ops because they are concerned about the ability of their co-ops to self-govern. Some members enter into a co-op with a commons consciousness. But others develop it through doing the work of the commons. Diane, of the Piney Branch Co-op, is not a major leader at her co-op, but she developed an understanding and appreciation of self-governance through serving just one term on the co-op board. She says:

"I was the assistant secretary. And it was a good experience. I would recommend every shareholder to do it at least once. It's really a good experience, it's a learning experience... [I]t wasn't a lot of work. It could have its rough moments, by me not understanding a lot of things. It made it sometimes a little challenging for me. But other than that, it was fine. But I would definitely recommend everybody, at least do one term. Just to see, and get the insight, and know what's going on. Do it at least one term, just to see. And it really was a learning experience." [#34]

Though she has five children and works full-time, Diane was able to carve out time to participate in the work of running her co-op. When she emphasizes how much she learned in the process, I would argue that what she was learning, writ large, was to collectively self-govern.

Learning to collectively self-govern means becoming comfortable with doing prefigurative work: that is, working today in ways that model a future, desired world (cf.

Chatterton 2010). If, as Hardt, following Jefferson, argues, democracy is learned by doing, then the work of self-governance must be prefigurative (Hardt 2007). The supportive environment of the commons can enable members to become comfortable with prefigurative work. Whitney describes how she took on the role as the treasurer of the Fenwick Co-op, and how she learned the position as she went:

“When I first joined, I wouldn’t say I had any experience with finances at all. I was never trained in that kind of thing. And after I had a bunch of questions at a meeting, [another member] suggested, why don’t *you* do it? It was very scary, because I don’t know anything about economics or accounting. So I just sort of jumped in there. I was the treasurer for probably four years, and then I had to take a break and move home for a year when my dad passed away, and I had to take care of my mom and my dad’s small business. Then I came back and was treasurer again, did it until I was completely burned out, and then I took a break, and now I’m doing it again!” [#23]

Later, she follows up on this thought:

“[L]earning about the treasurer position, and feeling confident that I could do it, that’s been good. When I had to go back [home] to help with my dad’s business, I used those skills then. It activates a different part of my brain – it’s not natural to me, but I can do it, if I concentrate. It was a matter of figuring that out, and now if I want to do it, I can. Now in my current relationship, I am the accountant [she laughs]! It’s sad that we don’t teach our kids about money, and we don’t teach each other about finances, and how to manage things, and be realistic.” [#23]

Whitney goes on to say that the supportive environment of the co-op was part of what enabled her to volunteer for the treasurer position even though she didn’t know anything about finances at the time. Taking on the position was a risk for her, personally – it was, as she says, “very scary” – and it was also a risk for the co-op as a whole. If Whitney had failed, the co-op might have failed. As it was, Whitney’s financial skills have developed to the point that, as her fellow co-op member Bashir notes, “she saves our asses every time.” Whitney is just one example of the many co-op members who have learned to engage in self-governance through, simply, diving into the work. And the supportive environment of the commons helps allow this to happen.

Finally, it's important to note that collective self-governance appears to happen best when people are relaxed and enjoying themselves. In Chapter 6, Sophie describes the pleasure she and her fellow members at the Anacostia Co-op gained through working together to paint their community room. Similarly, Bashir describes the pleasures of working in the community garden that sits in the collective back yard of the Fenwick Co-op. The garden, he says, is a place where members can relax and talk informally about co-op matters. He says:

“[O]ne sign of the health of the co-op is participation in a community garden... To me it means more than just the garden. It means, you wanna do something collaboratively. I truly believe, that the more people that work on the community garden, and feel invested, the easier that our meetings will get. It's just that kind of thing. The people who used to work in the garden, we used to talk about, informally, and not in a room, about a lot of things about the co-op. And you're kind of taking care of the co-op. There's something magical that happens in taking care of the co-op physically, that you're not caught up with procedure and bureaucracy. It's more of a holistic approach.” [#22]

The Fenwick's community garden is an example of learning collective self-governance through working together in a relaxed manner. The garden is also an example of how the expansion of the commons may support the maintenance of an existing commons. Research indicates that working together in community gardens can open up safe spaces for people to engage in informal dialogue that leads to greater understanding (Shinew, Glover et al. 2004). Community gardens, Shinew et al. argue (following Linn 1999), are a form of “neighborhood commons.” In this case, the community garden is an expansion of the commons – an expansion that, as already noted, was attempted by LECs in New York City (Clark 1994). It may be that people can learn to work in common by building other commons together. The work of the commons is iterative and doubles back on itself constantly. It is not a linear progression, but a constant doing and redoing, a constant applying of new knowledge. Learning collective self-governance, and in prefigurative ways, is part of the dialectical process of commons maintenance and expansion.

### **Future possibilities: postwork and the time of the urban commons**

I'd like to end with an observation about potential future theoretical directions for research into the urban commons by bringing in Kathi Weeks' ideas as developed in her (2011) book *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. I have in earlier chapters discussed my interest in feminist concepts of work vis a vis the commons, and have also expressed an interest in the way in which time functions in the commons. Both of these interests could be built upon in the future work, I believe, through engagement with Weeks' ideas. Weeks sees two main problems with work: one, it monopolizes our time, and two, it dominates the social and political imagination, such that people gain identity and a sense of how to participate in the world primarily through their waged work. Our understandings about how to engage in social reciprocity, she argues, get reduced to what we can do through our waged work. Even as we have become enormously more productive in our work, we have not been given the opportunity to trade the wealth gained through that productivity for time. But time, Weeks argues, is what we need more of in order to participate in society in new and as yet undiscovered ways. Weeks details two social policies that could free up time – she argues both for a shorter work week, and for a universal basic income – but she is more interested in the provocation of what she calls postwork. In a postwork existence – an existence in which waged work did not provide the primary structure of our daily lives – how would people spend their time?

Weeks does not take up the idea of the commons. Yet it appears to me that the commons provides a ground for the development of postwork; in fact, researchers may find that this may ultimately be one of the most important functions the commons provides. The commons, I have

argued, is a space where people may begin to change their relationship to waged labor. The commons requires work and time, but this is a very different work from waged labor, and it is also a very different kind of time.

Through interviews, direct observation of co-op member meetings, and my participant observation in one of the co-ops in my sample, I have learned that people tend to approach their work in the co-op very differently than they would approach waged work in the workplace. The main difference is that, in the work of the co-op, they have control over their time. This work, therefore, is very different from waged work. It can still be difficult and frustrating, but it can also be joyful. At the Anacostia Co-op, meetings are held on the building's roof deck during the warm months, timed to take advantage of the glorious summer evening sky. Board members – elected by the membership at large, willingly taking on the work of the co-op for a two-year stint – eat pizza purchased from the co-op's petty cash funds, and discuss co-op problems and how to solve them. One member's child comes and draws in her coloring book while board members talk. This is work, but on the members' terms and timeframes.

I illustrate the possibilities for thinking through postwork and the time of the urban commons by telling the story of one long-time member of the Penn Branch Co-op, Hazel Dickens<sup>25</sup>. Dickens, who grew up one of eleven children in an impoverished West Virginia coal-mining town, became famous as a musician in the once-vibrant bluegrass scene of Washington, D.C. She was known, her obituary notes, as “a forceful voice of the working class, singing with unguarded emotion of poverty, labor and loss” (Schudel 2011). Dickens had left West Virginia at age 16, moving first to Baltimore and taking a job at a can factory there. She told a reporter that it was terribly difficult for her to adjust herself to working in the factory. It took all her energy, she said, to just learn how to work at a job. She moved to Washington and into the Penn

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<sup>25</sup> Her real name. She died before I was able to interview her for this project.

Branch in about 1970, back when it was still a rental complex, and took a job managing a neighborhood Mexican import store. All along, she was writing and performing music, and playing an increasingly important role in the area's burgeoning bluegrass scene.

In 1979, Dickens experienced a turning point in her life. After a brief marriage and years of trying to balance waged work with music-making, she decided that year to dedicate her life to her art. She quit her day job at the shop, and gave up the dream, she told a reporter, of owning her own house. Instead, she stayed in her little one-bedroom apartment, and concentrated on writing music (Battiata 2001). As soon as she made this decision, her first solo albums started pouring out. The first one, released in 1981, was titled *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People*. It was followed by three more in quick succession; over the years, her songs appeared on over two dozen albums. In 2001 Dickens won a National Heritage fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts for her role in preserving and reinventing mountain music.

The year Dickens decided to quit her job – 1979 – was also the year the Penn Branch tenants had just completed the purchase of their apartment complex, making it perhaps the city's very first limited-equity cooperative. One cannot help but think that the long-term affordability and stability garnered through the conversion to cooperative ownership was a factor in Dickens' decision to take the risk to devote her life to music. Her rental apartment – where she had once received an eviction notice on Christmas Eve – had become a stable place where people watched out for each other, costs were kept low, and fear of eviction was banished. It had been reclaimed as a commons.

Dickens was a somewhat reclusive member of the Penn Branch. She appreciated that her neighbors looked out for each other, she told a reporter, but she was not particularly involved in the collective work of the co-op. Sarah, one of the early leaders of the Penn Branch purchase

effort, says of Dickens, “We never asked her to do a concert fundraiser, I don’t know why – maybe I just felt I wanted to respect her privacy too much.” But, she adds with a laugh, “I remember having to visit her twice, and it was really cool!” Though Dickens may not have participated directly in her housing co-op, she gave to a wider commons through her music. For instance, she donated four of her songs to the documentary film *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, which won an Oscar for its chronicling of a coal-mining strike. She gave the songs for free because, she said, “I knew [the director] was about \$60,000 in debt on the project, and I badly wanted to see it get into theaters” (quoted in Schudel 2011). Dickens was a fierce advocate of the poor, of people who had lost out under capitalism and were never going to win. She does not appear to have been someone who operated on the logic of the market, but rather on the logic of the common. Though she may not have participated directly in the commons of her housing, her ability to live there is part of what allowed her to participate in a broader collective project of music and social justice.<sup>26</sup>

It was because of her ability to live in a commons, I think, that Hazel Dickens was able to move into a kind of post-work existence. This is not to say she did not work: she wrote music and performed constantly. But it was on her own terms. No longer was she paid a wage to fit into someone else’s profit scheme, be it at a factory or a store. She was able to devote herself to meaningful work – work deeply meaningful both to herself and to the thousands of people that heard her songs. Another way to say this is that she became able to experience a different kind of time: a time marked not by linear clocks and time cards, but by cyclical verses and choruses, time as formed by notes and beats, musical time such as Lefebvre describes. Through

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<sup>26</sup> This is not to excuse her lack of participation in the work of her own housing cooperative; not even nationally recognized artists can be excused from the work of maintaining the collective resource that they and their neighbors rely on to support their everyday lives. This story would be neater if Dickens had, in fact, performed at fundraisers for the Penn Branch, supporting the co-op through her music.

membership in the commons of her housing, Dickens was able to escape, to a certain degree, the strictures of capitalist time. And as an artist thriving in a limited-equity co-op, Dickens was not alone. “We have many artists in our building,” Magdalena told me proudly, of the Broad Branch Co-op. LECs in Manhattan’s Hells Kitchen supported artist members as well (Saegert, Benitez et al. 2005). If a commons can help support the kind of transformative art of people like Hazel Dickens and others, it is worth pursuing as a way of collective life.

My hope is that researchers can work in common to further develop some of these ideas of postwork and time in the urban commons. Ultimately, I want people to think more closely about the urban commons, and deal realistically with the work they require. The commons, are constituted through commoning – and commoning can be joyful, but it is also work: it is figuring out how to deal with people who are not paying monthly co-op fees; it is writing and rewriting rules for living together; and it is, at least for the present, dealing with the collective stress of maintaining a noncommodified space in the midst of a capitalist real estate market. To continue to flesh out how the urban commons functions is important for building a world in which people gain collective control over their own lives and can, as Sheila hopes – and as Hazel Dickens illustrates – further their dreams.

### Appendix 1: Summary of Sample Projects

The ten projects sampled in this research are presented here in chronological order by year of founding. A short history of each project follows the table below.

<i>Project name</i>	<i>Year founded</i>	<i>Ward</i>	<i># Units</i>	<i>Demographic makeup</i> <sup>27</sup>	<i>Current status</i>
Penn Branch Cooperative	1979	3	63	Diverse in race and class	LEC
Anacostia Cooperative	1983	4	44	Mostly African-American and Caribbean, working class	Market-rate cooperative
Watts Cooperative	1989	4	43	African-American working class	LEC
Rock Creek Cooperative	1989	2	27	African-American working class	Vacant
Oxon Run Cooperative	1992	1	15	Diverse in race, working class	Market-rate condo
Potomac Cooperative	1997	4	36	Diverse in race, mostly working class	LEC
Piney Branch Cooperative	2001	7	90	African-American working class	LEC
Fenwick Cooperative	2003	1	15	Diverse in race and class	LEC
Broad Branch Cooperative	2004	1	21	Diverse in race, mostly working class	LEC
Tiber Cooperative	2005	5	4	African-American working class	LEC

#### **Penn Branch Cooperative**

Penn Branch Cooperative is made up of six three-story apartment buildings in the Glover Park neighborhood. It has 63 units, all of which are one bedroom. It was built in 1941 as rental housing for workers coming to D.C. during the Second World War. The complex is one block from Rock Creek Park, the national forest located within Washington, D.C. Glover Park is a relatively upper-income neighborhood, just north of Georgetown. Penn Branch Cooperative is one of the only – perhaps *the* only – limited-equity co-op in Ward 3, the city’s wealthiest and whitest ward.

<sup>27</sup> For projects that are no longer LECs, demographic makeup is given for the project when it was an LEC.

Penn Branch is also one of the city's earliest LECs. After receiving eviction notices on Christmas Eve, 1977, the tenants organized to purchase the building, and, after an extended battle with their landlord, were able to do so in 1979. The cooperative was organized as a limited-equity structure from the beginning, with the goal of preserving affordable housing in the neighborhood. The co-op is self-managed, which is highly unusual for D.C. LECs, particularly given the co-op's relatively large size. One member, who has been living in the building since it was a rental, is paid to be the full-time site manager.

This is a diverse co-op, in terms of race and income. At one point 14 different countries were represented in the membership. It is slowly becoming a more elderly co-op, as people age in place. The longest-term member has been in her unit for 42 years, and is 85 years old. 12 of the 63 units are currently occupied by members who use Section 8 (now HCVP) vouchers to pay their carrying charges (the number of Section 8 members has shifted slightly over the years). All the Section 8 members are developmentally disabled adults that are referred to the co-op by a local non-profit organization.

In 1977, before conversion to co-op, rents at in the complex were about \$119. When the tenant purchase took place, members bought into the co-op by buying \$1000 shares. \$500 of this amount could be financed by the city government's first-time homebuyer program. Members who could not pay the remaining \$500 in full could pay on a payment plan, paying \$8 or \$10 a month. The share price has increased slowly over the years, based on increases in the consumer price index. In 1986, the co-op paid off their initial loans and restructured, and the share price for new members rose to \$32,000. In 2004, one member spearheaded a campaign to increase the share price by 50%. Though some longtime members were opposed to this because it would make the shares more expensive for new members, the membership voted to do so. (The

member who spearheaded the campaign, a lawyer who had never been involved in the life of the co-op in any other way, sold her share and moved out shortly after the share price was increased.) Today, the share price hovers right around \$100,000, and increases continue to be tied to the CPI. This is still a very affordable price for a one-bedroom unit, particularly given the co-op's location in a relatively wealthy neighborhood with a good public elementary school (given the fact that all the units are one-bedroom, not many children live there, but a few have grown up there over the years). In addition to paying mortgages on their share loans (if they are still paying off mortgages – long-term members may have paid them off), members also pay co-op fees, the highest of which is currently \$369. Members who have moved in recently, therefore, pay about \$800 or \$900 total on their housing costs, depending on the terms of their share mortgages. Early 2011 real estate listings for similar low-rise one-bedroom condominium units in the neighborhood show one priced at \$299,000, with a monthly fee of \$214; another is selling for \$294,000, with a monthly fee of \$357; a third is priced at \$277,000, with a \$356 fee. The current median rent for one-bedroom apartments in Glover Park is \$2169 (though this includes high-rise units, which often have more amenities than low-rise). A more rigorous comparison of prices is warranted, but these initial figures indicate that the cooperative is quite affordable in comparison to surrounding housing opportunities.

The city does not place resale restrictions on Penn Branch co-op, nor does any other outside institution. Resale restrictions are enforced solely by the co-op itself. There are no income restrictions on new members, but new members tend not to be wealthy. Apparently this is because the co-op's amenities are relatively few: the units are small (the largest floor plan is 540 square feet) and modest, and there is no parking, swimming pool, roof deck, or other amenities that wealthier people, I was told, tend to want. Because the limited-equity nature of

the co-op is enforced by the co-op membership, it is possible that in future years the co-op could decide to raise their share prices to market rate.

### **Anacostia Cooperative**

Anacostia Cooperative is a market-rate co-op that began life as an LEC when the tenants purchased the building from their landlord in 1983. The co-op is located in Washington's Ward 4, an area several miles north of downtown that is home to historically black, working-class and middle-class neighborhoods, with a smattering of whites, and wealthier residents, both black and white. The co-op's neighborhood of Brightwood is relatively stable and, because it is not located near a stop in the city's subway system, does not appear to be on the verge of gentrification. It is a quiet, mostly residential neighborhood; a major commercial thoroughfare lies two blocks east of the building. All but two of the building's 44 units are one bedrooms; the remainder are studios. The building is currently home to a mix of long-time residents, who are all African-American or Caribbean, and newer residents, who are a mix of black and white professionals. Long-term residents tend to be older, and newer residents represent an age range from about 30 to about 60. There are currently only two children living in the building, a six-year-old who shares a one-bedroom apartment with her mother and great-grandmother; and an eight-year-old whose family is renting one of the units from a co-op member.

The building's tenants began organizing to buy the building in 1980, and completed the purchase in 1983. It was the first building in Ward 4 to go co-op under the city's then-new tenant first right to purchase law. The tenants at the time were almost entirely African-Americans and Caribbeans who worked low-level government jobs, were bus drivers, students at Howard University, or retired; they were for the most part working people who needed an

affordable place to live. They elected to go limited-equity because they did not have the money to purchase the building without assistance from the city. Tenants received city assistance to purchase their shares in the new co-op, which were about \$20,000. But once the co-op was able to pay off their city loan in 1996, the membership decided to convert to a market-rate structure. This conversion happened when the president at the time was ready to leave the co-op, and realized he could make more money selling his unit if the ownership structure was changed. Conversion to market-rate did not require existing members to make new condo downpayments, and everyone was able to stay in the building. Since that time, original co-op members have only had to pay their co-op fees, which are now in the neighborhood of \$350, depending on exact square footage of the unit.

The fact that the co-op is now market-rate has meant that, as units become empty, they are no longer as affordable to new members as they once were. This has both meant a diminution of the city's affordable housing stock overall, and a changed demographic within the building. New members tend to be younger and busier. Yet the building is still quite economically diverse, since the long-time, mostly elderly members rarely leave the building, as there is little incentive for them to sell their shares. As the president explains, selling a share will not bring in enough money to buy a larger home in the neighborhood; and, if any of the seniors in the building were to sell their shares, they would be too wealthy to be eligible for city-funded retirement homes. Besides, they have built a strong community in the building, and look out for each other. Their social ties and external financial circumstances mean that the members, by and large, do not have huge incentive to take advantage of their accumulated equity and leave.

The case of this co-op raises some interesting tensions about the value of limited-equity restrictions vis a vis the ability of low-income residents to have power over their own housing.

Because they were able to convert to market and sell a few empty units at the market rate, the co-op did not have to take out another loan from the bank (or from the city) in order to make needed repairs. Their market-rate status has enabled this group of mostly low- and moderate-income people to attain a degree of financial self-sufficiency that may not have been possible if they were not able to access the equity in their building. (It is interesting that Anacostia chose to collectivize the proceeds of the sale from the empty units, as compared to another co-op that went condo in the 2000s, which chose to divide up the proceeds among the individual members of the old cooperative.) The co-op vice-president is a journeyman electrician who lived in Tanzania for ten years in the 1980s, helping build that newly formed socialist state, and brought his ideals and experiences to his work at Anacostia. He is a strong proponent of cooperative work in all fields, represents Anacostia in a regional association of housing cooperatives, and hopes that Anacostia can serve as a model cooperative for others. He places great emphasis on economic collective self-sufficiency, and is therefore completely uninterested in the limited-equity model. This perspective merits serious thought when considering the advantages and disadvantages of the limited-equity model.

### **Watts Cooperative**

Watts is a limited-equity co-op located in the Brightwood neighborhood of DC's Ward 4. The co-op is made up of three three-story buildings, with a total of 43 units, half one-bedrooms and half two-bedrooms. The buildings were built in 1955, and the units are modest, though in good repair. Brightwood is a long-time black working- and middle-class area, several miles removed from the city's downtown, and not directly served by the city's subway system. Though gentrification has not hit this neighborhood as it has hit closer-in neighborhoods, home

prices and rents have risen in recent years. Wal-Mart is planning to open one of its first DC stores on the block adjacent to the co-op in 2012, which may affect neighborhood housing values. The co-op is mostly African-American, and members are described by the interviewee as “working class.”

The former tenants bought the buildings from their relatively cooperative landlord for \$550,000, completing the purchase in 1989. That year, according to *Washingtonian Magazine*, the average price of a single-family home in Brightwood was \$128,000. Residents each paid \$1000 (for a two bedroom share) or \$500 (for a one bedroom share). Some residents came up with the cash on their own, while others were able to use Section 8. Everyone who wanted to stay in the building and be part of the co-op did stay, and most people remained in the building. The few that left did so apparently because they didn't understand the limited-equity concept, and how it could benefit them. The major changes that took place when they bought the buildings was that maintenance and repair increased, and the community of residents grew stronger. After purchase, the co-op worked to obtain additional financing for renovations to the buildings. The grand opening of the renovated cooperative was held in April 1991.

At the time of purchase, the co-op decided to keep its carrying charges at the same level of the rent they had been paying, which was \$333 for a two bedroom. They did not raise their carrying charges for a long time, but over the past seven years have raised them several times, in order to build up their reserve fund and pay for repairs. Members who have been in the co-op for a long time pay lower carrying charges than new members. One long-time resident, for example, now pays \$595 for her two bedroom, which is the amount that a new member would pay for a one bedroom. (Share prices are now \$800 for a one-bedroom and \$1000 for a two-bedroom.) \$595 is a remarkable deal for the neighborhood; according to a real estate listing, the average

rent for a one-bedroom in the neighborhood is \$1000. As of 2011, carrying charges for incoming members are \$610 for a one-bedroom and \$627 for a two-bedroom. While some members in the past have used Section 8 subsidies to help pay their carrying charges, as of 2011 no members have Section 8 assistance.

In 2004, the president of the co-op's management company suggested that Watts convert to a condominium structure. When one member found out about this offer, she strongly counseled the co-op board president against it. Though this member had never been involved with the board, she has worked as a community organizer in other neighborhoods, and had attended meetings of a group of LECs that had formed in 2004 in an attempt to share experiences across co-ops. Through participating in this group, she learned of a number of co-ops that had gone condo, and had heard horror stories of former co-op members being forced to leave their homes once their buildings went condo. This member values limited-equity ownership because it is her only option for ownership. She also values the community that the co-op's affordability has helped create. Her daughter, for example, who grew up in the co-op, now owns the unit below her. Conversion to condominium, for this woman, is a risk she is not willing to take, even if it could possibly bring her some profits. This interview points to the idea that there may be a certain financial conservatism to co-op decisions to remain limited-equity. Members value the homes they already have, and are not willing to risk them for potential financial gain.

The members that have moved out have typically left to buy houses on the open market, or have gone into nursing homes. In general this appears to be a well-managed and stable building.

### **Rock Creek Cooperative**

The Rock Creek was a 27-unit cooperative located in the Shaw neighborhood, a historically African-American neighborhood just north of downtown D.C. Shaw is famous as a center of black cultural and economic activity. Throughout the 1980s and '90s, the building was situated a block from an enormous parking lot, which took up about six city blocks. The parking lot represented the disinvestment experienced by the neighborhood, beginning in the post-riot era through the early 1990s, when a metro station opened a block from Rock Creek. Tenants began organizing against poor living conditions as early as 1981. In February 1986, a pair of investor brothers purchased the building for \$425,000. Three months later, the brothers informed the tenants of their intention to sell the building. Because D.C. law requires landlords to give tenants the first opportunity to purchase the building, the brothers offered it to sale to the tenants – for \$1.6 million, nearly four times that amount for which they had purchased it three months earlier. The tenants rejected the offer but were determined to stay in their housing. Their landlords were determined to force them out.

For several years, the tenants fought with their landlord over maintenance issues. At one point the landlord offered them \$60,000 as a group to leave the building; they rejected the offer, and in turn offered to purchase the building for \$535,000, an offer he rejected. Finally, in 1989, the tenant association was able to purchase the building for \$864,300, with assistance from the city, and convert it into a limited-equity cooperative.

During renovations, tenants had to temporarily move out of the building, and by 1990 only six families remained who were committed to the co-op. They worked to find new families to fill the units, offering units to people who had been displaced from nearby buildings. Rock Creek Cooperative finally celebrated its grand opening on March 21, 1992. Only three of the tenants who were there when the original rent strikes and protests began in 1986 were still in the

building by the time of the groundbreaking ceremony. The grand opening was attended by the mayor at the time, Sharon Pratt Kelly. Photographs from the grand opening show jubilant co-op members speaking to an enthusiastic crowd. Balloons festoon the entrance to the building and the community room inside, and a hand-lettered sign hangs high, exulting, “We Own It!”

The building continued as a limited-equity cooperative for about twelve years. The initial price for members to buy into the co-op was \$800; this later went up to \$1500. The co-op had eight 1-bedroom units, six two-bedrooms, and 13 three-bedrooms, which was conducive to families. Initial carrying charges were \$475 for a one-bedroom, \$610 for a two-bedroom, and \$745 for a three-bedroom, but because most members received Section 8 assistance, they were paying substantially less. Though co-op members had to raise their carrying charges over time, the building remained an affordable option very near downtown. At least one member was able to walk to her downtown job.

In 2000, construction was completed on a massive convention center in what had once been the vast parking lot just to the east of the co-op. It was at this time that the D.C. housing market began to boom, and some members of the co-op began to push for converting the building to a market-rate condominium ownership structure. The exact course of events is unclear, but it appears that one member in particular pushed for conversion, believing that she would be able to sell her unit or rent it out for a hefty sum. In 2004, the membership narrowly voted to convert to market-rate condominium ownership. The co-op association worked with a local developer that specialized in doing tenant purchase deals, and in helping limited-equity cooperatives convert to condominium ownership. Most of the co-op members were low-income people who could not afford to participate in the conversion. They were paid minor amounts of money to leave, along with the offer of renting another unit owned by the developer; some

received nothing. One former member, who was paid \$4700 to leave, has lived in two different rental apartments since leaving the co-op; at the time of our interview, she was packing up to move into a third. Only three of the original co-op members were able to buy into the new condominium structure; they received “insider” prices that ranged from \$99,005 to \$128,664. Outsiders purchased condominium units for prices ranging from \$239,500 to \$390,000. But by June of 2007, ownership of all the units had been transferred to Square 369 Hotel Associates, LLC, for undisclosed sums of money, and the condominium structure had been terminated. The building is now owned by the Marriott Corporation; it reportedly plans to develop a boutique hotel there. As of 2012, the building sits empty and boarded up, awaiting redevelopment.

### **Oxon Run Condominium**

The Oxon Run Condominium, which converted from limited-equity cooperative status in 2005, is in the Columbia Heights neighborhood. A number of limited-equity cooperatives were developed in this neighborhood in the mid 1980s, when the neighborhood was still quite rough but fears of gentrification and displacement were in the air. Today it is a rapidly gentrifying area. This building is a four-story building with 15 units, all one and two bedrooms. In the mid-1980s, the rent was a bit over \$200 for a one-bedroom unit.

In 1987 or 1988, the landlord put the building up for sale, and the tenants formed a tenant association in order to exercise their rights to purchase it collectively. It was a diverse building from the beginning, made up of Salvadorans, Ethiopians and African-Americans. The group was able to get a \$300,000 loan to purchase (\$250,000) and renovate (\$50,000) the building. Initial members had to pay a subscription fee and also qualify for financing for \$26,000 of the co-op’s blanket loan. This meant that members had to nearly double their monthly payments, so that

after purchase, the cost for a one-bedroom unit went up to a bit over \$400. Two residents could not afford the increased charges, and so left the building at the time of the purchase. The purchase was completed in the fall of 1991. Renovations commenced, and the co-op existed for a little over a decade, and remained affordable by barely raising carrying charges the whole time.

But by 2002, the co-op's loan from the National Cooperative Bank had gone into default. The co-op's management company suggested to the members that they convert to a condominium ownership structure in order to pay off the loan and simultaneously take advantage of rising home values. In December of 2002, the cooperative approved the plan to convert to condominium. Under the conversion plan, co-op members would need to purchase their units for \$36,000 for a one-bedroom or \$42,000 for a two-bedroom; those who could not purchase would receive a buyout to leave. These were astonishingly low prices, given the market in the neighborhood at the time; the one-bedroom units had been appraised at \$105,000, and the two bedrooms at \$125,000. Two members decided to move, both because they did not think they could qualify to participate in the conversion, and because they wanted larger units for their family. They received buyouts to leave. The cooperative completed the conversion to condominium in 2005. Meanwhile, the appraised value of the units kept going up. As of 2006, one of the one-bedroom units was appraised at \$320,000.

At the time of conversion to condo, 13 of the 15 units were occupied by co-op members; one was vacant; and one was owned by an investor and being rented out. Five years after the conversion, only five of the original 13 co-op members remained in the building. The former co-op members quickly began to refinance and then sell their units. The first former cooperative member to sell his unit did so in December 2006, for \$240,000, after having refinanced for \$140,000 six months earlier. The next two former co-op members to sell their units both did so

in March 2008, one for \$192,500 (after having refinanced for \$77,000), and one for \$205,000 (after having refinanced for \$135,500). A fourth unit was sold in April 2008 for \$205,000, after the original co-op owner had refinanced for \$135,000. A fifth unit was sold in October 2008, upon the death of the owner, for \$187,500 (the elderly owner had taken out a reverse mortgage on the home when she originally entered into the condominium purchase). In June 2009, a sixth unit was sold by an original co-op family, for \$225,834, after they had refinanced it twice: first for \$129,000, and a year later for \$175,000. In February 2010, a seventh unit was sold for \$206,196, and in April 2010 an eighth unit was sold for \$235,000. Thus, in the five years between April 2005 (when the Declaration to Condo was issued) and April 2010 (when the latest records are available), eight of the 13 original co-op members sold their units and left the building. Only five original co-op members were left in the building, just five years after conversion to condominium. The building is now one of many market-rate condominiums that fill an increasingly gentrifying neighborhood – though, as its manager/developer notes, its units are always sold at the bottom end of the market, because the condo association does not make the improvements to the building necessary for making it appeal to upper-income buyers.

As to whether the eight former co-op-cum-condo owners have moved on to better housing opportunities, the answer is ambiguous. One former owner, a Salvadoran immigrant who lost his job in demolition and was divorced in quick succession, now lives in a rooming house a few blocks from his old condo, where he pays \$475 a month for his room -- \$50 more in the summer, because he uses an air conditioner – which is about the amount he had been paying in carrying charges for his two-bedroom co-op unit. Another former owner briefly moved back to his home country of Ghana, but then ended up back in the neighborhood, living in a weekly rental a few blocks from his old condo. One of the Salvadoran immigrant families now rents an

apartment in Prince George's County, Maryland. One former owner reportedly moved back to Ethiopia, where he was from. Two former owners, both elderly African-American women, have died (one unit has been sold at market; the other is still owned by the woman's daughter). Two former owners have not been located.

The five original co-op owners who remain in the building as condo owners appear to be in relatively good financial shape. Of the five, three have not refinanced their units or taken out loans using their homes as collateral; as long as they can continue to make their monthly payments, they should be able to hold onto their units. One elderly woman has borrowed \$5000 against her home, a minor sum. The fifth owner has taken out a \$50,000 home equity line of credit against her home.

### **Potomac Cooperative**

Potomac Cooperative is in the Brightwood neighborhood of D.C.'s Ward 4: a mostly working-and middle-class black neighborhood a few miles north of downtown, with a number of LECs. This is a 36-unit building, made up of eleven studios, 23 one-bedroom units, and two two-bedroom units. The tenants began organizing to purchase the building in 1995, and completed the purchase in 1997. This is a diverse building, in terms of both race and income. Residents include immigrants from Vietnam, El Salvador and several Caribbean islands, along with African-Americans. Incomes range from \$14,000 to \$80,000. Some members hold professional jobs, including legal secretary at a corporate law firm and editor. A few are retired.

The tenants purchased the building in 1997 for about \$700,000, with a loan from a local bank and making use of FHA-insured multifamily housing revenue bonds. They received no direct subsidy, but HUD has a 10% "insurance interest" in the building. Before the tenants

bought the building, rents were quite low: about \$350 for a one-bedroom unit. After tenant purchase, carrying charges rose to “\$400-something” for a studio, \$525 for a one-bedroom unit, and between \$500 and \$600 for a two-bedroom unit. In addition, members had to pay a share fee to buy into the co-op of \$300 or \$400. When the tenants bought the building, a number moved out, both because they did not understand the purchase, and because their monthly charges would rise. As of 2011, membership shares are \$1500 for a studio apartment and \$2000 for a one-bedroom unit. Monthly carrying charges are \$750 for studios, \$876 for unrenovated one-bedrooms, and \$918 for renovated one-bedrooms. Charges have remained at \$900 for the two two-bedroom units, which see very little turnover and have not been renovated. Since purchase, the co-op has had to evict three or four people for nonpayment of carrying charges. But most people stay long-term; the vacancies that emerge are often the result of immigrants moving back to their home countries. Two former co-op families, both Latino immigrants, have left to buy homes on the open market (though the president worries that they were caught up in the overheated housing market and may have received a loan they could not handle). More recently, a young single man has moved out to purchase a condominium unit in Petworth, the adjacent neighborhood to the south.

Potomac is required by the terms of their original loan to keep 15 of the 36 units affordable to households earning 60% of AMI, and 7 units affordable to households earning 50% of AMI. Yet none of their members receive Section 8 or any other form of rental assistance. The president worries that the low-income members in the building will not be able to keep up with rising costs. The co-op has a McKinney Act loan through their lender, DCHFA, which they received in 2005. Potomac is about to refinance their debt. They are interested in going condo at some point, but probably not immediately.

Potomac has had about ten different management companies since they formed in 1997. This is unfortunately not unusual for LECs. They have also had difficulties with internal management. The current co-op president was originally secretary of the board when the co-op was first formed, in 1997. She got off the board after a few years, and then started realizing that the next board was mismanaging money and may have been forgiving themselves their carrying charges; meanwhile, the property manager was renting out an empty unit and pocketing the proceeds. The co-op owed tens of thousands of dollars in utility fees and had no replacement reserves. So she got back on the board and became president in March 2003, at which point the co-op was two months from foreclosure. She and a few other board members worked very hard to turn the building around; as of 2010, 16 units have been renovated, the co-op has a 6-figure reserves account, and they are working to refinance their debt in order to make needed repairs to the building.

One of the challenges with the building is that they have a hard time filling some of their units. For at least two years, a giant banner announcing “cooperative units available!” has hung over the entrance to the building. As of 2011, seven of the 36 units were vacant, with ill effects on the co-op’s income stream. All but one of the vacant units are efficiencies, which are hard to market. The co-op is considering trying to consolidate some of the efficiencies and create one-bedroom units, but this of course would lower their overall potential income.

### **Piney Branch Cooperative**

Piney Branch Cooperative is an LEC in far Southeast DC, just across the border from Maryland. It is one block from a Metro stop, but not particularly near any commercial or retail

development. The complex is made up of 90 townhome units, ranging in size from 3 to 5 bedrooms. The complex is virtually entirely African-American and working-class. Piney Branch began life as a public housing complex in 1971. It was developed as part of an experimental HUD program, the “Turnkey III” program, to eventually give public housing residents ownership over their units. The DC Housing Authority carefully selected tenants to move into the complex, accepting working people who were excited about the idea of gaining home ownership (only about 5-10% of original tenants were welfare recipients). Tenants were told to maintain their homes, and that after two years of living there, full ownership of the housing would be transferred to them. But two years came and went, and the promise of home ownership was unfulfilled. The tenants had large families and were busy raising children. They continued to put money and effort into their homes, doing things like installing screen doors and awnings, building decks, and landscaping their small front yards. But for about twenty years, they continued to be tenants of DC public housing.

In 1990, the tenants finally started to organize to get ownership of their homes. This renewed interest in gaining ownership was prompted by the fact that, by this time, the children of most of the original tenants had since grown up and moved out of their parents’ units; the housing authority, therefore, was beginning to reassign longtime tenants to other, small units in other projects to reflect their reduced family size. Since the residents had long been told that they would eventually own their units, and had put so much work into them, they could not countenance simply being transferred to another unit. The residents worked for ten years to gain ownership of their homes. In the end, only 18 of the original tenants stayed through the entire process. Through a long and difficult process, residents finally gained ownership as a limited-equity cooperative in 2001. They received the units from the city for a dollar. The city’s public

housing authority gave them \$3 million for renovations, and they took out an additional loan from the National Cooperative Bank to complete renovations.

Tenants who had been in the complex since before 1976 received Section 8 certificates to help them pay their monthly carrying charges. The board has decided to not accept Section 8 certificates from new members. Members must pay \$1000 for a share to move into the co-op, regardless of unit size (original members were exempt from this requirement). Carrying charges are extremely low: \$516 for a 3-bedroom, \$609 for a 4-bedroom, and \$649 for a 5-bedroom. Carrying charges cover the loan payments to NCB, fees to their management company, the salary for the on-site manager and groundskeeper, insurance, and the collective water bill. Other than the Section 8 certificates used by the original members (currently about 14), the complex receives no subsidy.

This co-op maintains a waiting list for new members. Because of its large, family-friendly units, Metro-accessible location, and very affordable carrying charges, it does not have any trouble attracting new members. A board committee screens new members. As in most co-ops in my study, the board has difficulty attracting people to meetings, and encouraging involvement generally. One of the major issues the board deals with is house rule violations, and the problem of young people hanging out when the weather is warm. At least one member is concerned about safety in the neighborhood; in the decades she has lived there, six people have been killed in the alley adjacent to her unit. Recently, one unit was being used as a base of drug dealing operations, and was raided by U.S. marshals. The family left the co-op before the membership had a chance to vote them out. The membership has only ever voted one family out. In that case, the family had a fire in their unit that caused \$64,000 worth of damage across four units that the co-op had to pay for, because the family did not have insurance.

The co-op is set to pay off their loan to NCB in about five years. They have not decided if they will restructure their ownership once they have paid off that loan. According to their bylaws, if they have a surplus at the end of the year, they can redistribute it to their members. So one possibility would be to keep their current structure and their current carrying charges, but give members a refund at the end of every year.

### **Fenwick Cooperative**

Fenwick Cooperative is an LEC that began to be organized 2000; the first members moved in in 2003. It is located in the Columbia Heights neighborhood, which since about 2004 has been undergoing rapid gentrification and redevelopment. Although a large number of subsidized housing remains in Columbia Heights, the neighborhood has become something of a flashpoint for debates about economic revitalization and displacement of low-income people. The co-op is made up of 15 one-, two-, and three-bedroom units that have been carved out of five rowhouses on a single block. The co-op founders worked with a local nonprofit developer, who was able to acquire the then-boarded-up rowhouses from the city for \$1 each. Though co-op members began moving in in 2003, the deed was not actually transferred from the developer to the co-op until 2010. Members must pay an initial \$3000 membership fee (in 2010, this fee was raised from \$2000); carrying charges are close to \$700 for one-bedroom units, about \$750 for the two-bedroom units, and about \$800 for the three-bedroom units. This is about one-third the price of comparable rentals. Though its early founders were older black single women, as of 2011 the co-op represents a diverse range of age, race, and familial status.

Fenwick is distinct from most of the city's other LECs in that it has been intentional from the start. It did not emerge from a tenant purchase, but rather was developed from the "ground

up” by a group of people who wanted to create an affordable homeownership opportunity for residents who were specifically interested in being involved in the limited-equity model. The co-op founders, some of whom had lived in and helped organize other LECs, had come to the conclusion that LECs work best when people enter into them intentionally – not when the LEC is essentially their only option for remaining in the building (as is the case when LECs are formed through tenant purchase). Three of the five original founders had been members of the Rock Creek Co-op, and left it in order to start fresh. Another distinctive quality of the co-op is that, in an effort to foster participation and reduce hierarchy, all the residents serve on the board. A third distinctive quality is that the co-op was designed explicitly to house social justice activists. While the co-op has a diversity of members, some members have fewer options than others. For some members, the co-op may be a place to live in community for a few years before moving on to purchase market-rate housing, while for others, who may be older and on fixed income, the option to purchase market-rate housing may never materialize.

Co-op members receive no ongoing individual subsidies to help pay their monthly carrying charges. When the co-op has needed to raise money to cover certain expenses, it has held fundraisers of fish fries and movie nights. Finances are a steady worry of co-op members. Though they have an outside management company, members work in committees to take care of finances, administration, facilities, and recruiting new members. This self-management has at times been very difficult. Since the co-op opened, three of the founding members have moved out into a rental house in another neighborhood, apparently in frustration over the difficulty of working together. Yet a recent infusion of new members who are excited about joining the co-op has other members hopeful that a fresh energy will reinvigorate the community. Because of

its location, relatively low costs and its community orientation, interest in joining the co-op is relatively high, and the co-op maintains a waiting list of interested members.

It is highly unlikely that this cooperative would ever choose to convert to a condominium form, since it was founded explicitly to provide affordable housing in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood.

### **Broad Branch Cooperative**

Broad Branch Cooperative is an LEC that was purchased by the tenants in 2004, using a project-based Section 8 subsidy. It is in Adams Morgan, a centrally-located neighborhood long known for its diverse ethnic and income mix. This neighborhood was the epicenter of struggles for tenants rights and anti-displacement work in the 1970s, and over the years a number of tenant associations here have purchased their buildings and converted them to LECs. The neighborhood began to see a wave of gentrification in the mid-70s, which subsided and then picked up again in the mid-90s. Today the neighborhood is home to several affordable apartment buildings operated by non-profit groups, as well as several LECs; but otherwise, rents and sale prices here are quite high. Broad Branch is a 21-unit building situated on a main thoroughfare, between two market-rate buildings. Units range in size from efficiencies to four-bedrooms. The building is a gorgeous old historic property, and is immaculate inside and out. The co-op president is proud of the fact that her building fits right into the neighborhood, and gives no impression that it houses low-income people.

The building is diverse in terms of race and income, with first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants from Central America and the Caribbean, along with black Americans and one elderly white woman. While most members are low-income, some have lower incomes

more out of necessity (like an older Salvadoran woman who has retired after working in hotel housekeeping for years), and some more out of choice (like the niece of the co-op president, who has a masters degree in theater and works as an actor).

The tenants first organized to try to purchase their building in the early 1980s. They were unable to finance the purchase, and ended up working with an investor who purchased the building using project-based Section 8 financing, continuing to rent it to the tenants. When the owner decided to opt out of his Section 8 contract when it expired in 2003, the tenants decided once again to try to purchase the building. The tenant association had set up a CD some ten years previously, and had steadily been placing money into it, so that by the time the purchase opportunity arrived, they had money to hire a lawyer to help them. They completed their purchase in 2004, using project-based Section 8 funds to finance acquisition and rehabilitation, and entered into another 20-year Section 8 contract. Technically the HUD-determined carrying charges for the units are high (ranging from \$1200 for a one-bedroom to \$2500 for a four-bedroom), but since members just pay 30% of their income to their housing costs, the actual costs to members is substantially lower. In addition, members each pay a \$20 monthly co-op fee. The fee goes to incidental building expenses. If members pay their fee regularly and on time, they receive \$50 back at the end of each year.

The president, a highly organized immigrant who moved to the building in 1994, runs the co-op with a strong hand. We met in a studio apartment that has been converted into the co-op office. As we spoke, she continually glanced at a series of monitors that showed security camera video streaming live from six different spots within and outside the building. She values having control over what goes on in the building. She described when the tenants were organizing to purchase the building, and were considering whether to go co-op or condo. They decided to go

co-op because the cooperative form enables them to have more control over what was going on in the building than the condominium form (but since they were relying on a Section 8 subsidy to purchase and rehabilitate the building, it's clear that the building would have been limited-equity from the beginning, regardless of whether it was cooperative or condominium).

Broad Branch does, however, raise some interesting questions about resale-restricted homeownership more generally. Even though Broad Branch has a project-based Section 8 subsidy, the building has something of an income mix. While some residents pay very little in monthly carrying charges, others are paying close to the HUD-determined limits, because over the years of living in the building their incomes have risen, and they have not wanted to leave. Of the current residents, two are paying full price for their units, because they earn too much to receive a subsidy.

As their incomes rise, people are permitted to stay in their homes. This, in fact, is the case for most (if not all) resale-restricted homeownership structures. It is conceivable, therefore, that young people who moved into Broad Branch with a low income could eventually earn substantially higher incomes, to the point that they would be ineligible to move into the building if they were arriving as a new member. Because of the Section 8 contract, the unit is technically still affordable – but if it is occupied by someone who doesn't "need" it, should it still be considered part of the city's affordable housing stock? Broad Branch, as described, is a beautiful and historic building in a prime location. The Broad Branch's current Section 8 contract will not expire until 2024. It would be very interesting to track the incomes of co-op members over the next 13 years, and see what kinds of decisions they make about the building ownership when the Section 8 subsidy finally expires.

### **Tiber Cooperative**

Tiber Cooperative is the smallest co-op in my study: just four units in a small apartment building. Each unit has one bedroom and an enclosed back porch. The co-op is in the Trinidad neighborhood of Ward 5 in Northeast DC. Trinidad for many years was regarded as one of the city's roughest neighborhoods. Several years ago, the neighborhood experienced so much violence that the city police set up controversial "military-style" checkpoints at its edges to monitor who entered and left the area. Trinidad is near H St. NE, a commercial corridor that was devastated during the April 1968 riots but that over the past several years has been experiencing a surge of revitalization. H St. and Trinidad are somewhat proximate to the trendy Capitol Hill neighborhood, and housing prices in Trinidad seem to be on the rise.

This was originally a rental building, and went into foreclosure in 2003; the landlord was issued a citation for "wrongful housing conditions" in 2005. Later that year the tenants, after having formed a tenants association, were able to exercise their first right to purchase the building for \$250,000, with the help of a \$313,000 loan from the city. A small nonprofit developer has done the development for the co-op.

At the time of purchase in 2005, the rent on each unit was \$489. This was, the co-op president admits, a very low rent, but the building was also in very bad shape. After they became a co-op, the board instituted a share fee of \$1500, and carrying charges went up to \$550. Carrying charges have risen over the years, and are now \$810, which the president describes as "comfortable." She notes that in the other rental buildings on her street, which have the same layout as her building, one-bedroom rents range from \$800 to \$1200. Still, compared with other co-ops in my study, \$800 for a one-bedroom is on the high end of costs. The president is frustrated that her co-op has not yet been renovated. In most tenant purchase deals, tenant

associations receive money from the city both to purchase the building and to renovate it. In this deal, the renovation money did not come right away (the president blames the developer for this), and they are still waiting for promised renovations. The president's unit is in decent shape, but her hot water heater, for instance, is fully exposed in the kitchen, her fuses blow all the time, and her back porch has not been insulated, which would make it a viable extra room.

As of early 2011, Tiber had only two members, and was searching for two more. This is a low-income co-op; the president is currently unemployed, and worked most recently cleaning houses. (However, she emphasizes that she and the other members do not want people with Section 8 moving into the co-op, because, as she explains, "I don't know what it is about Section 8 people, and I hate to stereotype, I *hate* to stereotype, they will destroy your property! They will totally annihilate your property.") The board is made up of four people: the two co-op members; a woman who has worked professionally for years to help tenants purchase their buildings and create co-ops; and a woman who lives in another, successful, LEC. Tiber seems relatively connected to other co-ops, probably for two reasons: it was developed by a developer that works with other LECs, and the president, shortly after the tenants bought the building, went to work for a non-profit which had a contract from the city to manage LECs. The president's exposure to the 13 LECs this group managed gave her valuable insight into issues LECs face.

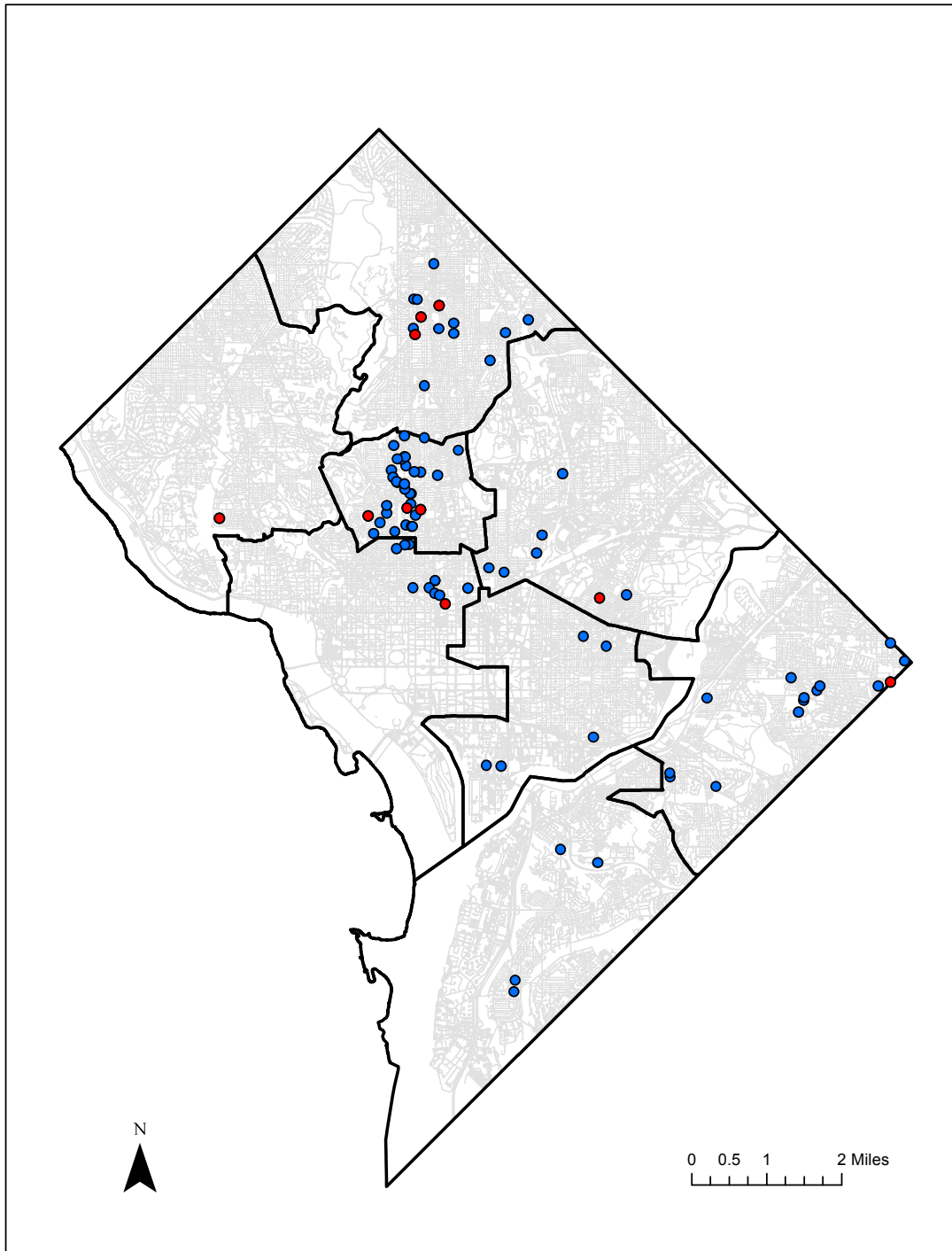
The president feels a very strong sense of ownership. When she realized the co-op was not going to get its renovation money right away, for example, she spent her own tax refund on fixing up one of the other units to make it attractive to a new member. The president is clearly heavily invested in the building and a true believer in the limited-equity concept, even to the point of wanting to help others realize its benefits. She says that she thinks people are being "exploited" by high rents, and says, "I don't understand it. I don't understand why there's no

limit. No ceiling to it, stop! Right there! Cause if I leave this place, the only way I could possibly leave is if I hit the lottery. Seriously!” Limited-equity cooperative ownership is her only option for ownership (unless, she says, she hits the lottery). And she also feels a responsibility to others who might buy into her co-op in the future, should she leave, that it remain affordable to them.

The Tiber co-op faces some challenges. Its small size means that it is very difficult to maintain the building’s income with any vacancies. And because the co-op was not able to undergo renovations right after purchase, it has been difficult to attract new members. The unrenovated state of the building, together with a monthly carrying charge that is not unusually low, and its location in a neighborhood that is still in transition, might make it less attractive to new members than some other co-ops in my study.

**Appendix 2: Washington, D.C. Limited-Equity Cooperatives, 2012**

*Research sample highlighted in red*



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