



Counterspaces against the odds? The production and emancipatory potential of alternative spaces

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ABSTRACT

Prefigurative action that aims to construct desired transformations pose new and interesting questions centering on the geography of transitioning towards more ecologically-sound and socially-just systems. Geographers and others have employed a number of theoretical lenses to grapple with how best prefigurative activities might be supported, and how they both envision alternative futures and actually ‘do stuff’ to embody that vision. However, missing from this academic conversation is that prefigurative activity is not solely about the alternative material and economic practices, but the creation of alternative social spaces. This paper draws from both a Lefebvrian reading of space and a feminist geographical perspective to explore the spaces of a prefigurative community teeming within the politically and religiously conservative context of Salt Lake City, Utah (USA). An in-depth ethnography was conducted over an 18-month period, employing both participant-observation and semi-structured interviews. The sociality and spatiality of the production of alternative spaces is explored through Lefebvre’s discussion of abstract and differential space, which opens up multiple possibilities for resistance. This research finds that the process of creating this alternative space is grounded in five moments: (i) the self, (ii) social networks, (iii) material practices, (iv) knowledge creation, and (v) economic practices. At the same time, a feminist ‘killjoy’ perspective calls attention to the limits of the emancipatory potential of these movements.

1. Introduction

Despite the supposed inevitability of capitalism captured by Margaret Thatcher’s infamous dictum “there is no alternative,” radically subversive ways of living, working, and playing are emerging beyond its confines. A new breed of activists is doing away with the status-quo, consumer-based identity, and individualism to find meaning and fulfillment in prefiguratively building the worlds they desire (Leach, 2013; Carlsson, 2008). Working from the grassroots, civil society actors are creating alternative systems of production and consumption or “grassroots innovations for sustainability” (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). Rejecting system-sanctioned solutions to global social and environmental crises, they aim at systemic change and show us that another way is not just possible, it is here and now (Carlsson and Manning, 2010). In so doing, they ‘change the coordinates of what is possible’ (Žižek, 2004, p.123) and what it means to be an activist (Carlsson and Manning, 2010; Bobel, 2007).

Academics from a range of fields have begun to dissect this

phenomenon, using a variety of labels and corresponding ontologies: ‘actually existing sustainabilities’¹ (Krueger and Agyeman, 2005), ‘grassroots innovations for sustainability’ (Seyfang and Smith, 2007), ‘autonomous geographies’ (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006), ‘nowtopias’ (Carlsson, 2008), and ‘concrete utopias’ (Muraca, 2015). Previous research has parsed out the challenges facing such projects, the importance of networking, learning, and intermediaries for success, and their diffusion potential (Hossain, 2016). However, what begs further attention may be one of the most fundamental elements of prefigurative work: their potential to create new (social) space. As Lefebvre (1991, p. 190) wrote, “to change life, we must first change space.”

Drawing from Lefebvre (1991), this paper is guided by the questions: (i) how do prefigurative actors produce space and (ii) what space do they produce? In answering these first questions, three points of analysis are relevant. First, attention is paid to what the alternative space investigated is alternative of, both socially and spatially. Second, a broad view of the features of this space is employed, including and beyond the usual focus on material and economic innovations or

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¹ Sustainability can be both a loaded and fuzzy term (Goodland and Daly, 1996); here I follow Pickerill and Maxey (2009) (p. 1516) in defining sustainability as a notion that “encompass[es] all aspects of life (social, economic, political, emotional, etc.) and underscore[s] the fundamental importance of the environment to all of the above.”

products. Third, consideration is given to the extent to which these spaces are emancipatory through the use of a feminist lens.

1.1. From grassroots innovations to Nowtopias

While a variety of different labels have been used to describe prefigurative projects, they all point to a common re-envisioning of material practices that cover the gambit of what is needed for human survival and flourishing. Food is grown: provision and alternative agricultural projects abound, and include free libraries for seeds, collectives of permaculture² enthusiasts, and vacant lot gardeners (Smith, 2007; Ferguson and Lovell, 2015; Carlsson, 2008). Material objects are made: some projects are art-related like Burning Man enthusiasts' massive, interactive sculptures (Jones, 2011; Carlsson, 2008), others find spaces to share 3D printers, laser etchers, metalworking tools, and the like (Smith et al., 2016). Transportation is reimagined: cycling finds renewed value bicycle co-operatives and critical mass rides, and alternative fuels are sought after in biodiesel and biofuel cooperatives (Carlsson, 2008). Housing is collectivized and greened: housing projects like ecovillages, cohousing, and low-impact development are challenging the status-quo of single-family homeownership (Boyer, 2015; Pickerill and Maxey, 2009). Exchange forms are made local or free: community currencies keep currency exchange bounded to a locality, gifting circle participants ask for what they need and gift what they do not (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016). Together these projects are celebrating the commons (Bollier, 2014; Chatterton, 2016) and creatively generating possibilities (Gibson-Graham, 2008). They go beyond unitary concerns about climate change (Chatterton, 2013) and anticipate the future (Anderson, 2010) in opening up cracks of possibility for creating other worlds (Holloway, 2010).

A critical piece of all of these prefigurative practices is their utopian aspirations. While some (not all) geographers have dismissed utopia as fantastical, idealistic dreaming or even as potentially authoritarian, the concept can be argued to aid in the imagination of alternatives to unsustainable political, economic, and cultural systems (Pinder 2015; Braun, 2015). As such, some have used the labels “nowtopias,” “real utopias,” and “concrete utopias” to refer to these projects, which commonly embody the actual practice of envisioned alternatives to capitalism³ (Carlsson and Manning, 2010; Wright, 2013; Muraca, 2015). The use of “utopia” embraces aspirations and visions for radical alternatives aimed at creating more fulfilling lives, while the “real” pays attention to the evaluation of the desirability, viability and achievability of alternatives (Wright, 2013).

While concrete utopian projects may appear apolitical because they work outside of traditional protest and campaign forms of activism, they are in fact profoundly political and anticapitalist (Carlsson, 2008; Carlsson and Manning, 2010). Their politics are prefigurative, they embody the transformation they desire (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). Building from Gandhi's nonviolent philosophy of action, obtaining the means of survival through bread-labor (one's own bodily work), agriculture, and spinning khadi (hand-spun cloth) are everyday political acts (Ghandi, 1955). The ‘autonomous geographies’ perspective captures this radical nature well, defined as “those spaces where there is a questioning of the laws and social norms of society and a creative desire to constitute non-capitalist, collective forms of politics, identity, and citizenship” (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006, p. 1; see also Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). The extent to which these goals and are

² A type of alternative agriculture that aims to mirror ecosystems and emphasize a reinvigoration of human-nature relationships (Mollison, 1988).

³ Following Cloke et al (2014, p. 920) capitalism here is defined as, “an economic system in which the production and distribution of goods is organized around the profit motive and characterized by marked inequalities in the social division of wealth between private owners of the materials and tools of production (capital) and those who work for them to make a living (labor).”

actually achieved is questionable; at the same time that celebration of diverse economies as a performative rethinking of the supposed dominance of capitalism and oppression is a deliberate practical and rhetorical strategy (Gibson-Graham, 2002).

The ‘grassroots innovations for sustainability’ perspective suggests that alternative values and beliefs about the environment drive communities to come together and take pro-environmental action (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). In contrast, the Nowtopian writers argue that individuals may be motivated by a desire to escape being “mere workers” and overcome associated powerlessness and dissatisfaction by searching for meaning outside of their paid work (Carlsson, 2008; Carlsson and Manning, 2010). Whether these activists *intentionally* work for social justice or environmental amelioration, whether for distant ‘others’ or their own communities is debatable and context-dependent (Massey, 2005; Amin, 2004; Mason and Whitehead, 2012). Scholarly focus on the material and economic outcomes rather than the social processes that shape these spaces neglects the centrality of intra and interpersonal relations to their production.

The development of grassroots innovations is highly contingent on the formation of social networks that share relevant knowledge, resources and skills (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016). The grassroots innovations literature hones in on this, defining grassroots innovations as ‘networks’ and analyzing the protective spaces (e.g. values, culture) that facilitate experimentation with non-profit seeking, communally-owned, innovations for sustainability (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). These networks are often analyzed insofar as to how they might contribute to the success, failure, and diffusion of the innovations (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016; Smith and Raven, 2012; Geels, 2002). On the other hand, the autonomous geographies perspective argues more attention needs to be paid to the complex, messy nature of how these networks work on the ground (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). A wide analytical frame (Longhurst, 2013) might allow such diversity and complexity, material and immaterial elements (Zibechi, 2012) to be captured.

Grassroots innovations are spatial phenomena, a translocal network of local initiatives popping up across the globe (Feola, 2016). Between places, the internet is in part used to circulate ideas, Do-It-Yourself (DIY) blueprints, and knowledge (Nicolosi and Feola, 2016). At the same time, adapting generalized models to place-specific elements allows these projects to thrive in particular places (Nicolosi and Feola, 2016). The tension between global aspirations and embeddedness in place is a critical area for geographic exploration (Featherstone, 2008; Harvey, 1996). The fixation of alternative institutions in particular places has been found to help an alternative social scene develop into a widely-recognized alternative place (Longhurst, 2013).

While this literature has explored many interesting and productive avenues to date, several literature gaps identified are addressed with this paper. First, as Longhurst (2013) points out, little research takes a broader perspective to recognize the breadth of alternative practices in specific places. Lefebvre's (1991) focus on space (discussed in the next section) can help open up the analytical frame to understand how these spaces are produced. Second, while research has been conducted in the context of alternative places, the extent to which alternative milieus are formed by different processes, such as those present in conservative places is needed (Longhurst, 2013). Third, many celebrations of diverse economies and alternatives have been overly laudatory (Gibson-Graham, 2002), thus the feminist killjoy perspective (introduced in the next section) provides a useful corrective.

1.2. From abstract space to counterspaces

In order to investigate of the production of alternative spaces, I draw from Lefebvre's (1991) *The Production of Space* in addition to Gibson-Graham and feminist scholars who can help ground his work. First is a discussion of what the space is alternative of and implications for responses. Second, Lefebvre's ideas around utopias and counterspaces are used to look at the features of alternative spaces. Third, tools

to ground the work empirically and understand the extent to which alternative spaces might be emancipatory are explored.

First, what are prefigurative actors challenging; what are alternative spaces alternative of? From Lefebvre's (1991) perspective, it is 'abstract space,' which is 'the tool of domination' by the 'centers of wealth and power' produced by capitalist social relations. Abstract space is the space of commodification which produces ramifications for personal and social well-being, such the empty search for identity and meaning through consumerism (Robbins, 2008). Lefebvre (1991) notes the tendency of abstract space to homogenize and fragment, dampening creativity and social conviviality (Carlsson, 2008; Marcuse, 2009). The infinite growth paradigm called forth by capitalism necessitates the exploitation of natural resources and human labor, leading to social and environmental problems (Ruuska, 2017) like global climate change (Klein, 2015), mass species extinction (Ceballos et al., 2017), and the dumping of toxics on marginalized groups (Bullard, 2000). From a geographer's perspective, these human and environmental impacts and the extent of domination of abstract space is not complete, but geographically uneven.

Similarly, Gibson-Graham (1996) point out that the domination of capitalism is not socially or economically uniform or complete. A capitalocentric orientation to the economy employs strong theory, a paranoid orientation which reads capitalism, oppression, and dominance into almost everything, making it difficult both to recognize the many alternatives that already exist and to imagine new alternatives (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Sedgwick, 2003). Capacities to take action are still present with the obstacles that oppositional forces produce (North, 2014).

In fact, at the same time that abstract space represents attempts to dominate the production of space, it also creates opportunities for resistance through accentuating differences. Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 52) wrote, "thus, despite—or rather because of—its negativity, abstract space carries within itself the seeds of a new kind of space. I shall call that new space 'differential space', because, inasmuch as abstract space tends towards homogeneity, towards the elimination of existing differences or peculiarities, a new space cannot be born (produced) unless it accentuates differences." The differences that Lefebvre refers to here are both multiple and multi-faceted.

While this reading of Lefebvre may appear binary, the point is that by see-sawing a dialectical view of capitalism versus postcapitalist practices, instead of honing in on one alternative possibility, many potential alternatives are opened up (Holloway, 2010; Wright, 2010; Chatterton, 2016). In pitting against the many manifestations of capitalism, thousands of alternatives and new worlds emerge (Esteve, 2007). The exploration of what is counter to abstract spaces is a spatial strategy for uncovering many potential alternatives.

Lefebvre's ideas around counterspaces, utopias, and festival help to explore multiple features of alternative spaces. 'Counterspaces' are defined by 'the strategic level:' they run counter to a particular strategy (Lefebvre, 1991). Elements of a counterspace include, according to Lefebvre (1991) use over exchange, quality over quantity, heterogeneity over homogeneity, demanding amenities, empty spaces, play, encounter, non-specialized, and multifunctional spaces. Counterspaces can be seen as turning the world upside down, an inversion of abstract space.

Another modality of accentuating difference is through travelling towards the idea of utopia, even if it can never be reached. The general idea of combining the 'real,' 'now,' 'concrete' with utopia relates to Lefebvre's (2003) discussion of the dialectical relationship between the real, the possible, the impossible. By exploring the possible, one rejects the presumed inevitability of power and the current mode of production (Lefebvre, 1991). As Holloway (2010, p. 10) writes, "how can we think of changing the world so radically when it seems so impossible?" and suggests that by focusing on creating cracks in capitalism a multitude of anticapitalist possibilities can be opened and expanded.

This is where the space for utopian explorations comes in. Lefebvre

wrote, "utopia would transcend the institutional by making use of myth, the problematic of the real and the possible-impossible." (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 105). The political uprisings of May 1968 in Paris were just such a moment for Lefebvre, which he proclaimed a 'concrete utopia' (Pinder, 2015). Lefebvre defines utopias as "the places of what has no place, or no longer has a place – the absolute, the divine, or the possible" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 163).

One of the spaces where the routinized is interrupted, producing a moment of presence is the festival or carnival. The carnivalesque creates a space where all participants are socially unified and stripped of their 'normal' social status (Turner, 1979; Shields, 1991; Bakhtin, 1984). Shields argues that "carnival is the occasion for the enactment of alternative, utopian social arrangements" (Shields, 1991, p. 91). Although the appearance of carnival, in its privileging of the senses and pleasures may at first appear wasteful, it is indeed a productive practice and a site for social innovation (Shields, 1991; Bakhtin, 1984).

Lefebvre's (1991, 2003) notions of 'differential space,' 'counterspaces,' and 'concrete utopias' (used somewhat interchangeably here) explore the multiple faces created by inversion of abstract space, the nature of possibility, and the actual practice in the creation of new social space. The question remains, however, as to how these largely theoretical ideas can be empirically grounded (Pierce and Martin, 2015). The solution used here is to follow Gibson-Graham (2008) in employing weak theory and thick description in attempting to not over-read the dominance of capitalism, instead highlighting the relationship of alternatives to oppositional forces (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Weak theory and thick description requires scholars to observe and interpret and avoid jumping to conclusions, "to carefully reconsider the 'large issues' that 'small facts' are made to speak to" (Gibson-Graham, 2014, p. 149, p. 152). This standpoint is reparative, at the same time that it argues that the feminist lens be productive in helping to parse out the ways these spaces can be more inclusive and thus emancipatory.

Specifically, a feminist killjoy perspective is used as a corrective to the hagiographic celebrations of alternative or diverse economies and to help develop understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of these possibilities (Gibson-Graham, 2002; Parker, 2017; North, 2007, 2014; Fickey, 2011). A feminist killjoy is one who is criticized for stealing happiness by bringing to light sexism, racism, and other power imbalances (Ahmed, 2010). In reality, the feminist killjoy may not be stealing happiness so much as she reveals the ugly emotions that are tucked away, moved elsewhere or voided under the cloak of happiness (Ahmed, 2010).

The exposure of sexism, racism, and heteronormativity in social movements can position the feminist researcher as a *double* killjoy, spoiling feelings of solidarity and optimism (Parker, 2017). A double killjoy attitude can help scholars understand how alternative practices might be problematic by exposing their contradictions, in some ways spoiling the fantasy. This paper argues that taking a feminist killjoy attitude on the production of alternatives is a *hopeful* stance because it asserts that the inclusivity is a reasonable and achievable outcome.

It is very difficult to do Lefebvre justice in such a short space. That said, some of the ideas brought up in *The Production of Space* are useful in re-thinking scholarly analysis of attempts to generate alternatives. First, Lefebvre's attention to abstract space helps scholars think through *how* spaces are produced: how abstract space might produce the need for them in the first place and how abstract space produces a counterpoint around which to accentuate (a multitude of) differences. While somewhat empirically vague, Lefebvre's ideas around utopias, counterspaces, and differential space help to sketch the contours of this space. In combination with some of the more grounding and empirically-based work produced by Gibson-Graham and feminist killjoys, an investigation of the production of alternative spaces becomes possible.

2. Methods

Feminist geographical methods and theory guide the approach of

this research. This research used the ethnographic method, a common methodological choice in feminist geography, as it allows the researcher to uncover “the processes and meanings that undergird sociospatial life” (Herbert, 2000, p. 550). Ethnography can also be particularly useful in revealing the creation and maintenance of power in the everyday (Rose, 1993). While this research does not center on women’s or gender issues, as a feminist geography it oriented itself in questioning systems that attempt to dominate and oppress (Hiemstra and Billo, 2017). This project follows Katz’ (2001) countertopographies in conducting a detailed examination of a distinct place, while recognizing it is connected to other places along contour lines. This ethnographic work uses weak theory and thick description with a feminist killjoy perspective, in relating what was observed and attempting not to over-read the dominance of particular systems, and making a space to acknowledge the potentialities of differential spaces (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Sedgwick, 2003; Ahmed, 2010).

I relied primarily on participant-observation, which in this case was closer to being an observant participant. For 18 months, I attended meetings, events, worked on collective projects, and ‘hung-out’ informally. These encounters were primarily with a social network that self-identified as “the community,” but also contained different subgroups and foci within. Two of the main foci of this network which I followed were permaculture enthusiasts, with whom the work centered around growing food, and Burning Man counter-culturalists (‘burners’), with whom the work focused on creative and sustainable building, and on a re-privileging of play. This in-person ethnography was necessarily complemented by internet-mediated research, because Facebook was heavily used to organize meetings and events, and also to exchange ideas and information (Madge, 2010). I acted as a genuine participant in online forums (e.g. sharing my experience with permaculture, and locations of useful urban ‘waste’) and generalized all digital ethnographic observations to ensure anonymity (Madge, 2010). To get a reading of the religious and political character of the state, I also analyzed secondary documents from news media.

I prioritized participant-observation because I was interested not only how people thought about space, but how they behaved in it. Fieldnotes were taken during (when possible) each encounter and immediately after each encounter a “Fieldwork Notes Form” was completed. The field notes were subsequently thematically analyzed in an iterative process, and are presented in a generalized form here to protect the anonymity and privacy of participants (Salt Lake City is sometimes referred to as “Small Lake City” to refer to wide interpersonal familiarity, this was thus deemed necessary) (Herbert, 2000). I relied secondarily on semi-structured interviews (18 total, 1–2 h each), which were used in the later phases of the research project to confirm or deny my observations. In the semi-structured interviews, I attempted to create a non-hierarchical space between myself and the interviewee. Notes were taken (using shorthand and subsequently transcribed) during interviews instead of using an audio recorder, to help create a comfortable, equalizing space. I drew from the philosophy and orientation of Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) in reciprocating towards the communities I was studying as much as possible (e.g. helping with others’ projects, volunteering at events) (Cahill, 2007).

2.1. “This is the place”

The boundary set for this ethnographic study was Salt Lake City (SLC), Utah, USA. This section describes the ways in which SLC represents a unique place, as Massey defines it, “a temporary constellation where the repercussions of a multiplicity of histories have been woven together” (Massey, 2005, p. 151). The Salt Lake Valley, formed by in part by the retreat of ancient Lake Bonneville, is a 500-square mile mountain valley (~4300 foot elevation) physically bounded by the Wasatch Mountains to the east, the Traverse Mountains to the south, the Oquirrh Mountains to the west, and the Great Salt Lake to the north.

The Salt Lake Valley was inhabited by the Ute and Shoshone tribes when Latter-Day Saints (‘Mormons’) arrived in 1847, fleeing religious persecution. Upon arrival, their leader Brigham Young famously declared “this is the place” where they would settle (Utah American Indian Digital Archive, 2017). Conflict between the settlers and Utes and Shoshones ultimately resulted in their replacement onto reservation land with Mormon settlers commanding authority over the Valley and surrounding territories (Utah American Indian Digital Archive, 2017). Mormons envisioned Utah as a promised land; it was isolated and empty of settlers, making it an ideal place to fulfill their duty to build their own utopian dream: “New Zion” (Toney et al., 2003).

Today, the Mormon influence over Utah and SLC remains strong. Utah is the most Mormon state in the US, about 62 percent of Utah’s population is Mormon (SLC ~ 51% Mormon), and has been noted as the US’s most distinct religiously-based culture region (Toney et al., 2003). The growth in the Mormon population is primarily driven by the high birth rate (the highest in the nation, stemming from the Mormon belief that a large number of souls are waiting to be born) (Canham, 2014). Utah also has the fastest population growth, youngest median age, largest percentage of persons under 18 years and largest household size (Utah Economic Council, 2017). What these statistics point to is the impacts of Mormon beliefs over its members’ lives and families, and the social shape of the state as a whole.

The family is the ‘fundamental unit’ for Mormons who married on average 4 years younger than the US population, not uncommonly at age 18 (“The First Presidency,” n.d.; Uecker and Stokes, 2008). The family is organized overtly patriarchally, gender is explicitly defined as binary, marriage between a man and a woman, and premarital sex as a sin. As “The Doctrine of the Family” states, “by divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children” (“The First Presidency,” n.d.). Families must follow the strict rules and policies of the church to be united with their families in the afterlife, including for example tithing 10% of their income to the LDS Church, obtaining from caffeine and alcohol, and serving a two-year mission (usually at age 18) (“The Mormons” n.d.; Henderson, 2012). This set of beliefs molds a distinct trajectory for member’s lives.

In general, reasons for leaving the Mormon church are manifold, including for example losing faith in the church’s doctrine, disillusionment following study of the church’s history, and specific church policies (Dahlin, 2014). At times, policy announcements from the LDS Church spark mass resignations. For example, the news leak of the policy that children of gay parents would explicitly no longer be allowed to be blessed and baptized resulted in over 12,000 resignations in the 8-month period following (Levin, 2016; Neugebauer 2015).

Mormon political control was also evident in supermajority of Mormons and Republicans in the Utah legislature (Davidson, 2016, 2019). This control has tangible impacts on policy in the state. As advocates of medical marijuana wrote in a letter to Republican lawmakers, “it is common knowledge that no liquor bill, sex education bill, gambling bill, or sexual orientation/gender identity bill would be passed by the Legislature without the support of The Church of Jesus Christ [of Latter-Day Saints]” (Nixon, 2018a). Policies that have a tangible impact on the lives of non-Mormons in the state include a 3.2 alcohol by weight limit on beer, moving the DUI limit down from 0.08% to 0.05% (the lowest in the nation), and a number of other restrictive alcohol laws (Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control, n.d., Nixon, 2018b).

The association of the Mormon church with the Republican party also has tangible policy impacts and effects the lives of non-Mormons and non-Republicans. Examples include: a bill to ban gay conversion therapy failing (Allen, 2019), the state legislature voting to repeal a Medicaid expansion that passed a ballot initiative and the state legislature limiting the impact of a medical cannabis bill that also passed a ballot initiative (Capps and Holder, 2019). Utah also ranks last in the

nation in per pupil state spending (US Census, 2015).

Mormon links with business in Salt Lake City are strong and mark the city's landscape. For example, the primary place to shop in SLC is the church's \$2 billion dollar downtown City Creek Center shopping mall (Winter, 2012). The Mormon church itself has businesses and land holdings across the nation and globe, and is estimated to be worth several billion dollars (Winter, 2012). The religion's founder, Joseph Smith, once announced to his followers that God had told him "all things unto me are spiritual," including business (Smith himself invested in tanneries, mills, hotels, and banks) and that establishing and maintaining a thriving economic system for its members was an important role for the Church (Winter, 2012). These glimpses into Utah suggest it is a physically and socially unique place whose history has been marked by attempts to control space particularly through the institution of the Mormon Church.

At the same time, the conservative and Mormon practices in Utah do not necessarily restrict alternatives, especially in SLC, which contains one-third of Utah's 3 million-strong population. Other practices that are not dominant thrive in SLC include: a very liberal Democratic party (citation), a legion of ski bums, radical environmental activists including the likes of Tim DeChristopher, a plethora of environmental nonprofits, a booming microbrewery scene, and the prefigurative spaces that are the focus of this study.

2.2. SLC Counterspaces

In the Salt Lake Valley, several prefigurative groups and activities were present: a bicycle collective, makerspaces, cohousing communities, community gardens (of various forms), permaculture projects and groups, and Burning Man counter-culturalists ('burners'). As an observant-participant across these different grassroots innovations, however, what became increasingly clear were certain densities of social relations. The counterspaces I speak of here and that I followed the most closely revolved around a socially-distinct network producing a counterspace, and largely identifying with two broader subcultures.

The first was 'burners,' those who participate in and/or identify with the ethos of Burning Man, an annual art festival wherein participants create a temporary utopia in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada. It is not a festival, but rather the co-creation of a 70,000-strong city centered around "10 Principles" which include things like "gifting," "decommodification" and "communal effort." Although the 'big' burn in Nevada only happens one week a year, Burning Man ethos and ideas shape the lives and creative endeavors of burners in SLC year-round, and is the center point with which people in this group self-identify and socialize. Burners in Salt Lake City typically spent their free time working on collective art projects, and organizing elaborate parties that include performative and interactive art, in addition to some projects with a more specific focus on sustainability. Second were permaculture enthusiasts who spent free time working in collective permaculture gardens, and in organized gatherings aimed at collectively learning and discussing permaculture. The overlap between these two foci was significant, but not total; this network referred to itself as 'the community.'

This section reflects on the ethnographic findings with reference to the research questions: (i) how do prefigurative actors in SLC produce space and (ii) what space do they produce? First, what the alternative space investigated is alternative of (socially and spatially) is investigated. Second, a broad view of the features of this space is taken, employing an adaptation of Longhurst's (2013) categories to look at the breadth of practices in SLC. This social space is centered around inverting conventional space and is grounded in five moments or inversions of: (i) the self, (ii) social network, (iii) material practices, (iv) knowledge creation, and (v) economic practices (Fig. 1). In these we see Lefebvre's ideas around utopia, differential space, and counterspace reflected. Throughout, feminist killjoy perspective is used to consideration is given to the extent to which these spaces are emancipatory.

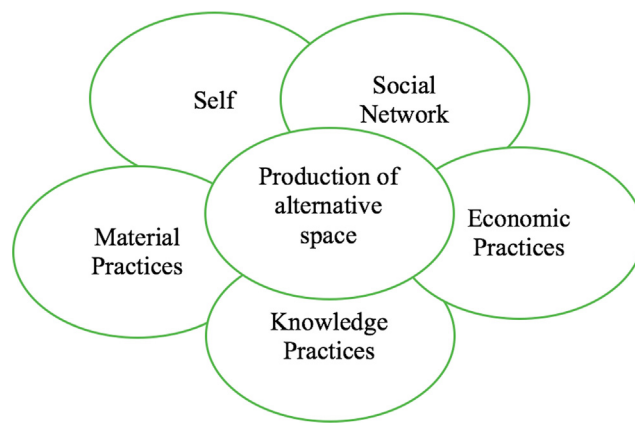


Fig. 1. All elements of the alternative space are overlapping and co-implicated in its production. Differentiation from oppositional forces on various scales occurs in each of these moments.

2.3. Emergence: The creation of a differential space

The case study here exemplifies how the attempts to dominate space can provide the seeds of a differential space (see Table 1). Abstract space on multiple spatial scales (capitalist economy and culture and the Mormon attempt to dominate the social space in Utah) caused many participants to feel disillusioned from themselves, from their spirituality, from the products of their work, "from the earth," from each other. Many in 'the community' related that leaving 'the church,' 'the typical life working in the corporate world,' 'the cookie-cutter life,' caused an instability in terms of financial resources, the self, and social support.

The closeness of 'the community' may have links with the social support that the Mormon church provides its members. Members of the Mormon church are divided into wards, local church communities that are very strong networks of support: it was widely noted that the church is the source of one's friends, and networks for getting high paying jobs. One young woman described how her ward helped her through a serious illness: they rotated taking care of her, brought her and her family food, and also paid her outstanding medical bills. At the same time, many participants noted that leaving the Mormon church results in being ostracized from one's previous network of family, community, and support. It also represents an emotional loss, as one young man who recently graduated from the Mormon flagship university, and subsequently left the church due to its anti-LGBTQ policies related, "you go through state of grieving when you leave the church- joy, sadness, nostalgia... I went through that- it was really confusing for my brain to add up what love is." The individual is left without moral compass and without home, which some find in the countercultural spaces in Salt Lake City. Chatting in a lawn-turned-permaculture garden the same person later reflected, "if love is real it made sense to love the earth."

As a young man who also left the Mormon church put it, "because we grew up in a community, we crave a community of support." Likewise, 'the community' provides such emotional, spiritual, social, and even financial support; for example, by holding fundraiser events for members who have experienced serious illness, injury, or other tragic events. It should be noted that not everyone in 'the community' is an ex-Mormon, but many are, and even for those who are not, the influence of the Mormon construction of community and the consequences of leaving it influence the sociality of 'the community.'

Describing some disillusionment with the interpersonal conflict in a permaculture group, a permaculture enthusiast related, "the community attracts a lot of very broken people." Also, this *disillusionment* for many participants led towards "choosing a margin" of sorts- not the margin of marginalized groups but a margin of this differential space. In

Table 1

Characteristics (oppositional forces of abstract space) in relation to geographically-fixed and unfixed institutions and the ways the counterspace differentiates from them.

Geographically-fixed institutions		Capitalist economy/culture	
Characteristic	Differentiation	Characteristic	Differentiation
Restricted life-paths	Reproductive freedom, freedom in choosing labor w/o judgement	Capitalist cultural notion of success as economic	Liberation from pursuit of economic gain to meaningful connection with products of labor
Restricted self-expression	Radical self-expression	Societal fragmentation	Social coming-together with 'the community'
Restricted social scene	Freedom to socialize with heterogeneous (age, gender, sexuality) group	Homogeneous spaces	Heterogeneous spaces devoted to learning, pleasure, food, dance, work
Bodily restrictions (e.g. alcohol, caffeine, sexuality)	Bodily liberation	Boredom, deprived of creativity	Play, pleasure, senses, carnival
Singular spirituality dictated	Multiple spiritualities explored	Envtl disconnection & harm	Envtl connection and healing through material practices
		Capitalist economy	Bartering, gifting, trading, volunteering, upcycling
		Consumer culture	Maker culture

contrast to the Mormon restrictions (the family, the church) and the capitalist restrictions (the 9–5, fragmentation, homogeneity), 'the community' represents the carnivalesque, earthy differential space where there is festival, joy, pleasure, a primacy of senses, play, reconnection with others and 'the earth' (Bakhtin, 1984; Shields, 1991; Lefebvre, 1991).

Choosing this counterspace for these reasons says something important about the orientation to change of 'grassroots innovators.' Participants in counterspaces may not be motivated by environmental or social justice goals. As such, they may not see their work as activism (as Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010 have also noted), many in fact in this case study did not, and some actively and overtly rejected the label "activist" in favor of "actionist" or "solutionist" (Bobel, 2007). This is important, because as a result, these countercultural spaces may not have the same level of radical education and organizing capabilities as more intentionally organized traditional activist groups. As a consequence, while the utopian vision, and actual practice of that vision (making real the possible-impossible) is alive and well in these counterspaces, they also reproduce some of the conditions (patriarchy, hierarchy, objectification of women, cultural appropriation, control of knowledge, capitalist economic relations) that they (mostly unconsciously) work against. Their organizational capacities and ability to deal with interpersonal conflict also struggle through lack of intentional training and creation of democratic decision-making structures. While 'stuff gets done' generally, there are a lot of complaints of those with vision but no practice, or because, as one participant noted, "they just come to have some sense of family or something but don't actually do anything."

The strategy of producing an alternative space follows a process of differentiation from abstract space in the forms of (i) geographically-fixed institutions and (ii) capitalist economy and culture (Table 1). Countering abstract space is employed as a strategy of *differentiation*, Lefebvre's inversions of abstract space towards conviviality, leisure and carnival, and multiple other possibilities. This *counterspace* strategy is reflected in differentiation of each of the five moments of space: the self, the social network, and in material, economic, and knowledge practices.

2.4. The self and the social network

The bodies circulating in SLC counterspaces might strike you as much as the strange material space. Bodies here were extravagant performances- not just in the fire, hoop, ribbon dances, ridiculous behavior, and overt sexual displays, but also in dress. Typical dress of these participants includes things like: animal prints, fur coats, tutus, harem pants, utility belts and holsters, long feather earrings, crystal necklaces, and a variety of strange hats. The dress style of this group deviated from the norm to the extent that one young woman reflected

that as she and a group of friends were walking downtown, someone passing by said, "nice costumes," to which she replied "these aren't costumes, this is our attire!" This radical self-expression also sometimes included a sense of the carnival and the absurd, as a man wearing shower hooks for earrings joked, "got these from a designer in L.A." In sum, the alternative dress code of this network is a way of asserting identity and claiming group membership.

The bodies (of an array of ages, sizes, mostly white) that intersected in this space collided with intimate greetings and bond over regular, open discussion of life, often from an alternative spiritual perspective. Many embraced "spirit science," shamanic, crystal healing, Native American spiritualities, yoga, sweat lodges, ecstatic dance, conspiracy theories, sacred geometry, and the use of psychedelics in these explorations. Social support and learning about alternative spirituality was cultivated both online (Facebook) and in-person. Alternative spiritualities were also made real via the material practices of 'the community,' for example with the creation of the Temple of Awareness (Fig. 2).

Analyzing the practices of the self, it becomes evident that a new politics of the self was critical in the production of the counterspace (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Self-transformation was needed to re-constitute the self in a new, non-capitalist (and in this case, non-Mormon) sense, and to provide a stable relationship to oneself and environment (Longhurst, 2013). A new relationship to the self was practiced through the bodily performance of identity (e.g. dress), emotion (e.g. spirituality), and through the routines of everyday life (e.g. alternative work options, commitment to building material manifestations of the project) (Lefebvre, 1991; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Ahmed, 2004; Dickinson, 1997). In particular, alternative spiritualities formed a type of interpersonal glue and collective identity in addition to "reconstituting the self", much as the literature on the role of emotions in activism suggests (Brown and Pickerill, 2009). When self-transformation was enacted according to the group's norms, acceptance into the group was a given.

Again, collectively this network self-referentiated as 'the community.' 'The community' was tightly knit and although it contained sub-groups, it was a primary source of social interaction and support for those within it. In the process of defining the inside of 'the community,' one of the primary considerations was the extent to which an individual's everyday life was wrapped in the production of the counterspace. This included how much an individual contributed to the creation of the physical building of the counterspace (gardens, sculptures, physical spaces and other physical projects), which to a large extent was also contingent on choosing alternative pathways for earning money (e.g. service industry jobs) to give one the flexibility to participate. Importantly, aligning to the group's alternative bodily performance, especially dress, also regulated inclusion. Hierarchy and inclusion within the sub-groups and whole community also centered around the leaders of these groups, the length of time one has been on



Fig. 2. The Temple of Awareness, collectively built in a warehouse lot in Salt Lake City and pictured here at Burning Man 2017. Photo credit: Bobby Gittins.

the inside, and the density of one's own ties to others in the network. And yet, for those on the inside of 'the community,' it was comfortably referred to as "family," many "I love you's" were exchanged, and the interpersonal conflicts that abounded and are mediated by 'the community' are perhaps (in a contradictory way) a testament to the closeness of the network.

However, from a feminist perspective, 'the community' also reproduced oppressive structures (Hiemstra and Billo, 2017). In several instances in this case study, the search for self-transformation and spirituality that solidified group membership involved cultural appropriation (especially of Native American spiritualities and practices like sweat lodges). This at times created direct confrontation between Native Americans and non-natives, who were often dismissive of the latter's concerns. 'The community' also has allowed men known to be abusive towards women to remain in their midst.

The bodily performance that helped provide entry, in the case of women, was often a hyper-sexualized one, which brings up the issue of the objectification of women. In addition, the hierarchical nature of 'the community' was often noted in my conversations with participants. Shields (1991) and Bakhtin (1984) insist that the carnivalesque and liminality reduce everyone to a common denominator of participants, this appears not to be the case in the construction of counterspaces (while it does provide an escape from existing social norms). The politics of inclusion also were of note here: while one of the 10 Burning Man Principles is "radical inclusion," inclusion/exclusion and hierarchy were regulated via specific bodily and everyday performances. It is notable that patriarchy, hierarchy, and a strict politics of inclusion were also characteristics of the Mormon social space: as one participant noted, "Utah Mormons are like a whole subset... they're more integrated outside of Utah... because everyone around them isn't LDS they have to be more tolerant."

At the same time, 'the community' itself was of critical importance to the production of the counterspace. 'The community' glued together those individuals, practicing a transformed and alternative relationship to the self, with the 'utopian vision' and its practice via alternative material, economic, and knowledge practices. Cooperation and connection were vital in the creation of this space (see also Zibechi, 2012).

2.5. Material practices

Material practices were highly contingent on time both in the sense of events and in terms of the sun's passage through the sky. During the light of day, the primary space occupied by these groups was out-of-doors, and the primary (material) activity was the re-creation of urban

space through permaculture. Permaculture practices aim to grow food as an ecosystem, leaving space also for habitat of birds, bees, and other species; offering a more sustainable approach to agriculture for example by sequestering more greenhouse gas emissions compared to conventional agriculture (Hathaway, 2016).

Front yards were replaced with gardens-as-ecosystems, sometimes individual, and sometimes networked through neighborhood sharing and collaboration (you plant a fruit tree here, I'll keep the chickens there). Abandoned lots (under a billboard, behind a religious center, in a rare huge unused backyard) were replaced by individual gardens, (formal and informal) community gardens, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operations. The permaculture practices of the community were an extensive and concrete material practices (e.g. including three permaculture farms at approximately 6 total acres, and more than a dozen front or back yards replaced by household permaculture plots). The specific food-related innovations birthed in this process were many; a few examples include: swale/countour,⁴ hugelkultur,⁵ hydroponics, seed bombs, spirulina fish tanks,⁶ pickling/canning, and brewing.

With the passage to night often through to near sunrise the radical material spaces created in this network often moved indoors, and coalesced in carnivalesque events. These events were held as private in response to the state's strict liquor laws and early closing times for clubs. The physical locations of these, like the abandoned lots, were on-the-margin: at warehouses and rented floors in buildings on the outskirts of town or in the industrial areas of the city, or otherwise in the desert outside of Salt Lake City for multi-day events. Here the participant passes to another world, stepping into such a space, your experience is immediately transformed by sensuous experience: loud electronic music, dim, but intensely hued illumination. Lumpy couches and odd chairs give invitation for conversation. Kaleidoscopic, otherworldly 2D art arouses the imagination and prismatic sculptures (often geodesic or simulative of natural forms, iridescent with LEDs, and interactive) solicit participation.

Material innovations and experiments created by this network include composting toilets ("composters"), a solar powered vehicular DJ booth ("the solar saucer," see Fig. 3), desert camping innovations (hexayurts, monkey houses, etc.), large sculptures (some of which were

⁴ A permaculture technique of building berms and rivulets in order to better capture water.

⁵ A permaculture technique of burying logs and branches in garden beds to increase fungal content and water retention.

⁶ A technique of growing spirulina, an algae consumed for health benefits.



Fig. 3. The solar saucer helping power an urban garden created in a formerly abandoned lot. Photo credit: James Loomis.

burned), light art, and a tesla coil. The Jenkstar ranch in southern Utah featured multiple experiments with sustainability innovations (e.g. a water catchment system, earth structures, buildings made of upcycled materials), which were also discussed at monthly events in SLC.

These spaces were created through events: formal and informal gatherings-together where both experiential and formal knowledge were shared and where projects got done; largely organized through Facebook. Analysis of the material practices of ‘the community’ shows that the inversion of conventional physical spaces (gardens over lawns, the sensory and aesthetic art/decoration of festivals/events) set the stage for the social practice of differential space. As Lefebvre (1991, p. 379) writes,

“Innumerable groups, some ephemeral, some more durable, have sought to invent a ‘new life’ ... Among the obstacles that they have run into and the reasons for their failure when it occurs must certainly be numbered the absence of an appropriated space, the inability to invent new forms. It is a curious and paradoxical fact that, while spaces dedicated to sensual delight have existed, they are few and far between... An architecture of pleasure and joy, of community in the use of the gifts of the earth, has yet to be invented.”

Lefebvre (1991, p. 168) insists that the failure of many utopian groups has been a ‘morphological maladaptation,’ and in the counter-spaces of SLC there seemed to be the type of re-adaptation he saw as missing. The physical transformation of the character or meaning of places is a spatial strategy of protest (Routledge, 2017). These differential spaces, on the physical and social margins of town, were adapted to the practice of a new politics of the self, the community, and also to economic practices and knowledge creation. However, there was some contradiction in the material space: in the capitalist relations (e.g. buying tickets to events), and in the gender-based division of labor in building these spaces and innovations.

2.6. Knowledge co-creation

The creation and sharing of knowledge was an essential piece of the material and economic practices (Vlasov and Vincze, 2018). Knowledge of innovation-making and permaculture techniques were shared at events from those who were perceived as having more expertise (often white men), through formal and experiential learning. This attitude is summarized by one permaculture practitioner’s comment: “it’s okay if you don’t know, that’s why we’re all here, to learn from each other—each of us know bits.” Similarly, another commented, “everything I

know is from you guys, from picking your brains.” Much of this knowledge was also shared through online networks (primarily Facebook) where events are organized, DIY plans shared, and personal experiences debated. The co-creation of knowledge was often also linked to the emotional and spiritual and was reflective of a specific orientation to change.

In order to create these material objects (innovations, art), and physical spaces (permaculture gardens, spaces for permanent and temporary events) new collective representations of space (especially knowledge) were produced by ‘the community.’ This knowledge was grounded in the Do-It-Yourself Ethics, transferred through informal and formal knowledge exchange, both online and in person. At times however, again the dominative characteristic of representations of space were noted here with sometimes diverting to the ‘experts’ who were often white men. And yet, for some the co-creation of knowledge and its expression through building practical and artistic structures was a highlight of their experience in ‘the community,’ a source of joy, invigoration, and fulfillment.

2.7. Alternative economic practices

It is important to acknowledge the existence of alternatives to capitalism here, working in the shadows of capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 1996). Within this counterspace, resources and objects were often shared through the alternative economy, which was regulated online (Facebook groups) and more informally. Obtaining materials for the creation of permaculture gardens and sculptures/infrastructure in burner spaces preferred in both cases the use of urban waste streams. Permaculturists made use of materials such as discarded cardboard, PVC piping, animal manure, and yard “waste.” Many permaculture gardens were created with minimal financial resources (Fig. 4). Burner sculptures and buildings were often made of upcycled junk, in fact; one group calls themselves the Jenkstars—renaming “junk” “jenk” and making it useful (most buildings at their ranch were made of it). Networks also exchanged resources amongst themselves through informal barter/exchange, clothing swaps, and volunteering time for other individuals’ and groups’ projects.

Borrowing, gifting, trading, and bartering, and the appropriation of urban waste streams were socially encouraged and celebrated (these informal alternative economic systems are often missed by academic study). “Work” itself was seen as secondary to ‘the community’ (e.g. in choosing blue-collar or informal economy jobs because of their flexibility). However, some did try to use the knowledge and skills cultivated in the counterspace to create small businesses and sustain



Fig. 4. A permaculture food forest created primarily through exchange and gifting. Photo by the author.

themselves economically.

What this all suggests is that counterspaces are spatial struggles. Larger-scale and place-specific attempts to dominate space are the seeds of this movement. The counterspace itself is an inversion of abstract space, and thus the abstract space itself is also a defining factor for counterspaces. What counterspaces ‘actually do’ is not just create material and economic practices, but create a new social space. This social space is centered around inverting abstract space and is evident in five moments: the self, social networks, material practices, knowledge co-creation, and alternative economic practices. The alternative meanings around the self and social network self-transformation are just as important as the material practices themselves (e.g. making permaculture gardens or composters); more attention needs to be paid to the sociality of these spaces. At the same time, oppressive structures are not completely escaped, and the non-explicitly political orientation towards change may be to blame.

3. Conclusion

This study suggests that abstract space and the conservative nature of particular places may be the seeds of producing differential spaces. Previous work has proposed that ‘alternative milieus’ and ‘creative environments’ in politically liberal areas allow for more alternative experimentation, but this work suggests those may not be the only conducive environments (Longhurst, 2013). This may be a question of scale: conservative places may indeed be teeming with grassroots innovative activity, but be overlooked because of bias towards seeing the larger-scale dynamic of the majority political orientation of a place. Comparative studies (e.g. between conservative and liberal places) should be employed to help further address the question of the impacts of the political orientations of places on alternative practices.

This paper supports Longhurst’s (2013) assertions that a wider analytical frame allows diversity of alternative practices to be captured, but would see the lifestyles, pathways, and spiritualities bleed into each other as multiple practices that the same groups and individuals conduct. Emergence and renewal in this case comes not from homophilic migration to a place seen as alternative, but from self-transformation or differentiation from dominative spatial practices of geographically-fixed institutions to situate actors in the alternative social network.

Much current scholarship, especially in socio-technical transition studies, assumes that participants are motivated by a care for the environment. While this may be true for some, this study demonstrates that motivations are more complex. In addition, the link between motivation and participation remains crucial. It is vital that scholars pay attention to not only *what* participants in counterspaces do, but *why* they do it. The role of emotion and spirituality in counterspaces particularly merits further exploration.

The question of what motivates prefigurative actors also has impacts on their orientation to change and awareness of their own activism. From a practical standpoint, prefigurative actors should be more intentional about organizing, and get training perhaps from local social justice organizations about how to organize, how to be more inclusive, and how to confront patriarchy and other oppressive structures (Pickerill, 2015). From an academic standpoint, the present paper nevertheless follows Carlsson and Manning (2010) and urges scholars to look beyond surface appearances to recognize the radical nature of concrete utopian experiments.

Questions of process and complexity are critical. The ‘grassroots innovations’ perspective seems to highlight social networks and material objects (innovations) they produce, while the autonomous geographies perspective better attends to the complex, messy, everyday interaction and lives that are the seedbeds of these movements. This study suggests that in all it is critical to pay attention to the variety of prefigurative practices and networks in a place, because the interlinkages between them are so dense that it is sometimes difficult to see where one ends and another begins. The material spaces that innovators create, socialize, and work in are also critical in setting the stage for a counterspace. This research finds that what these movements are actually doing goes beyond the innovations: they are creating a new social space.

From a feminist perspective, it is important to recognize the ‘negatives’: the reproduction of oppressive structures within these counterspaces. It is a false pretense to claim that these movements are non-hierarchical when ethnographic fieldwork reveals the contrary. While a strong social network in this case was vital to the production of this counterspace and of innovation, it also created exclusivity. This paper was limited to discussing the implications of grassroots innovation in terms of the creation of space; however, future research could focus

more specifically on critical perspectives on ‘community’ in these spaces. At the same time that scholars may be ‘killjoys,’ they can also recognize the important, radical work that alternatives embody.

Mindful of the proliferation of academic jargon, this paper argues that the lens of space is useful to re-focus attention on the processes of producing multiple and multi-faceted alternative practices, from the material to the social. Beyond singular innovations, the perspective of the differential and counter spaces is a reminder that changing the world requires a reimagining of space. The optics of the production of space helps us see the construction of actual other worlds, the processes through which they are born and molded. Pitted against the domination of space- against the odds- we see in counterspaces the cracks open up, and multitudes of possibilities revealed.

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