

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the contemporary library landscape is well underway. Over the last several decades, traditional libraries and archives have increasingly experimented with a variety of alternative collections, lending structures and public functions to meet the changing needs of local communities. One of the more prominent innovations of late is the ‘Libraries of Things’ (LoT), a collections and lending practice that circulates a diverse range of equipment, tools, and goods.

To be sure, the LoT movement is not entirely new. In the US and Europe, scores of unconventional libraries sharing everything from telescopes to soil tillers have been around for decades (Faber 1974; McCormack 1985; Robison & Shedd 2017). These early tool and gadget-lending programs emulated modern centralized public library systems (Soderholm & Nolin 2016; Stenstrom *et al.* 2019) but differed in that they offered a novel range of ‘things’ and services to attract new patrons, support lower income households, and forge community reciprocity. While such goals are still firmly part of contemporary LoTs, over the last few years there has been rapid expansion and diversification of these sharing spaces around the world, including Canada. As an umbrella concept, LoTs now commonly include tool libraries, seed libraries, ‘lenderies’ and ‘thingeries’, and in some cases, makerspaces and repair cafes (Meißner 2021). Proponents of LoTs claim that these are vital spaces for experimenting with alternative cultures of consumption and innovative sustainability agendas, initiatives argued to increase access to less affordable goods, decrease waste and resource use, and facilitate community cohesion (Baden *et al.* 2020; Robison & Shedd 2017a). Even given their transformative potential, however, LoTs have received remarkably little attention in the social science literature.

One clear starting point is acknowledging the linkages between modern LoTs and alternative socio-economic systems largely described as collaborative consumption (Botsman & Rogers 2011), and more popularly, the sharing economy. In short, the sharing economy represents a range of mobile digital platforms and bricks-and-mortar places that facilitate the exchange of diverse commodities and services (Hamari *et al.* 2015). Over the last decade, the sharing economy has split between for-profit and non-profit models, the former spearheaded by global ‘unicorn’ firms (e.g., Uber, Airbnb, Lyft) with the latter encompassing organizations and platforms, such as LoTs, that typically deal in non-transactional services (renting, sharing, swapping), some with membership fees (Schor & Vallas 2021).

Given this diverse field, the sharing economy remains a “polysemic” and increasingly contentious practice (Schor & Vallas 2021). Scholarly work on the topic has ranged from research in business and management which tends to explore the economic possibilities and impacts of the sharing economy on local and global markets, to critical social science which confronts its social, political, environmental, and labour ramifications (Schor & Attwood-Charles 2017). Recent work by critical geographers, for instance, exposes the complex political economies of commercial platforms as they tend to propagate specific urban-economic narratives (e.g., neoliberalism) and increased labour precarity with respect to emerging ‘gig economies’ (Cockayne 2016; Zwick 2017). Other work has explored the implications of integrating the sharing paradigm in urban governance strategies manifesting in ‘Sharing City’ agendas around the world (Santala & McGuirk 2019).

Though vital, these research approaches have largely prioritized the for-profit and digital sectors of the Sharing Economy arguably sidestepping community-focused sharing practices that offer potentially radical alternatives to more prevalent ‘capitalocentric’ approaches (Santala & McGuirk 2019; Gibson-Graham 2006). Moreover, in their recent work exploring the conceptual

boundaries of the urban sharing agenda, Chan and Zhang (2021) rightly highlight that existing research has routinely ignored the explicit socio-spatial dimensions of sharing economies. Though modern sharing has been accelerated by digital infrastructure and is seemingly untethered by the global mobile app market, much of this practice remains distinctly localized and anchored ‘in place’. In other words, it is vital that sharing economy research and its myriad sharing practices directly engages with the geographies of sharing.

Considering these ideas, this paper contributes to the emerging literature and research on the non-profit sharing economy through a specific focus on Canadian LoTs. For over a decade, the LoT phenomenon has marched across Canada, developing a diverse and engaging sharing landscape that includes neighbourhood tool libraries, DIY depots and other creative sub-species of sharing spaces. In this paper, I investigate the diverse geographies of Canadian LoTs. Taking a critical social science perspective, I argue that LoTs represent fertile ground to explore the emerging landscape of alternative sharing economies, and more specifically, highlight that these spaces are complex sites of social, economic, political decision making. In short, this means paying particular attention not only to what these places do (i.e., facilitate sharing) but also how they are conceived, managed, and supported (or not) by wider values and practices.

Through key informant interviews with LoT agents (e.g., founders, librarians, managers), this research finds that the viability and success of LoTs are contingent on three common themes: i) *sharing cultures* – the need to navigate changing cultures of sharing and sustainability; ii) *sharing capital* – accessing various forms of capital; and iii) *sharing politics* – mobilizing local leadership and building cooperation between organizations. Overall, this work highlights that the viability and impact of LoTs hinges on the negotiation of these complex ‘sharing’ themes – contexts that enable and constrain LoTs to act as vital spaces for collaboration, experimentation, and community.

The paper is organised as follows. In part 1, I highlight the emerging field of alternative sharing economies and discuss their linkages with non-profit sharing spaces. This section also traces the recent development of LoTs as part of this sharing landscape. Part 2 explains the methodology and outlines the Canadian LoT market. Part 3 presents and discusses the main findings, and finally, part 4 draws key conclusions and suggests several future research avenues for the study of LoTs and the global sharing economy.

ENGAGING WITH ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIES AND NOVEL SPATIALITIES OF SHARING

Social, economic, and environmental challenges have long put into question the pervasive logics of global capitalism. Rising inequality and poverty coupled with global climate change and resource insecurity has accelerated opposition to prevailing market systems (e.g., privatization, resource extraction, competition) and has resulted in a plethora of alternative economic visions. Geographers have increasingly explored sharing and communal practices as key alternatives to capitalistic ways of organizing local economies and their wider societies (Santala & McGuirk 2020). A central thread in this literature, and one worthy of discussion, concerns the rise of non- or post-capitalist narratives, most clearly outlined in Gibson-Graham’s (2006, 2008) research on ‘alternative economic spaces’ and ‘diverse economies.’ In this section, I highlight the concept of alternative economies before turning to a discussion of sharing spaces and the emerging role of LoTs.

Now a distinct field in critical economic geography, Gibson-Graham's work emerged as a direct confrontation to global hegemonic discourses of a single economic system controlled and maintained by capital (e.g., development, growth, profit). Instead, they call for wider recognition and engagement with 'already existing' and evolving economic forms and practices built upon an "ethics of necessity, surplus, consumption, and commons" (Gibson-Graham 2006, p. 66; Fickey 2011; Schmid 2018, p. 5). At the forefront of diverse economies are a wide range of alternative and non-capitalist enterprises, labour, and transactions; many of which are typically marginalised and hidden in the everyday practice of mainstream economies. Recent research has explored the role of urban farming and food collectives, the development of alternative local-currency systems (e.g., Berkshares (US), Salt Spring Dollars (Canada), Brixton Pound (UK)) and credit unions (Seyfang & Longhurst 2016); and, bartering-service systems, where members exchange labour-time credits instead of money (Seyfang 2016). For Gibson-Graham such strategies represent a widening space of 'difference', that is, a socio-economic field (not a single system) of practices, formations and spaces that produce alternative ethical, organizational, and political potential outside of conventional growth paradigms (Hobson & Lynch 2016).

Over the last few years, this work has sparked several important debates especially concerned with the capability of online commercial platforms, like Airbnb and Uber, to lead meaningful and radical change. For some community sharing advocates, the for-profit sharing economy amounts to an appropriation and perversion of the social and ethical roots of sharing. What commercial platforms offer, in short, is a type of 'share-washing' that at "best leads to incremental change, or at worst, reaffirms capitalocentric norms" (Hobson & Lynch 2016, p. 21).

While the consequences and limitations of the commercial sharing sector continue to receive academic attention, there is growing interest in illuminating otherwise peripheral sharing practices. This move includes highlighting both non-profit activities and projects of 'economic autonomy and experimentation' (Gibson-Graham 2008, p. 614, Santala & McGuirk 2019), and uncovering the place-based and spatial dimensions of sharing, ranging from their deepening relationships with urban and community space to the formation of distinct spaces for sharing (Chan & Zhang 2021). Much of this work has highlighted a few prominent contexts especially considering their close alignment with contemporary LoT practices and goals, namely: makerspaces, community gardens, and repair cafes.

The first and perhaps most notable set of shared social spaces are those related to practices of collective and peer production. At the forefront are makerspaces (also referred to as hacklabs, fablabs and hackerspaces; see Maxigas 2012 for further distinctions), largely defined as community-led places for users to build, create, tinker and experiment (Davies 2017; Kostakis *et al.* 2015, p. 556). Over the last two decades, rising affordability and access to fabrication technologies (e.g., computerized laser cutters, and 3-D printers) have spread hacking/making as a practice and philosophy. Though fluid and uneven, recent investigations of a so-called 'hacker ethic' suggests that shared principals of problem solving, freedom and autonomy exist alongside values of "peer-to-peer learning processes as opposed to formal modes of learning; sharing, solidarity and cooperation" (Kotsakis *et al.* 2015, p. 557).

The practices of hacking are also deeply predicated on the foundation and maintenance of *makerspace*. Makerspaces are physically and programmatically diverse: with over 2400 makerspaces globally there is both a remarkable range of organizational size (e.g., from small 'pop-up' workshops to large established studios) and capacity (e.g., in-house skills, types of tools) (Niaros *et al.* 2017; Hackerspace.org 2021). Nevertheless, for Niaros *et al.* (2017, p. 1175), makerspaces are examples of innovative 'third places', informal public spaces that exist "beyond

the realms of home and work” that act as civic infrastructure to support alternative forms of production, peer-to-peer sharing and collaborative learning. In a similar vein, Chan and Zhang (2021, p. 165) point out that makerspaces are sustainable, and indeed successful, through their capacity to enable ‘colocation’ and ‘copresence’, contexts where users not only share space and amenities but work in each other’s presence.

Shared social spaces are also defined through the ‘fixer movement’, a global ethic and practice of peer repair. Though repair has a long history, the fixer movement is regarded as a contemporary intervention in modern waste streams through tackling industrial design (e.g., planned obsolescence), legislative norms (e.g., the ‘right to repair’) and the collective repair of consumer electronics, digital devices, and industrial equipment (Hielscher & Jaeger-Erben 2021). Over the last few years, the fixer movement has become integral to the development of online repair and ‘teardown’ guides and has helped to globalize repair-centered social enterprises, non-profit organizations, and community-driven repair cafes (Madon 2021). Repair cafes, for one, have grown and diversified around the world, ranging from permanent studios (sometimes merged with makerspaces and libraries) to temporary or pop-up events often organized by local volunteer repairers (Hieshler & Jaeger-Erben 2021; Madon 2021). These programs are considered as key social spaces for enabling ‘repair as a practice’, that is, spaces that support a repair community that also builds an ethic of “improvement, modification and innovation” (Meißner 2021, p. 2). Overall, repair cafes have received ongoing research interest particularly given their role in supporting cultures of care and repair argued to deliver radical approaches to sustainability, including the emerging Zero Waste and Circular Economy agendas (Meißner 2021).

Finally, community gardens represent important shared social spaces for the co-production of food. Community gardens have become globally popular interventions used by planners and activists to “[remake and reimagine] cities as healthy and sustainable places” (Spierings *et al.* 2018, p. 677). With a rising diversity of designs and types (e.g., for therapy, schools, and multicultural engagements), community gardens are widely touted as pivotal in not only enhancing local food security and sovereignty, but also in promoting education and community health (Konst *et al.* 2018). Notwithstanding these benefits, however, recent critical research has pointed out that these spaces also contend with key challenges, like social exclusion, where barriers to accessing these spaces are increasingly drawn through material boundaries (e.g., gates and walls), socio-cultural issues (e.g., racial, and multicultural exclusivity) and the wider development of ‘insiders’ (those that belong) vs. outsiders (those that do not belong) (Spierings *et al.* 2018).

While these practices differ in their actions and aims, they all point to a rising diversity of non-profit and access-based sharing economies (Baden & Frei 2021). Here, the role of peer production/consumption and repair are increasingly valuable alternatives to commercial (i.e., capitocentric) platforms. As alternatives, these cases operate as community economies, practices that “resocialize economic relations” with a goal of privileging “care for the local community and its environment” (Gibson & Graham 2006, p. 80). These cases highlight the role of dedicated shared space -- place-based and community-oriented locations that Chan and Zhang (2021, p. 159) argue support “the sharing of social lives and professional knowledge”. And, while these and other examples of the non-profit sharing economy typically use digital platforms to connect users and participants their objectives and successes are largely predicated on their ability to build and maintain sharing, but also reciprocity, mutuality, and cooperation, *in situ*.

Contemporary LoTs have emerged within this diverse socio-spatial landscape of alternative economic practice. In recent years, the LoT and Tool Library movements have included many of the practical, social, and spatial functions of makerspaces and repair cafes either formally

as host-spaces (Cun *et al.* 2019) or informally through the integration of their wider values and goals (Robison & Shedd 2017). However, ‘things’ collections and similar resource-sharing services are also part of innovative strategies designed to not only maintain but evolve the role and value of libraries for local communities. In the UK, Baden *et al.* (2020; see also, Baden & Frei 2021) highlight that the small but emerging LoT landscape advances “community development, both by strengthening peoples’ ties to their local community and by establishing a *community of practice* linked to the LoT” (Baden *et al.* 2020, p. 13, emphasis added). Through shared environmental and social values focused on reducing resource use and waste and enabling more equitable access to goods, local LoTs are both “contributing to economic activity ... and to the wider social sustainability benefits frequently overlooked” in the sustainability literature (Baden *et al.* 2020, p. 13; see also Ameli 2017 for the case in Germany). Significantly, the authors also note key challenges in the capacity of the UK LoT landscape, ranging from the limitation of these small-scale enterprises to maintain key resources (e.g., fixed capital, operational space, paid and voluntary labour, stocks of desired ‘things’), to overcoming consumers’ hesitancy to participate in alternative sharing practices (Baden & Frei 2021).

Outside of a few jurisdictions, however, little is known about LoTs. In Canada, the LoT movement has received increasing attention from popular media and local municipalities seeking community-oriented approaches to building sustainability and resource efficiency but has not been the subject of academic enquiry. In the remainder of the paper, therefore, I explore the development of LoTs as a key part of the contemporary Canadian sharing economy and critical spaces of the ‘diverse economy’. While taking a national scope, I focus on the following questions: How do LoTs operate as sharing spaces? What challenges and opportunities exist for these LoTs? What values, ethics and practices must LoTs navigate for their long-term viability and success?

METHODS

This work is based on 18 semi-structured interviews with key informants whose expertise includes the sharing economy, access-based services, and practical knowledge relating to the planning, development, and operation of LoTs. It is important to note that the Canadian LoT landscape is represented through various nomenclatures, including (but not limited to): Libraries of Things, Tool Libraries, Sharing Depots, Lenderies, and Thingeries. Although there exists diversity across these spaces, these organizations share many common practices and values such as non-profit ‘thing’/tool/goods sharing typically through membership structures, and the maintenance of ‘space’ to facilitate borrowing practices and support the development of learning, production, and shared experiences. The following research merges the various nomenclatures under the term Libraries of Things (LoT), a term that is sufficiently wide to capture the diversity of practice and one that is gaining global recognition (Robison & Shedd 2017). It is important to note, however, that this methodology is only applied to the Canadian context and as such offers a narrow scope of the overall range of global LoT operations and experiences. While this case study approach illuminates key characteristics of this specific LoT landscape, other global jurisdictions may present entirely unique data and perspectives.

In early 2021, a thorough web search (e.g., LoT websites and Facebook pages) identified 34 LoTs across Canada in various states of operation (a total of 30 LoTs considered open and in-operation; two in development; two permanently closed in the calendar year) (Table 1). Recruitment emails were sent out to the locations ‘in operation’ between mid-2020 and mid-2021.

Each interview lasted between 40 to 90 minutes and included local experts in the sharing economy and the principal coordinators (e.g., founders, managers, volunteers, and librarians) of local LoTs across Canada (Table 2)¹.

<about here Table 1>

The interviews focused on a range of key themes developed from the literature review, including: the existing and emerging challenges concerning the sharing economy; the development and integration of sharing and collaborative thinking into current policy and planning initiatives particularly within the sustainability sector; and the various challenges and strategies in developing and sustaining local LoTs and other sharing spaces. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed qualitatively using NVivo, a qualitative coding software.

<about here Table 2>

SHARING COAST-TO-COAST: LIBRARIES OF THINGS ACROSS CANADA

The establishment of a contemporary sharing economy in Canada has occurred over the last decade largely in response to the maturation of platform economies, app markets, and, most importantly, the rising demand for novel forms of collective and sustainable consumption. Outside of the profit-based sharing economy, however, there is little comprehensive knowledge about the growth and dynamics of non-profit access-based sharing.

As summarized in Table 1, formal LoTs in Canada emerged around 2006-2007 in places like Peterborough (ON) and Winnipeg (MB) and have rapidly gained ground since 2010 to include over 32 spaces across the country (30 operational, 2 in development). It is important to note that most of the operational LoTs (23 of 30) are in Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs, urban areas with a population of at least 100,000) with the remaining sites (9 of 30) in smaller cities and towns. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this trend follows a common pattern of the wider sharing economy as an ‘urban phenomenon’, a context where “it is the very scale, proximity, amenities, and specialization that mark city life that enable sharing economy firms to flourish” (Davidson & Infranca 2016, p. 218). Notwithstanding this focus, the growth of LoTs both in smaller city centres, places like Orillia (ON) and St. Albert (AB), and the recent attempts to develop sharing spaces in northern communities like Iqaluit (NU) and Whitehouse (YK), highlight the increasing reach and value of formal sharing spaces as instrumental components of community-making across the urban/rural spectrum.

This research also highlights that though the actual range of services and programs vary across the LoT landscape, a typology of LoTs based upon organizational status (i.e., institutional, non-profit/charity, co-operative, and independent) and items shared (i.e., ‘generalist’ which offer tools *and* other implements; and ‘tool-specific’) is possible (Table 3)².

<about here Table 3>

The majority of LoTs (25 of 30) not only offer goods/tools sharing services but also have dedicated spaces for community functions such as repair workshops, makerspaces, and DIY (Do-it-Yourself) or Rebuilding Centres (e.g., Whistler, BC). The remaining seven operational LoTs exclusively offer goods/tools sharing (e.g., The Thingery), but many have either expressed interest in

expanding their services to include flexible community spaces or have hosted temporary (or ‘pop-up’) events, like repair cafes and food swaps.

Most LoTs (24 of 30) were established by local champions and/or small groups of community volunteers and entrepreneurs. In the case the former, individual champions with expertise in the construction industry and the craft/tool sector spearheaded the development of local sustainable “communities of practice” and founded LoT sites (e.g., Saint John Tool Library and DIY Centre). In the case of the latter, non-profit societies, social enterprises, and charitable organizations led the founding and management of local LoTs (e.g., Winnipeg’s ArtsJunktion/Tool Lending Library). The remaining LoTs (6 of 30) were developed and managed through established public library systems and typically share library infrastructure and space as part of their operations (e.g., the York Region Lenderies).

Finally, participation and membership access vary across the LoT landscape. While community and co-operative LoTs require members to pay dues to borrow things; grassroots and public LoTs offer vetted open access and open access through public library systems, respectively.

Beyond these key characteristics, it is important to recognize that the successful operation of LoTs are deeply connected to a range of cultural, political, economic, and spatial dynamics. In the remainder of this section, I draw on interview data to explore three central themes that play a fundamental role in the development of these sharing spaces, namely, the challenges and opportunities inherent in sharing cultures, sharing capital, and sharing politics.

Sharing Cultures: Negotiating cultures of sharing and sustainability - Developing and sustaining viable LoTs in a diversifying sharing market requires a meaningful engagement with wider, and dynamic, sharing cultures. Across the interviews, LoT stakeholders routinely reflected on the role of negotiating local, regional, and global values associated with sharing practices.

Financial considerations are widely understood as significant, indeed primary, motivations for many LoT members. As one interviewee explained, sharing is “broadly understood” but largely begins with an “attraction to save a little money” (Interview 4-5). Founders and managers, particularly those from the larger urban centres (e.g., Toronto, Halifax, Vancouver), reflected on the fact that members are increasingly young individuals and couples dealing with new homes or navigating the high cost (and low supply) of tradespeople. “But once they get here”, argued one manager, “they get introduced to a bunch of ideas because they meet our people at the service desk and around the space” (Interview 10). Here, the social and cultural values of LoTs are crucial to building what this manager referred to as “two levels of messaging: the first is to save money, and the second is to build staying power... supporters of the overall mission of sharing and borrowing” (Interview 10).

For many, the growth of LoTs across Canada is also intimately connected to a surging interest and knowledge of sustainability-oriented values and practices in contemporary society. In this case, a global recognition of sustainability in general and its various modalities (e.g., the sharing, circular, repair, and DIY economies) have laid the groundwork for LoTs and strengthened their visibility and legitimacy in local communities:

[T]here is definitely interest in the sharing economy... Some are doing it because they just believe in the concept. They think it’s great, just we need to share more ... But community building is part of it too because we do a lot of free events and people get access to our ‘tool ninjas’ and ask questions and participate as a community. (Interview 8)

I think people get it ... some people link it [sharing and circular economy] to climate change, some people just don't want to see stuff in landfill... We've said borrow don't buy, save money, save the environment and that seems to resonate with them. (Interview 13)

In the case of Guelph (ON), success in the 'Smart Cities Challenge'³, a federal grant competition, boosted the value and role of the local LoT. Through this process, the Guelph Tool Library has gained visibility as a space that supports regional sustainability and circular economy:

People talk about the circular economy a lot here...Guelph won ten million dollars from the Federal Government. The project ... is about building a circular economy in the region with lots of other organizations that are geared towards that through the Tool Library. There's a lot of general knowledge about the sharing economy, circular economy, those kinds of things here ... because of that we're able to have a significant impact as a tool library in a small town. (Interviews 11-12)

Others highlighted the fundamental role of popular trends that emerged in recent self-help and DIY cultures, trends that grew from the isolation caused by the global Covid pandemic. The rise of minimalism and decluttering in self-help guru Marie Kondo's work (Interview 7) and the expanding collection of how-to videos on YouTube have expanded interest in LoTs, effectively grounding the virtual DIY milieu with place-based DIY practice:

Since Covid ... a lot more people are like, "I want to learn to fix things. I want to learn to make things. I learned how to do this over the closure period. And now I need the tools to actually make these things for myself" ... the DIY culture and the YouTube culture, has been an important opportunity for these libraries ... when people come in and they're tentative about taking out say, a pressure canner or a dehydrator ... my advice is always like, "here's how to do it". But also, like, "check out these videos on YouTube and you'll figure it out", so I think that's important. (Interview 11-12)

Even given these developments, the recognition of the sharing economy and awareness of the role of LoTs is certainly not universal. In their UK analysis, Baden *et al.* (2020, p. 12) highlight that the promotion of LoTs, typically as distinct spaces of sustainability, positions them as part of an "alternative consumption and production segment". As socio-spatial practices that operate outside of the 'norm', scaling LoTs up, that is "attracting mainstream consumers and positioning sharing as mainstream", represents a key challenge (Baden *et al.* 2020, p.12). This issue was expressed by many of the interviewees in the Canadian context, particularly given the relative novelty of formal sharing spaces. As one interviewee put it, "I think the whole sharing economy is still a new concept for most people. Nobody knows what it looks like. You know, they don't really know how it's going to benefit them" (Interview 9). For some, this challenge has a distinct generational angle, one that is connected to engrained cultures of ownership:

[My parents'] generation is like "I already have all this stuff, so I don't really need a library of things" ... we have to get people before they buy their stuff [otherwise] they don't need us. Younger people are more inclined to want these things ... My generation

is a little less likely to go to your neighbor to ask for something, we're much more likely to go to an organization. (Interview 18)

Of course, *where* these organizations are located often presents a key challenge. Several LoT agents described 'accessibility' as a central barrier to growing the role and impact of sharing spaces for all members of the local community (Interview 6, 7, 13). In one case, a member survey highlighted that the LoT's central city location was generally only accessible via car -- a continual challenge for many lower income and suburban users (Interview 13). In response, the organization has developed what they call a 'mobile LoT', a service that drops off items and things door-to-door. In Vancouver, the Thingery has employed, from the outset, a mobile and modular approach with multiple LoT sites housed in reused shipping containers that can be relocated to fit accessibility challenges of local communities.

Overall, while there remains an ongoing challenges of promoting the value and accessibility of LoTs in communities, the interviewees highlighted the remarkable potential of LoTs as spaces for "intergenerational learning, experimentation and sharing" (Interview 10). LoTs and other sharing spaces were routinely characterized as vital community spaces that facilitate 'colocation and copresence' (Chan & Zhang 2021): an opportunity space that incites users to develop new skills, watch and interact with others (some as experts and some novice), and perhaps experiment with new and different forms of consumption, including borrowing, repairing, and making.

Sharing Capital: Accessing Public Funding and Charitable Resources - Beyond the need to negotiate cultures of sharing, a central topic of debate amongst LoT stakeholders relates to ongoing opportunities and challenges of engaging with various forms of capital -- from accessing public funds and grants, to navigating local volunteer and charitable goods markets. In the case of the former, most of the interviewees highlighted the value of public grants in mitigating the precariousness of revenue streams for non-profit/social enterprises, but also pointed to ongoing difficulties in public grant opportunities. Across the LoTs, these revenue streams, often combined with membership dues, cover a variety of operational costs (e.g., rent, staff, stock) and service costs (e.g., supporting new programs and projects).

For some, decisions on how to officially label and define LoTs, that is their 'organizational status' (e.g., social enterprise, registered charity), are key challenges (see Table 3). In Comox (BC), the LoT founders explained that while their 'co-operative' status makes sense for their 'sharing mission', it represents an ongoing funding challenge for co-operative LoTs since they do not have access to similar grant opportunities available to other organization using the non-profit or charitable labels. Moreover, as grants are increasingly allocated to support distinct issues, such as environmental education and poverty reduction, the Comox LoT has "slipped through the cracks ... we [are] sort of doing all those things, but our organization doesn't really fit into any of those boxes" (Interview 15-16).

Taking a different approach, the Saskatoon Tool Library has remained what they call a 'grassroots' organization (Table 3), a sharing space that has, for the time being, eschewed public grants in favour of maintaining a sense of independence and autonomy:

[D]o we really want to ever get to the money point [charging memberships and applying for grants]? Do we want to keep it completely free? It's nice being this little grassroots space... we don't have any funding from anyone, so they have no say in what we do, there's no hoops to go through. (Interview 18)

Like most social enterprises and charities, however, grants remain significant financial revenue streams for LoTs (Mendell 2010). Outside of the Saskatoon Tool Library, all LoTs engaged in grant applications to grow their spaces and cover overhead costs and sharing programs. While several of the LoTs have been successful in grant opportunities (e.g., Guelph, Toronto, Ottawa, Halifax), every LoT stakeholder highlighted ongoing difficulties in “chasing the money” (Interview 9). A combination of challenges, from time commitments, access to professional advice, and steep grant-writing learning curves, place a great deal of stress on paid and volunteer staff. As one interviewee explained,

unless you have somebody in your organisation who has [grant] experience or is willing to learn from somebody, you can spend a whole lot of time, effort, and volunteer hours going after money that never materializes ... this takes away from our core mission, to put underused tools in the hands of people who need them. (Interview 4-5)

Beyond the challenges of the ‘chase’, the grant-receiving LoTs also explained that while funding is helpful, limitations on what the money can be used for has limited their capacity to “take us to the next level” (Interview 4). Rather remarkably, several LoT managers argued that recent grant opportunities have overprioritized program innovation and experimentation, referred as “novel initiatives”, at the expense of supporting arguably more primary operational aspects like infrastructure and (strategic) management (Interview 4-5, 10). A key stumbling block for larger and more developed LoTs involves procuring and maintaining stable management positions (e.g., executive directors), which are perceived as fundamental in “growing these spaces for local and regional communities” (Interview 8). Overall, limitations like these have, according to one manager, “led the library along a path of always dreaming up new things in order to get the funding; when in reality, the main thing needed is better infrastructure, better systems, better management” (Interview 10). It is important to note, too, that as non-institutional LoTs are monetized, whether through pay-per-use or co-operative/membership fees (Table 3), some LoT agents questioned the overall “reach” of their services. For LoTs in Charlottetown (PEI), Toronto (ON) and Vancouver (BC), places where housing and living costs have skyrocketed, monetization represents a double-edge sword: at once an operational necessity and a financial barrier for many lower-income homeowners.

Finally, given the non-profit nature of LoTs, the interviews highlight the need to engage with dynamic and sometimes capricious charitable resources, including volunteer labour and the donations of ‘things’. In the case of the latter, LoTs typically rely on donations, of goods and tools, which are then borrowed and/or used on-site for workshops. Maintaining steady streams of donations, however, is a consistent resource challenge for most spaces, and particularly acute for LoTs in smaller and peripheral cities, such as Comox (BC) and St. John’s (NL). For the St. John’s Tool Library, challenges with reliable donation streams are chiefly the result of both a general lack of community awareness (an issue shared by all LoTs) and, more acutely, the persistence of a culture of ownership *and* discard engrained in mainstream consumption practices:

There’s still a lot of negativity towards borrowing here, there’s a positivity towards ownership and of retaining these things... there’s the ego of it, “I can have this stuff”, but then there’s the independence part, “I don’t need to rely on this community. I want these things for myself”, that’s hard to break. (Interview 3)

Importantly, a central goal of LoTs is not simply about reshaping how individuals and communities consume things, but also how they dispense and dispose of these things at the end of their useful lives. There is growing evidence that while sustainable consumption practices like recycling and brand substitution have gained ground, arguably more radical approaches like reuse and reduction have received considerably less attention (Akenji 2013; Baden *et al.* 2020). In particular, take-back schemes and reuse programs, such as LoTs, have been slow to develop in places like St. John's as contemporary sustainability practices and policies have met resistance by local communities reluctant to change.

Sharing Politics: Leadership and Co-operation in the Emerging Community Economy - In addition to engaging with shifting values of sharing and accessing various forms of capital, the operation of LoTs is also contingent upon mobilizing local leadership and building cooperation between similar organizations.

Throughout the interviews, LoT managers and founders routinely discussed the role of political champions, civil society leaders, and local non-profit collaborations as either powerful enablers or key obstacles in the LoT landscape. As one founder made plain, “LoTs need friends” (Interview 18). And, while ‘friends’ vary considerably across contexts, several LoTs highlighted the role of municipal actors and local councillors to leverage capital and infrastructure, and gain traction in the non-profit sharing economy. LoTs in Halifax, Guelph, and Vancouver, for instance, have had consistent buy-in from “progressive” mayors and councillors who are drawn to the role of sharing spaces as a means of building community and implementing novel sustainability policies (Interview 4-5, 11-12, 14). In Guelph, a city with a strong stance on environmental issues and the only riding in the Province of Ontario that has a Green MPP⁴, engagement with political leaders has meant “getting political power behind what we’re trying to do ... it also helps in terms of us applying for grants, those kinds of things which are central to keeping us running” (Interview 4-5). Similarly, for the Halifax Tool Library, a young progressive local councillor, and member of the library, has been instrumental in unlocking grant opportunities and in “raising awareness” of the LoT, through linking their services with the diverse needs (e.g., access to tools for home improvements; community spaces) of the local community. Thus, the mobilization of local leadership for LoTs can be crucial in developing support for borrowing and sharing as part of a normalized economic practice, one that is not simply an ‘alternative’ to mainstream (e.g., profit oriented) sharing markets but rather as a legitimate and recognized practice of the community economy (Fickey 2011).

Not all jurisdictions benefit from progressive leadership. While for some, local champions are vital in “pulling the levers of power and the economy” (Interview 6), others struggle against stakeholders whose reluctance and misunderstanding of both the community/sharing economy and LoTs represent continuing barriers for growth. Here, several LoTs founders noted that failure to enlist the support of civic leaders is partly the result of a “crisis of attention”, that is, a saturation of the charitable/non-profit markets such that “the field is getting wider making it more difficult to make sure that they [local leaders] know you exist and that you’re important” (Interview 7, 13). For others, the lack of local support stems from a political culture that is “risk averse” (Interview 9). For the LoT in Orillia, a small city in Central Ontario, municipal leaders have been slow to respond to calls for support of community and sharing economies, in part through lack of political capacity (e.g., the resources necessary to make change), and perhaps more importantly, through a lack of understanding of LoTs and access-based sharing in general. A key challenge has been

educating municipal planners and the local council, gatekeepers of land-use and zoning decisions, to support the establishment of the LoT in a central location that is accessible for various communities (Interview 9).

Beyond the role of local leaders, LoT founders and managers highlighted the value of casting LoTs into wider socio-spatial networks of sharing, specifically those focused on building cooperation and collaboration with similar organizations at various scales. First, several LoT managers described the role of local (e.g., municipal) collaboration. For the Toronto Tool Library, event collaboration and the sharing of space and infrastructure with local organizations like the food bank, garden centres, and makerspaces, has been part of fundamental “balancing act” that not only lowers operational and membership costs, but also supports opportunities for the LoT to be “modular and experimental” in their approach to programming, services, and the goods they share (Interview 10).

Second, for LoTs in larger metropolitan areas, regional collaboration is considered a necessary step for building longer-term sustainability and meaningful sharing. For an LoT founder in Vancouver, this means developing a ‘regional sharing strategy’:

which is about planning: “Ok, how are we satisfying the needs and demands in a sustainable way, *together*? [emphasis in original] Where's our educational component? Is there a repair café? There's got to be inter-sector cooperation, it's got to be more than the lending libraries versus the manufacturers. It's got to be: “how is the Thingery collaborating with the tool library, and collaborating with the makerspace, and collaborating with the public library” (Interview 14).

While comprehensive regional sharing strategies do not currently exist as formal policy (i.e., facilitated or managed through regional government), it is increasingly clear to several managers that LoTs (and other sharing spaces) need to expand and diversify their networks beyond the local. Though not an easy task, envisioning and implementing inter-sectoral regional sharing gives LoTs not only the potential to access wider pools of resources (including voluntary and paid labour, skills, infrastructure) but also to forge a wider culture of sharing and goods-based access. Indeed, “it's the only way you beat the alternative [status quo] and that's when they [LoTs] are really going to start to make sense” (Interview 17).

CONCLUSIONS

The LoT movement is now firmly part of the global sharing economy. Around the world, public institutions, community leaders, and environmentally-oriented entrepreneurs are increasingly experimenting with the library model to fundamentally alter the way we live, from “disrupt[ing] mainstream economies and consumerism, [to] improving social cohesion, and contributing to the minimization of resource use” (Heinrichs 2013, p. 229).

And yet, it is remarkable that there has been little academic focus on LoTs and the role that these dynamic spaces play in forging alternative and ‘diverse’ economies. As the sharing economy has evolved over the last decade and has become dominated by profit-driven ‘sharing’ models, there has been increasing attention and critique of such practices especially given their globally disruptive impact on established economic systems. Lost in the mix, however, are non-profit, cooperative, and community-oriented sharing practices that arguably represent vital sharing spaces for more meaningful societal change.

This paper has responded to this gap by exploring the development of the LoT landscape in Canada and by understanding this movement as an integral part of local community economies (Gibson-Graham 2006). In doing so, it has illuminated several significant typologies and themes that shape the development and success of LoTs. This research points out that founders and managers are constantly balancing and negotiating complex dynamics of contemporary sharing – sharing cultures, sharing capitals, sharing politics – to maintain the viability of LoTs and to promote non-profit sharing (of things, ideas, and space) in their local communities. Here, prevailing values, trends, and knowledge of sustainability and the sharing economy (in their many guises) have ‘primed the pump’ of the LoT movement; that is, they have legitimized the idea of sharing and borrowing in community spaces as fundamental practices in sustainable consumption. However, pushing LoTs into the mainstream and making them part of an ‘everyday’ consumption that replaces or at least rivals contemporary cultures of ownership, still represents a tremendous hurdle. In many accounts, LoT stakeholders reflected on the tight balance between those who clearly understand and have bought into the LoT movement, and those that “just don’t get it” (Interview 9). While promotional campaigns are one approach to bridging this knowledge gap, it is certainly not enough to win over generations of consumers shaped by a political-economic system that runs on the continual consumption of new goods and a consumer culture that celebrates ownership as an imperative in modern society. It is increasingly clear that most LoTs are dependent on funding schemes and grant opportunities born from these same political-economic systems. In this case, accessing capital, from funds to donations, often represents a double-edged sword: while these resources are vital to maintaining and growing LoT operations, they also often represent distinct constraints and expenses particularly for smaller and resource-poor LoTs. Coupled with unreliable and fluctuating goods donations, LoTs, like many other charitable and non-profit organizations, face uphill battles in grants and funding landscapes that are marked by steep competition. However, in some cities, like Guelph and Halifax, long standing progressive politics and the coordination of regional sustainability planning has laid the groundwork for LoT funding and wider community support. In this way, building collaborative and cooperative networks, with local leaders and allied organizations in the community economy is clearly one step forward. Engaging with political champions who have vested interest in supporting community cohesion and sustainability initiatives represent part of a critical infrastructure for building legitimacy and distributing resources for LoTs and other similar sharing spaces. Moreover, these actors are also potential leaders of a formal sharing governance, that is, a system for developing and implementing sharing policies across sectors that could “change the game altogether” (Interview 17).

Finally, beyond these key insights, future research on LoTs is needed to explore several pressing issues. First, given the fact that contemporary LoTs are relatively novel and are continually evolving to meet consumer and community needs, there remains some question of their role and position in the global sharing ‘ecosystem’. The research explored here highlighted the non-profit/charitable LoT models, particularly as they exist as alternative forms of consumption in the Canadian economy. However, pinpointing exactly where this movement fits in a so-called ‘postcapitalist’ system in other socio-spatial and economic contexts is not entirely clear. For one founder, the lines are potentially blurring as these sharing spaces represent

gateways between the ‘true’ sharing economy and the traditional economy... On the one hand, these places enable a variety of low cost and free options for people and communities by sharing. On the other hand, we contribute to the traditional economy

through rent, utilities, salaries, and purchase of consumable items. Sitting in both places, sharing spaces have a delicate balancing act to accomplish (Interview 10).

Understanding if and how LoTs in other contexts maintain this ‘delicate balance’ is simply not well known. Comparing and sharing local and regional strategies to keep LoTs not only viable but accessible as charitable/non-profit spaces for diverse communities is vital. And of course, research is needed to understand how LoTs fare in other national contexts. At present, this research is limited to a few places in the Global North (e.g., Canada, UK, and Western Europe), places where sustainability initiatives have received the lion’s share of academic attention. Decentering sharing economy and LoT research is one way forward: we must pay attention to other, largely ignored, jurisdictions in the Global South and East where novel borrowing spaces and practices, along with their own socio-spatial politics, are well underway.

Second, given that this work has only focused on the experiences and decisions of LoT managers and coordinators, more research is needed to explore the consumer/user experience. Research that captures consumers’ motivations, uses, and values but also challenges and barriers to using sharing spaces is pivotal to building LoTs that evolve to meet to the needs of dynamic local communities. Of particular concern is research that explores the role of LoTs in forging spaces that are ‘open’, accessible, and inclusive. Understanding not only how members use and interact in LoTs but also how others (i.e., non-members) perceive these spaces is vital to ensuring that they function as legitimate and sustainable community resources – spaces that encourage everyone to experiment and share.

Endnotes

¹ Additional participant data has been withheld to ensure anonymity.

² The LoTs in this research offer a rich variety of things and to borrow, ranging from sewing machines and beer brewing implements to construction and power tools.

³ In 2019, the Smart Cities Challenge was a federal competition (initiated and supported by Infrastructure Canada) open to all municipalities, local or regional governments, and Indigenous communities (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit). The Challenge supported communities in their adoption of sustainable and smart cities approaches, specifically in developing policies and programs around innovation, data collection and connected technology.

⁴ An MPP is a Member of Provincial Parliament, an elected member of the Legislative Assembly of the Canadian province of Ontario.

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Table 1: Libraries of Things Across Canada (author's data, June 2021)

LoT/Sharing Space	Location (City and Province)	Year Established	Operational Status
St. John's Tool Library	St. John's, NL	2016	Operational
Halifax Tool Library	Halifax, NS	2014	Operational
Saint John Tool Library & DIY Centre	Saint John, NB	2015	Operational
Charlottetown Tool Library	Charlottetown, PEI	2017	Operational
Atelier La Patente, coopérative de solidarité	Quebec City, PQ	2016	Operational
La Remise Bibliothèque d'outils	Montreal, PQ	2015	Operational
Cornwall Tool Library	Cornwall, ON	2014	Operational
Ottawa Tool Library	Ottawa, ON	2014	Operational
Peterborough Tool Library	Peterborough, ON	2017	Operational
Orillia Tool Library and Makerspace	Orillia, ON	2016	Operational
Toronto Tool Library	Toronto, ON	2012	Operational
The Sharing Depot	Toronto, ON	2016	Operational
York Region Lendery	Markham, ON	2019	Operational
York Region Lendery	Newmarket, ON	2019	Operational
Guelph Tool Library	Guelph, ON	2016	Operational
Kitchener-Waterloo Library of Things	Kitchener-Waterloo, ON	2018	Operational
London Tool Library	London, ON	2015	Closed
Hamilton Tool Library	Hamilton, ON	2015	Closed
Iqaluit Tool Library	Iqaluit, NU	N/A	In Development
Winnipeg Tool Library/ArtsJunktion's Tool Lending Library	Winnipeg, MB	2007	Operational
Spence Neighbourhood Association Tool Lending Library	Winnipeg, MB	2010	Operational
Herman Prior Tool Library	Portage la Prairie, MB	2019	Operational
Library of Things YXE	Saskatoon, SK	2017	Operational
Edmonton Tool Library	Edmonton, AB	2016	Operational
St. Albert Tool Library	St. Albert, AB	2018	Operational
Calgary Tool Library	Calgary, AB	2014	Operational
Creative Tool and Object Library	Banff, AB	2016	Operational
Nelson Library of Things	Nelson, BC	Unknown	Operational
Vancouver Tool Library	Vancouver, BC	2011	Operational
Thingery	Vancouver, BC	2010	Operational
Whistler Community Services Society: Rebuild it Centre and Tool Library	Whistler, BC	2018	Operational
Courtenay Tool Library/ The SHED	Courtenay, BC	2018	Operational
Comox Valle Tool Library			
Victoria Tool Library	Victoria, BC	2016	Operational
Whitehorse Tool Library	Whitehorse, YK	N/A	In Development

Table 2: Sharing Spaces Interview Respondents (n =18)

Interview	Libraries of Things	Date	Type
1	N/A	Jun 2020	Non-Profit/Sustainability & Sharing Economy Expert
2	N/A	Jun 2020	Non-Profit/Sustainability & Sharing Economy Expert
3	St. John's Tool Library	Feb 2021	Co-founder
4-5	Halifax Tool Library	Feb 2021	Co-founder and Co-founder (retired)
6	Saint John Tool Library & DIY Centre	Feb 2021	Founder
7	Charlottetown Tool Library	Feb 2021	Founder
8	Ottawa Tool Library	Feb 2021	Co-Founder
9	Orillia Tool Library and Makerspace	Feb 2021	Co-Founder
10	Toronto Tool Library	Feb 2021	Director
11-12	Guelph Tool Library	Feb 2021	Co-Founder and Board Member
13	Kitchener-Waterloo Library of Things	Feb 2021	Associate/Librarian
14	Thingery	Feb 2021	Founder
15-16	Courtenay Tool Library/ The SHED Comox Valley Tool Library	Mar 2021	Co-Founder/Librarian and Associate
17	N/A	May 2021	Non-Profit/Sustainability & Sharing Economy Expert
18	Saskatoon Library of Things	Jun 2021	Founder

Table 3: Libraries of Things Typology

	Borrowing Practice		
	<i>Generalist</i>	<i>Tool-Specific</i>	
Organizational Status	<i>Institutional</i>	Public LoT	Public TL
	<i>Non-Profit/Charity</i>	Community LoT	Community TL
	<i>Co-operative¹</i>	Co-op LoT	Co-op TL
	<i>Independent</i>	Grassroots LoT	Grassroots TL

¹ A cooperative is a community-focused approach in which the LoT is effectively ‘owned’ by its ‘investing’ members who then get access to things and services.