

**Climate Justice in the Fossil Fuel Divestment Movement:  
Critical reflections on youth environmental organizing in Canada**

by

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Bachelor of Arts (Honours), Dalhousie University, 2014

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In  
the School of Environmental Studies

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## ABSTRACT:

The fossil fuel divestment movement is a directed-network campaign<sup>1</sup> that strategically uses economic and ethical arguments to challenge the social license of the fossil fuel industry. Fossil fuel divestment campaigns have become an induction point for the youth climate movement in North America (Grady-Benson & Sarathy, 2015; Rowe et. al., 2016). The analytical and operational approaches to social change employed by the fossil fuel divestment movement are having a ripple effect on the political orientation of a new generation of activists and environmental leaders. This thesis explores concepts and practices of climate justice in the fossil fuel divestment movement on Canadian university campuses, as a flashpoint in the shifting terrain of environmentalism. The research uses qualitative methods to analyze three case study campaigns, as well as supplemental interviews from additional campaign members and national coordinating organizations like 350.org and the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition. This project contributes to a growing body of literature concerned with applied political theory (Rowe et. al., 2016; Schifeling & Hoffman, 2017) and the social impacts of fossil fuel divestment (Bratman et al, 2016; Grady-Benson & Sarathy, 2015; Mangat et al., 2018), providing new insight into the potential of divestment organizing to disrupt dominant narratives of mainstream environmentalism. Fossil fuel divestment organizers are articulating climate justice analysis that calls for transformative system change, including critiques of neoliberal capitalism that are predominantly grounded in climate justice approaches.

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<sup>1</sup> From the *Networked Change In Canada Report* published by the Broadbent Institute and Net Change, Liacas and Mogus (2017) say a directed-network campaign “is a hybrid form of top-down and bottom-up mobilizations that enable extensive grassroots-led initiatives while also powerfully framing their causes and directing campaign momentum towards sharp political goals and shared activities. Success is measured by ‘impact’ through achievement of corporate, policy, or social change, and ‘force amplification’ as the comparison of campaigns resources and capacity to its overall impact”.

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**KEY WORDS:**

*Fossil Fuel Divestment, Climate Justice, Equity, Environmentalism, Social Movement, Climate Change, Anti-Capitalism, Systemic Change*

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*I would like to recognize my and the University of Victoria's presence on Lekwungen and WSÁNEĆ territory. The exploitation of First Nations peoples through colonization and at the hands of the Canadian state has delivered the foundation for systems and institutions from which I as a settler-Canadian continue to benefit, and is intrinsically linked to ongoing environmental and climate justice struggles. I recognize that I am coming to speak of justice from a place of privilege. My hope is to do this research with the utmost respect for the people, lands, and resources where I have made home.*

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# CHAPTER 1: Introduction

## OBJECTIVE & RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

This research explores how the fossil fuel divestment movement is integrating climate justice approaches into campaigns at Canadian universities. Of particular interest is how a new generation of environmental organizers, politically participating through divestment, are navigating the debate between system maintaining or reforming and system transforming change (Bratman et al, 2016). The overarching objective of this study is to consider how the fossil fuel divestment movement, through the emergence of climate justice approaches (CJA) in campaigns, might affect the orientation of mainstream environmentalism. To do so I investigate how fossil fuel divestment campaigns articulate climate justice as a concept or frame for social, political and economic analysis, and how organizers are operationalizing climate justice through campaign strategy and movement building practices. To this end, the guiding research questions are:

- (1) How do fossil fuel divestment movement participants and campaigns understand climate justice as an ideology and praxis? How are climate justice approaches developed and spread?
- (2) Is there demonstrable support for transformational politics within the movement? Are divestment organizers' climate justice approaches transformational in nature?
- (3) Is the incorporation of climate justice in divestment campaigns reflective of a more critical, intersectional, or transformational environmental movement? Does it address critiques of mainstream environmentalism?

(4) Are climate justice approaches significant for student organizing in divestment? What impact do organizers think the divestment movement is having? Which outcomes do they see as being the most significant?

This research on divestment is a window through which to view how climate justice approaches are being developed, deployed and expanded within the environmental movement, and offers a new site to investigate critiques of mainstream environmentalism.

The practical objective of this research project is to reflect back to campaigns how organizers are implementing a range of climate justice approaches. During the research interviews it became clear that despite a common language of “climate justice”, the meanings attributed to this concept and movement varied between individuals. Thus, my account of climate justice approaches aims to help organizers clarify the use and improve a collective understanding of this term. In doing so, as organizers engage in conversations about what it means to mobilize for climate justice, they can decide when it is strategically advantageous to centre transformational approaches in the movement. This account is not prescriptive in defining climate justice, rather, by articulating the range of perspectives within the movement I hope to provide useful reference material that can help campaigns improve communication, learn from each other and address tensions when perspectives conflict. To this end, this thesis will be made widely available to campaigns and the insights generated will be made available to organizers through additional public-facing adaptations of the thesis.



## PROBLEM & CRITICAL CONTEXT:

### *Critiques of Mainstream Environmentalism in North America*

#### *Eurocentric Constructions of Nature & Ongoing Colonialism*

The mainstream environmental movement in North America has been repeatedly critiqued by academics, activists and Indigenous communities for not being attentive enough to questions of justice and equity. Environmentalism established in the traditions of conservation and preservation has perpetuated culturally constructed ideas of wilderness as ecosystems unmarred by human intervention (Cronon, 1995; Guha & Martínez-Alier, 1997). Sundering the fundamental connection between human culture and the natural environment is a conceptual strategy underpinning worldviews that glorify human dominance over nature (as well as women and people of colour) and promote exploitation of resources for human development (Mies, 1998; Moore, 2015; Watts, 2013).

For example, both US and Canadian National Parks institutions, a foundational success of the preservation movement, are deeply embedded in attitudes about pristine nature that prioritize access to the economically advantaged and displace, erase, or fetishize Indigenous peoples (Jago, 2017; Nadasdy, 2005). A year-long promotion by Parks Canada for the state's 150th birthday, which issued passes granting free access to national parks, recently sparked discussion in news media about the connection between government established parks and colonization. In one such article, Jago (2017) scrutinizes the celebratory depiction of a Canadian national identity rooted vast "wild" landscapes by highlighting examples across the country where Indigenous lands have been appropriated for parks and protected areas. The National Post likewise published an article called "The shady past of Parks Canada" (Hamilton, 2017), in which the reporter describes the history of displacing Indigenous peoples from park land while also parading First Nations culture

for tourists. In fact, the blatant promotion of white supremacist ideology by Madison Grant, a “founding father” of US National Parks and the Wildlife Conservation Society, also continues to make headlines (Mock, 2016). Nadasdy (2005) argues that environmentalism has capitalized on Indigenous sustainability to mobilize conservation and preservation campaigns, yet remains a Eurocentric approach that fails to centre or accurately represent Indigenous perspectives. Today, relationships between Indigenous communities and environmental organizations reflect the complex and sometimes fraught history of opportunistic alliances (Davis, 2009), even as strides towards more genuine partnerships and reconciliation are taking place.

#### *Exclusion of Racialized, Marginalized Communities & ENGO Inaccessibility*

Environmental justice scholars have critiqued the mainstream environmental movement for inadequately addressing issues of racism, as well as failing to inspire support from rural or working-class communities (Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007; Schwarze, 2007). Robert Bullard (2014), whose groundbreaking research helped establish the field of environmental justice, argues that environmental organizing is often inaccessible to communities contending with poverty, racism, and other forms of structural violence or oppression. Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts (2009) also specifically call out “the history of excluding people of colour from leadership of the ecology movements” (p.407). However, they note the growing involvement of people of colour in environmental organizing since the emergence of justice-based frameworks and point to a number of prominent environmental justice community networks as proof that an equity-based approach is resonating with marginalized communities. Bullard’s solution is an inclusive environmentalism that recognizes these systemic injustices while fighting environmental

problems, asking “how can *environmental justice* be incorporated into the campaign for environmental protection?” (Bullard, 2014, p.238).

Debate continues within the environmental justice discourse about the merit of mainstream environmental groups adopting environmental justice frameworks versus continuing to operate within known fields of influence (Mohai, Pellow, & Roberts, 2009). The mainstream environmental movement has helped shift social paradigms to reduce pollution and improve recycling, and pushed for game-changing environmental legislation like the US Clean Air Act and the Endangered Species Act. Environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) have been instrumental in winning campaigns for environmental protection, conservation and awareness, but historically most have not challenged broader economic and sociopolitical systems within their public discourse. The reputation and resources of large ENGOs allows them to play a leading role when participating in environmental discourse and policy development, including how the problem of climate change is framed and what solutions are imagined to be feasible. More critical wings of the environmental movement have condemned compromises made by elite ENGOs that focus much of their energy on building industry and political alliances (Bond, 2012). Bond and Dorsey (2010) add that grassroots and elite ENGO campaigns, even when framed as climate justice, differ in their strategic approach to political influence; while elite ENGOs lobby major governments, organizations, and think tanks made accessible by their size and clout, grassroots campaigns focus on community-based interventions.

### *Green Growth & Sustainable Development Paradigms*

Mainstream environmentalism has generally operated within a sustainable development paradigm that pursues “green growth” and environmentally ethical consumption (Dale, Mathai &

Oliveira, 2016; Guha & Martínez-Alier, 1997; Magdoff & Bellamy Foster, 2011). Longstanding academic conversations within eco-socialist and Marxist traditions seek to debunk these “green growth” solutions as unable to address environmental externalities indispensable to neoliberal capitalism (Dale et al, 2016; Klein, 2015; Magdoff & Bellamy Foster, 2011). Elite ENGOs have a history of supporting policy mechanisms like carbon markets that have been extensively critiqued for not addressing the role of capitalism in perpetuating climate change (see: Bond, 2012; Klein, 2015; Magdoff & Bellamy Foster, 2011; Mohai et. al, 2009). Climate justice groups tend to resist this type of solution because energy-pricing mechanisms that increase costs have disproportionately detrimental impacts on marginalized low-income communities (Schlosberg & Collins, 2015) and do not address systemic roots of exploitation in capitalist economies (Bond, 2012; Klein, 2015; Magdoff & Bellamy Foster, 2011).

For its many gains in the protection of ecosystem and human health, the mainstream environmental movement has come up short on addressing systemic challenges like colonialism, racism, and the inequality and environmental externalities produced by neoliberal capitalism. In line with the criticisms levelled above, and attuned to the unique context of Canadian environmental movements, political ecologist Bruce Braun (2002) articulates a vision for a robust and critical environmentalism that broadens our conception of nature and environment. Writing over fifteen years ago, he calls for an environmental movement that “recognizes the intertwining of social, cultural, technological, and ecological relations in the worlds we inhabit...[with] an effort to dismantle relations of domination set in place during European colonialism, but that continue to infuse the so-called post-colonial present.” (Braun, 2002, p.10). Now, sixteen years after Braun published this insight, has the environmental movement made progress towards such a vision?

This research considers whether divestment, as a flashpoint in environmental organizing and through the inclusion of climate justice approaches, addresses these critiques of mainstream environmentalism. As the extracurricular occupation of thousands of young people concerned with climate change, the fossil fuel divestment movement represents an important and revealing moment of contention. Many young people engaged in divestment have already taken leadership roles in other environmental campaigns, and worldviews influenced by their divestment campaign experiences will likely continue to contribute to the direction of broader environmental discourse.

When this research project began, academic literature on fossil fuel divestment was sparse, with very few scholars considering divestment in a social movement context. Over the course of writing this thesis new work has since emerged that explores the social, political, and movement contexts of divestment, but as Mangat, Dalby, and Paterson (2018) note, “systematic analysis of the movement by social scientists is still in its infancy. So far most of the literature that discusses divestment limits the analysis to narrow economic questions” (p.188). In the conclusion of this thesis I respond to developing scholarship on divestment that emerged after my empirical research was complete, and thus couldn’t be directly incorporated into my study design. I suggest that qualitative study and community-engaged research that helps demonstrate the social impacts of divestment can add nuance to evaluations of the movement’s success, which are most often framed in quantitative terms (dollars divested or emissions reduced).

## *Divestment: The Movement, Arguments, Tactics and Strategy*

### *The Movement*

The fossil fuel divestment movement began as a response to the pervasive influence of the fossil fuel industry that organizers believed was delaying political action on climate change (McKibben, 2013). The first fossil fuel divestment campaign was initiated in 2011 at Swarthmore College. A year later divestment campaigns began to spread rapidly in North America, calling on institutions of public trust to divest from companies with the largest holdings of fossil fuel reserves; reserves that, if extracted and burned, would cause the world to drastically surpass its emissions reduction targets and increase global warming well beyond two degrees celsius (Grady-Benson & Sarathy, 2015; Muttitt et al., 2016). Bill McKibben's "Do the Math" national campus tour provided the impetus for mass student organizing. Its messaging was concise, simple, and implicated the fossil fuel industry for neglecting climate science. The tour publicized the calculations first made by the Carbon Tracker Initiative that, at the time of publication, 80% of the industry's known fossil fuel reserves (already incorporated in the growth and profit margins of fossil fuel companies) must stay unburned to avoid surpassing the (then) two-degree threshold for irreversible climate change (Leaton, Ranger, Ward, Sussams, & Brown, 2013). The most common 'asks' of divestment campaigns are (1) a freeze on any new fossil fuel industry investments, (2) divestment from the top 200 public companies with the largest holdings of fossil fuel reserves, and (3) increased transparency around university investment procedures<sup>2</sup>.

Many hundreds of fossil fuel divestment campaigns have been launched around the world at educational and other institutions to form a well-networked social movement (Hallward &

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<sup>2</sup> The first two campaign 'asks' are based on 350.org language and consistent throughout the movement. The third is generally more responsive to the circumstances of the campaign. It is important to recognize that campaign 'asks' or demands of the institution are not synonymous with campaign *goals*.

Shaver, 2012). The popularity of divestment on campuses across North America, and later too in parts of Europe, has built a base for escalating the global divestment movement and shaping the dominant divestment narratives. There are currently over 850 commitments to divest made by institutions around the world (Fossil Free, 2017).

Fossil fuel divestment campaigns have been present at Canadian universities for nearly six years. A number of early campaigns came out of Power Shift 2012 in Ottawa, a youth climate justice conference organized by the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition. There have been thirty-seven active campus campaigns in Canada to date (Sustainability and Education Policy Network, 2016). In February 2017, l'Université Laval announced it would shift its endowment fund away from fossil fuel energy, making it the first university in Canada to commit to full divestment. There have also been a number of significant decisions moving toward divestment, including partial divestments at Concordia University, the University of Ottawa, and Simon Fraser University (Maina et al., 2016). Divestment proposals have been rejected by administrations at: Dalhousie University, McGill University, the University of Toronto, the University of British Columbia<sup>3</sup>, the University of Calgary, Queen's University, the University of Victoria (Maina et al., 2016), and the University of Winnipeg. Beyond the university context, notable divestment commitments in Canada include the United Church of Canada (CBC News, August 2015), the Canadian Association of Geographers (Canadian Association of Geographers, 2016) and the Canadian Medical Association (Canadian Medical Association, 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> UBC administration rejected a proposal for divestment from the AMS, but has since initiated a shift of 1% of the university's endowment (\$10 million) to be held in a Sustainable Future Fund that will maintain ESG (environmental, social, and governance) principles and low-emissions investments.

### *Moral and Financial Arguments for Divestment*

The moral argument put forward by the divestment movement is that the fossil fuel industry is culpable in the unethical impacts of climate change. Particularly “bad apples” such as ExxonMobil are culpable for withholding climate change information from the public, funding climate denialism, lobbying against effective climate change policy, and for the environmental or social devastation at sites of fossil fuel extraction (Dunlap & McCright, 2011; Klein, 2014; Rowe et. al, 2017). By investing in these types of companies, universities are complicit in the harm caused by the unethical activity. Divestment also highlights the injustice of how a relatively small number of corporate actors, about 100 fossil fuel companies, have contributed the vast majority of climate change causing emissions (Griffin, 2017), yet these companies continue to hold immense economic and political power.

In calling out corporate culpability, not just states’ differential responsibility for emissions, fossil fuel divestment broke from the mainstream environmental movement’s dominant narrative that prioritized industry as a partner in climate solutions. Mangat, Dalby, and Paterson (2018) consider how divestment leverages different narrative frames in the public discourse, including the fossil fuel industry as a common “enemy”. They make the case that “divestment [has a] role in a distinct re-politicization of climate change through an emphasis on the questions of power, legitimacy, and conflict” (Mangat, Dalby & Paterson, 2018, p.190). By invigorating the climate change narrative in North America with a story of underdog students campaigning for democratic participation in their own institutions and justice through ethical investments, against rich and powerful corporate villains, the fossil fuel divestment movement uses moral authority to target the social license of the fossil fuel industry.



The financial argument for divestment focuses on the “carbon bubble” concept and the risk of stranded assets. Current market architecture allows for fossil fuel reserves to be valued as assets regardless of their global warming potential, and the share value of fossil fuel companies is predicated on the total consumption of their energy reserves. Prevention of catastrophic climate warming above the 2°C limit established by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and embedded in the UNFCCC Paris Agreement requires national governments to legislate a reduction in emissions. Without leaps in carbon capture and storage technology, this means that the remainder of proven carbon reserves must remain unextracted, at which time they would become “stranded assets” (Ansar, Caldecott & Tilbury, 2013; Mercure, Pollitt, Vinuales, et. al, 2018; Rubin, 2016). The carbon bubble refers to the risk of a drastic decrease in share-value of fossil fuel assets following the implementation of emission reduction legislation and transition to renewable energy resources. New macroeconomic analysis suggests that even without additional international policy measures the current technological trajectory of alternative energy will strand fossil fuel assets, with the US, Russia and Canada likely facing the greatest asset wealth loss (Mercure et. al, 2018). This represents a threat to the companies holding those assets, and financial vulnerability for institutions invested in them (Leaton et. al, 2013; Sanzillo, Hipple & Williams Derry, 2018).

In addition to the volatility of the energy resource sector, financial arguments for divestment also draw attention to the profitability of fossil free indexes (Sanzillo et. al, 2018). A growing number of investment firms and banks are offering fossil free portfolio options, many seeking to capitalize on the opportunity to provide new financial packages and products to environmentally minded investors. For example, Vancouver based investment firm Genus Capital, which advertises its fossil free approach, released a report in July of 2016 to promote the

strong performance of their CanGlobe Equity fund (Genus Capital Management Inc., 2017).

Divestment organizers at the University of Victoria were approached in 2015 by financial managers at CIBC that offered to partner in pitching divestment, and their services, to the institution's endowment managers.

Divestment campaigns opportunistically prioritize moral or financial rationales to their strategic benefit. An early strength of divestment was its diverse range of champions, attracting endorsements from traditional economists like Governor of the Bank of England Mark Carney (Shankleman, 2014), to Hollywood celebrity Leo DiCaprio (Pittis, 2015); from religious figures like former archbishop Desmond Tutu, to political leaders, including UN Climate Chief Christiana Figueres and former US President Barack Obama (Fossil Free, 2018). These local and global examples of non-traditional alliances demonstrate how the layers of argumentation in favour of divestment cast a wide net for support. The shared goal of divestment has been ground for interesting partnerships, but it is important to remember that working in coalition for shared goals is different than working in solidarity for shared values. When organizers put forward divestment as a prudent financial strategy, with the intention of reaching beyond those already engaged in climate change conversations, divestment aligns with “green growth” paradigms of mainstream environmentalism. Particularly where climate justice approaches lean towards visions of transformative change, seeking out and leveraging unconventional sympathizers appears to be a deliberate balance between challenging the bounds of climate change conversation, but not so far as to be dismissed as too radical. This tension plays out in many campaigns' internal decisions, but also, where individuals have genuinely different values and understandings of the movement's purpose, this tension gets to the heart of the struggle between radical and reformist currents of environmentalism.

## *The Tactic and Strategic Rationale*

Divestment, as an action, is the process of removing invested funds from a specific industry, sector, place, or company with policies, principles, or actions to which the investor is opposed; and reinvesting in alternatives. Divestment as a social movement uses this *tactic* of economic disincentives to create social or political pressure and weaken the financial viability of unethical institutions, organizations, states, or corporations (Kaempfer, 1987). Divestment *campaigns* seek to do this on a large scale by targeting institutions with relationships of public accountability, in order to shape public discourse and remove the social license<sup>4</sup> of those organizations with undesirable activities or principles (Stephenson, 2013). Universities, museums, foundations, faith groups, professional associations, cities, governments, and corporations can be the targets of divestment campaigns. They typically have large investment portfolios, such as endowment or pension funds, and represent constituents or congregations to whom their actions are accountable (Davis, 2008; Soule, 2008).

While divestment campaigns may have the potential to make investments more volatile or less attractive to other buyers, this is not the primary goal of the fossil fuel divestment movement. Divestment researchers (including prior participants) Bratman, Brunette, Shelly, and Nicholson, (2016) highlight that the *movement* for fossil fuel divestment “aims to transform the discussion of climate change from a technocratic analysis of carbon emissions to a human centred narrative calling for systemic change that is both social and economic” (p.4). Movements like divestment that target corporate and institutional adversaries work strategically by

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<sup>4</sup> Social license refers to the ability of industries or projects to garner support from local communities, stakeholders, or the public in order to avoid potentially costly social risks or conflict. The concept was first articulated by the mining industry in step with shifting sustainable development paradigms (Prno & Slocombe, 2012).

alleviating the top-down pressure that corporations exert on political bodies<sup>5</sup> (Young & Schwartz, 2014). The fossil fuel industry has wielded its economic power as a political force, but by diminishing the social license of its companies divestment aims to make political bodies more open to the social pressure created by civil society movements. When institutions that represent the cultural, intellectual, political and economic foundations of society rescind their financial support they contribute to movement narratives that call into question the ethicality of that investment, and the actor or activity it represents. Universities are key institutions in the formation and maintenance of existing intellectual hegemony and are therefore a crucial site in problematizing fossil fuel capital.

In the 1980s the tactic was exercised by a movement to divest from the regime of apartheid in South-Africa. It not only succeeded in raising international attention to the injustice taking place, but also posed a significant economic threat to the regime. Led predominantly by Black students on US college campuses, Nelson Mandela credited the university divestment movement as a turning point in the anti-apartheid battle (Stephenson, 2013). The Anti-Apartheid Divestment movement has been a touchstone for demonstrating the potential power of the divestment tactic, and in many cases has set a precedent for universities using their investments to address social injury. The success of this movement has been a model for ongoing fossil fuel divestment organizing (Dordi, 2016; Stephenson, 2013).

The fossil fuel divestment movement can best be described as using directed-network campaign model. This hybrid approach combines top-down and grassroots movement building strategies, which Liacas and Mogus (2017) argue has a greater “force amplification”, or, ability

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<sup>5</sup> Though not specifically focusing on divestment, Young and Schwartz (2014) work examines anti-corporate campaigns as strategic leverage in government policy. Young and Schwartz contend that “the growth of [anti-corporate] actions is partly due to the paradox that unelected corporate leaders are often more responsive to protest than elected politicians” (Young & Schwartz, 2014).

to conduct high impact campaigns with less organizing capacity. Top-down direction establishes political goals and frames the issue within a comprehensive movement narrative. Grassroots campaign autonomy allows participants to take ownership, assert their values and worldviews, and enables flexible strategies that address the context and needs of each locality. Divestment literatures often represent fossil fuel divestment with a singular campaign model, but this is a misrepresentation of diverse campaign approaches, strategies and organizer worldviews. The fossil fuel divestment movement's hybrid approach combines the advantages of locally targeted campaigning with the ability to jump scales through national organizing networks and connections to a global movement.

Organizing fossil fuel divestment campaigns on campus creates a common target for concerned young people and proposes specific actions for a winnable, local campaign. Organizers often iterate the importance of taking action at local institutions and communities which they are already a part of; where they can connect with other concerned students and shift from individual lifestyle changes to collective action. An extension of this strategically significant shift towards collective action is the role divestment plays in developing the skills of participants and engaging people in critical conversations about climate change and power, two examples of social impact that will be revisited in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

While Fossil Fuel Divestment began as an outlier to mainstream environmentalism, after six years of movement building and participation in the public dialogue it should now be considered part of the popular climate movement discourse, and no less than a pillar of youth climate organizing. The grassroots or directed-network models of distributed leadership employed through divestment has enabled the movement to contain elements of both mainstream

and radical environmentalism. Participants engage in a dynamic struggle within and between their individual political orientations and the direction of the campaign. One could extrapolate from the popularity of the divestment movement that the priorities, actions, and communications of divestment campaigns similarly contribute to the framing of climate change solution discourse. When campaigns focus primarily on economic arguments for fossil fuel divestment, they reinforce mainstream environmentalism's "green growth" and sustainable development discourse. Many have focused on demonstrating that "fossil free" investing is competitive with, or more profitable than, the performance of portfolios with standard energy investments (see: Trinks, Scholtens, Mulder & Dam, 2018), or the staggering growth of renewable energy industries as alternatives to fossil fuel investments (see: L. Brown, 2015). Some campaigns use these types of arguments more opportunistically in an effort to create inroads with administrations unsympathetic to moral argument alone, while still trying to centre public communication on the ethical imperatives for divestment. Both "green growth" environmentalism and more systemically critical threads are held in tension within the fossil fuel divestment movement, and are being worked through on the ground in campaigns. As divestment is absorbed into the mainstream environmental paradigm, it remains to be seen which, and to what extent, ideas and values from organizers creating the groundswell for fossil fuel divestment will be translated into mainstream environmental consciousness.

## RESEARCH METHODS & METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH:

### *Methodology: Movement-Relevant Theory & Engaged Research*

The relationship between social movements and scholarship can be a mutually beneficial one. However, at times the needs and interests of movements have not been adequately represented in the academic study of social movements. Schlosberg and Collins (2015) observe, "as much as their interests and ideas overlap, these theorists rarely cite movements, and movements do not commonly refer to academic journal articles to clarify their positions" (p.365). In the book titled "Learning Activism: The intellectual life of social movements" Choudry (2015) frames his investigation by sharing the following reflection: "Social, political and environmental activist movements can best be understood if we engage with the learning, knowledge, debates, and theorizing that go on within them" (p. xii). This project has been conducted as an exercise in Movement-Relevant Research, a methodological approach that values contributing both to social movement theory and to the movements themselves (Bevington & Dixon, 2005).

Literature discussing the state of knowledge production in Social Movement Studies recognizes the tendency to overextend structural and theoretical claims, and in response, proposes a shift to research that supplies movements with information most relevant and useful to participants' work (Flacks, 2004; Bevington & Dixon, 2005). Bevington and Dixon (2005) assert that researchers invested in the movements they study are likely to be diligent in producing accurate and high quality research. Movement-engaged researchers are not likely to shy away from criticism or challenging movement norms because they have a stake in ensuring that the most accurate information is available. Choudry (2015) reflects that "many people tend to see activism as action/practice that is somehow separate from learning, education, theory and

theorizing. Knowledge production and research were seen as things that happen elsewhere - in schools, colleges, and universities” (p.7). Bevington and Dixon (2005) also focus on the importance of recognizing activist-produced theory as a valuable resource for informing social movement and other academic studies. My personal experience campaigning for divestment at Dalhousie and the University of Victoria allows me to connect within the network of divestment organizers, understand their research needs, and to relate activist theory with critical political economy, socio-political theory and social movement studies.

### ***Movement Contributions***

This research considers questions of strategic value for movement organizers. Given the high student turnover in campus-based campaigns, understanding what about fossil fuel divestment draws and engages students is crucial to maintaining the movement’s momentum. While not prescriptive, it is my hope this research helps organizers connect their work to broader struggles for climate justice and articulate the significance of the divestment movement for peers, decision-makers, and the public. Cross-movement case studies also help campaigns address knowledge gaps and learn from each other about how to overcome shared challenges.

The development of this project has been the result of ongoing conversation and collaboration with participants of the divestment movement. Sharing back the results of this thesis with research participants is a priority. After the thesis is complete I will consult with divestment organizers to determine how best the work of this project can reach and support campaigns. Potential follow-up projects include compiling a ‘research debrief’ that synthesizes lessons learned across campaigns, writing public articles, or working with campaigns through presentations and webinars. Several interview participants commented that the interview process



was a positive experience that challenged them to reflect thoughtfully on the movement and their role. Based on this feedback I have made my interview questions broadly available to participants, and will be developing them into a facilitation guide for strategy retreat workshops.

### ***Role of the Researcher***

There is a tendency to frame divesting as a bold political act, without recognizing that ongoing support for the status quo is also a political position. A similar assumption is often made about research bias, such that where the positionality of the researcher is ignored, they and the research are presumed to be impartial. I challenge the assumption that social movement research should (or can) be an a-political process. Rather, I think that one's political stance should be made explicit in their research - from which the reader can interpret the findings with full knowledge of the author's, too often unstated, positionality. Here I seek to recognize that my personal experience campaigning for fossil fuel divestment has contributed to my research with the belief that the project is not compromised by my connections to the movement, but strengthened by the depth of experiential understanding, the critical analysis employed to evaluate the merits and weaknesses of our work, and the desire to seek and speak truths. Participation has granted me access to knowledgeable networks and resources, and to shared internal institutional knowledge of the movement.

I was first introduced to fossil fuel divestment in the fall of 2013 and became involved in Divest Dalhousie shortly thereafter. I organized with the Dalhousie campaign during my undergraduate degree, and continued to participate in divestment organizing at the University of Victoria. While I have treated this research project as a separate work from my community organizing and climate justice advocacy, I disclose my connection with this movement to

promote trust and accountability with the readers and participants of this research. While my history of involvement and personal relationships with divestment organizers grants me privileged access to networks of youth campaigning for divestment, I have followed all necessary ethical requirements to avoid any power-over relationships with research participants.

This work has also been an ongoing process of self-reflection on my own worldview and experiences, through which I have considered how my personal networks, in concert with elements of the research design, like snowball sampling, may affect the prevalence of certain perspectives among participants. In many ways the stories shared by interviewees paralleled my experience and personal development. I accept that through critical reflection during my analysis I began to understand my own experiences through the lens of my research, though I did not set out to share experiences that mirrored my own. Not all experiences are contained in this work, but I have done my best to do justice to the reflections shared by interview participants. The stories that emerged merit sharing, and the themes I have focused on are the result of the fields knowledge I am versed in, pressing discussion within the climate and divestment movements, and those topics which were observably exciting or meaningful to interviewees.

In doing research that focuses on issues of oppression and injustice it is also vital that I reflect on my role as a woman of European-settler descent. I seek to understand the impact and harm of historic and ongoing socio-cultural and environmental dislocation through colonization. My privilege and lived experience influence the way I understand these lessons, and I acknowledge that I am ill prepared to do effective or truly decolonial research at present. Divestment organizers are similarly confronting privilege and questions about practicing decolonization in environmental social movements. While these efforts are often inadequate, I have seen divestment campaigns act as an entry point to better understanding these relations.

Everyone in the Canadian state has been called on by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report to grapple with the colonial present; my aspiration is also to do better. I recognize that I am a beneficiary of these systems of injustice, including through the resources provided to me to complete this master's research from the government of Canada and the University of Victoria. I endeavour to do this work with respect for all those who have been generous in sharing their knowledge with me, all that I do not know and all that I am still learning.

### ***Research Methods***

This project uses data collected through semi-structured interviews with movement organizers, and ongoing observation of the movement at large. I elected to conduct three major case studies at universities across Canada with well-established divestment campaigns in order to capture multiple perspectives within a shared campaign experience, as well as an overarching picture of the national divestment narrative. The three universities are the University of British Columbia, the University of Toronto, and Dalhousie University. These campaigns have been some of the early leaders in the Canadian divestment movement, and each has received a response from their university administration. All administrations eventually rejected the campaign divestment proposals. Given the unique bureaucratic structure of each institution, different options remain available for the campaigns, which are now in different phases of responding. The three case studies selected face different institutional challenges and also express variety in their organizing structures. All campaigns contend with high-pressure strategy discussions, internal group dynamics, and varying priorities around allyship and escalation. Each of my selected cases represent a large and highly reputable university within the east, central, and western regions of Canada. Furthermore, each institution has environmental science or

sustainability undergraduate and master's level programs and has taken other measures to address climate change on campus - often used to foster a reputation for environmental or sustainability leadership.

Completing this research within the timeline of an MA thesis poses restrictions on the scope and depth of this project. For this reason, I focus solely on divestment campaigns at post-secondary institutions in Canada. University campuses were the primary site for mobilization and escalation during the divestment movement against South Africa's apartheid regime (Gosiger, 1986; Soule, 1996; Soule 2008), and this similarly appears to be the case for fossil fuel divestment, which has become the fastest growing divestment movement to date (Rowe et al., 2016).

The objective of engaging with movement participants is to capture the depth of Climate Justice understandings through personal accounts, while also considering the variation in perspectives across the movement. I sought and received approval to conduct interviews from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board prior to seeking participants<sup>6</sup>. Recruitment was based on participant interest in response to an introductory message sent to each of the major case study campaign's Facebook page or email address. Follow up messages were sent to initial respondents and snowball sampling methods were used until five interviews had taken place with each case study campaign. I prioritized participants that allowed me to observe the campaign from its inception to current form.

I supplement the three cases with expertise from national divestment coordinators at 350.org and Fossil Free Canada of the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition, and additional reflections from Divestment organizers at Mount Allison, McGill, the University of Victoria, and

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<sup>6</sup> See Annex I for Application for Human Research Ethics, including further details on recruitment process, resources, participant consent.

the University of Winnipeg. Expanding my sample data beyond the three major cases has ensured that the research considers nationally relevant themes and engages with divestment on a movement scale. Focusing on the personal stories of organizers at UBC, UofT and Dalhousie captures a comprehensive picture of what takes place in a campus campaign through the values, lessons, and ideas about climate solutions from young leaders of the climate movement. I asked organizers about their experiences, motivations for organizing, analytical understandings of climate justice and practices used to operationalize those understandings. The interview questions were organized around themes of 1) general information and introductions to divestment, 2) climate justice as ideology and praxis, 3) internal campaign dynamics and strategy. The semi-structured interview guide can be found in Annex II.

Case study interviews were transcribed, coded using NVivo software, and analyzed in concert with observations of group practices and public campaign material. To avoid limiting the observable themes, I began by open coding to identify emerging ideas within the transcripts.

### ***Justification for University Case Studies***

In the face of slow bureaucratic decision-making structures and administrative resistance at universities, students are organizing long-term fossil fuel divestment campaigns engaged in complex strategies and creative escalation (Rowe et al., 2016). Student campaigns also clearly involve Climate Justice Approaches. From my observation, these organizing spaces have been a site of politicization and mobilization for young people that expands their engagement with environmental and social justice work. As a new generation of organizers graduate from divestment, their skills, critical analysis, and leadership hint at potential trends in the next generation of environmental leaders in Canada. These conditions make campus campaigns an

appropriate, timely and interesting site to study climate justice organizing approaches in fossil fuel divestment, and how these approaches may mark new trends in environmentalism writ large. As discussed in the *Role of the Researcher* section, my involvement as a student organizer with Divest Dal and Divest UVic has allowed me to engage with the network of campus organizers and bring a large range of organizer voices into this work.

The role of universities in maintaining intellectual hegemony makes campus fossil fuel divestment all the more important and interesting as a site of contention and resistance. While university relationships with fossil fuel companies occasionally cause controversy, such as the University of Calgary's Enbridge School of Corporate Sustainability (see: Bakx & Haavardsrud, 2015), the growth and closeness of their partnerships is largely normalized or framed as necessary. Campus based divestment organizing provides another window into the corporatization of the university as a public institution under neoliberalism<sup>7</sup> (McGray & Turcotte-Summers, 2017). Divestment helps reveal the problematic reliance on endowment and other investment incomes to maintain university functions, raising the stakes for institutions breaking from status quo investment norms. Universities beholden to the success of fossil fuel corporations raises important questions about the ability of these public institutions to act democratically where interests conflict. Divestment is uniquely good at localizing struggles against corporate power by leveraging institutional endowments against fossil fuel capital. In doing so, it has at times revealed surprisingly close-knit relationships between the fossil fuel

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<sup>7</sup> My perspective is informed by David Harvey's (2005) definition of neoliberalism, which includes an ideological framework that privileges individual freedoms and responsibilities, strong private property rights, and a highly competitive labour market, regulated to maximize capital accumulation. Universities and other public institutions face greater financial uncertainty under policies that aim enforce a neoliberal politic through restricted public spending. To address their financial constraints, universities must secure funds through additional means, and often rely on solutions that reinforce neoliberal primacy. A few examples include: increasing tuition, competitive recruitment campaigns for high-paying international students, private donations, and corporate partnerships.

industry and university faculties or administrations, such as that between Dalhousie University and Shell Canada which is further discussed in chapter three.

## CHAPTER 2: Climate Justice Approaches in Fossil Fuel Divestment

### INTRODUCTION:

In this chapter I argue that the fossil fuel divestment movement is addressing critiques of mainstream environmentalism through climate justice approaches (CJAs), especially where organizers seek transformational change. I demonstrate that while CJAs are influential across the divestment movement, there is some variation in the meaning that organizers ascribe to climate justice. Drawing on interviewees' definitions and perspectives, I offer a detailed account of how organizers understand climate justice and undertake building it into their campaigns. My findings indicate that CJAs encompass modificational<sup>8</sup> and transformational change-seeking perspectives, which reflect a spectrum of reformist and radical political orientations. There is a general recognition within the movement that core organizers across campaigns hold radical political positions, but divestment also maintains space for modificational climate justice perspectives.

This research affirms for organizers that transformational climate justice perspectives are prominent within the movement leadership<sup>9</sup>, despite the movement's more reformist public appearance. Thus, it could be argued that they have power to gain ideological hegemony by further pushing the ideological envelope in internal debates about strategy, and have the movement even better reflect their transformative values publicly. Alternatively, it could be argued that a more ideologically broad understanding of climate justice is valuable for attracting new or non-radical people to divestment whose sense of political agency can evolve. This

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<sup>8</sup> See justification for term on page 47 in "Justification Climate Justice as an Organizing Approach" section.

<sup>9</sup> I did not conduct a movement-wide survey, but my research suggests intersectional climate justice perspectives and anti-capitalism are both widespread among Canadian student organizers. When I asked participants if critiques of capitalism were present in their campaigns, in almost every case organizers used the question as a springboard to comment on the ideological orientation of their campaign, and to offer their personal perspective on capitalism. Seventy-three percent of participants thought that critiques of capitalism were ideologically important to their campaigns. The same number articulated anti-capitalist views personally.



presents an opportunity to usher young people with more modificational perspectives through the campaign process in a way that activates critical thinking about systemic issues so that they move towards more transformational climate justice positions. Affinity for climate justice, even if reformist in nature, can be embraced as a precondition to moving people along the spectrum towards a more radical environmental politics. A flexible or inclusive climate justice narrative within fossil fuel divestment also maintains a space for conversation between radicals and reformists, and for students who are being exposed to climate justice concepts for the first time. These strategic decisions about approaches to climate justice are a manifestation of ongoing debates in broader organizing between the strategies of growing a broad movement with softer messaging versus speaking with a bold and unified, but potentially smaller, voice. Divergent CJAs have at times been a source of tension for organizers working through these ideas in their divestment campaigns, but it is important to remember that there is not one right answer because every campaign must respond strategically to their local context, politics, and resources.

As organizers carry the banner of “Climate Justice” and use CJAs to inform strategy, how this buzzword is defined and understood matters. Adding conceptual clarity to the range of climate justice iterations and organizing practices should help organizers navigate conversations where priorities may conflict, and to help avoid misunderstandings. The tensions that arise from organizers divergent interpretations are often overlooked, but represent the contested terrain of climate justice.

The length of responses, depth of reflection, and observable enthusiasm of interviewees when discussing climate justice was a clear indication of the important role it plays in bringing people into divestment, keeping them committed to the campaign, and defining the goals and strategy of the movement. I contend that, as a major site of politicization for young people

turning to environmental activism, the ideologies and approaches that define young people's experience with organizing for fossil fuel divestment will have significant impacts for the broader environmental movement in Canada. Specifically, mobilizing CJAs within divestment campaigns has helped accelerate a shift towards a justice-based orientation in the mainstream North American environmental movement (in line with leading Indigenous resurgence movements).

Environmental Justice scholars Schlosberg and Collins (2015) note in the final reflection of an extensive Climate Justice literature review, "ultimately, neither academics nor policymakers can comprehend the meaning of climate justice without understanding the long and pluralistic history of the social movements that have developed the concept over the past decades" (p.370). Thus, I situate my account of CJAs by tracing the development of the international Climate Justice social movement that was both responding locally to climate change impacts and internationally to the glacial pace of top-down political action. While other bodies of literature assess climate justice in philosophy and debate the definition or interpretation of climate justice in law (Schlosberg & Collins, 2015), I focus the subsequent section on the story of the Climate Justice movement. This is in part because of the interplay between divestment and the Climate Justice movement writ large, and also because the concept of climate justice in my research is similarly constructed from grassroots movement perspectives.

## REVIEW OF CLIMATE JUSTICE MOVEMENT LITERATURE:

### *Climate Change as an Equity Problem and the Movement for Climate Justice*

Climate change is a wicked problem. One that is complex, multi-scale and uncertain, where stakeholders and decision-makers deal with conflicting values, and with innumerable possible pathways for redress but no one solution (Rittel, 1972 in Buchanan, 1992). When it comes to tackling climate change the type of solution developed depends on the scope and framing used to understand the problem. While mainstream environmentalism has traditionally framed climate change as a problem of greenhouse gas emissions, wherein CO2 accounting and a shift to “green” economic growth would provide a win-win for all (Bond, 2012; Klein, 2015; Magdoff & Bellamy Foster, 2011), a climate justice approach frames climate change as an ethical, political, social and economic issue with interconnected causes and solutions. Put another way, Angus (2010) offers in his book “The Global Fight for Climate Justice” that:

The climate crisis involves profound issues of political, economic, and social justice, issues that cannot be resolved without equally profound changes in the political, economic, and social systems that are causing the crisis. They expose the profound injustices that makes the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people suffer for the crimes of the richest nations and the biggest corporations. They insist that we must view global warming as an issue of oppression, exploitation, and injustice. (p.11)

The exact origins of climate justice concepts in grassroots organizing are difficult to determine<sup>10</sup>, but the social movement for climate justice is deeply linked to environmental racism

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<sup>10</sup> The term ‘climate justice’ first appeared in academic literature in the early 1990s, but academics, policy makers, elite environmental organizations, and grassroots organizers apply different definitions to climate justice. Academic

and Civil Rights organizing practices (Schlosberg & Collins, 2015). Climate justice was not only embraced by environmental groups and Civil Rights activists, but also by participants from the occupational health and safety movement, the Indigenous land rights movements, and public economic justice movements (Faber & McCarthy, 2003). The term became popular in international climate politics at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change's 6th Conference of the Parties (COP) (Schlosberg & Collins, 2015, in reference to O'Neill). At this time "climate justice" was used as a rallying cry for nations to address their differential responsibility for climate change based on historical emissions. The establishment of climate justice groups during international UN Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations advanced certain principles as central to grassroots climate justice work and began to unify equity-based movement activism. Vishwas Satgar, professor of International Relations and Climate Justice activist, described the movement as a response to the crisis of global leadership at COP, where too much ground was being ceded to green capitalist responses. While speaking at the University of Victoria's Corporate Mapping Project Summer Institute, he discussed how climate justice principles and practices developed from the COPs were translated into domestic contexts, and that the framework added robust support to grassroots analysis and calls for a *just* transition away from fossil fuels. Climate Justice Now! was the foremost ENGO voice of climate justice and at COP13 articulated four demands: leaving fossil fuels in the ground, financial transfers from Global North to Global South based historical responsibility for ecological debt, food and land sovereignty for vulnerable communities, and a critique of pure market-based climate change policies (Climate Justice Now!, 2007). Environmental justice

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discourse has generally focused on (1) how climate change violates human rights to life, health and sustenance, (2) international responsibility based on historical contributions to climate change, or (3), as became popular in philosophy of law, the legal definition and interpretation of 'justice' in environmental contexts (Schlosberg & Collins, 2015).

principles like transparency and inclusive participation may have been organizational values, but they were not articulated in the demands brought to the international negotiating table at the time. However, Chawla (2009) notes that the lobby of large-scale climate justice organizations present at UN climate negotiations has continued to grow, and that participation of marginalized groups in environmental decision-making processes has also become more diverse.

Much of the Climate Justice movement leadership has come from groups in the Global South on the frontlines of climate change impacts. Central to a climate justice perspective is the understanding that those who suffer most from the consequences of climate change are often those who have contributed least to the problem and have lesser decision-making power in matters of mitigation or adaptation (Tokar, 2014). To this end, Tokar (2014) states:

The outlook known as climate justice is rooted in vulnerable communities around the world that have for many years experienced severe and destabilizing climate-related disruptions to their lives and livelihoods... Climate justice embodies the fundamental understanding that those who contribute the least to the excess of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the Earth's atmosphere consistently and disproportionately experience the most severe and disruptive consequences of global warming, and are often the least prepared to cope with its consequences. (p.25)

Climate Justice foregrounds the intersectional impacts of climate change, such that factors of race, class, gender, and nationality interact to amplify those impacts, and that the injustices of climate change are connected to broader systems of colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and neo-liberal capitalism (Mohai et al., 2009; Bullard, 2014; Klein, 2015; Magdoff & Bellamy Foster, 2011). An analysis of social and political power relations is critical to this

perspective. Implicating structural inequality and systemic oppression in the problem definition of climate change implies the need for transformative system change (Satgar, 2017).

Chawla (2009) says that because climate change exacerbates existing socio-economic inequalities, self-organized campaigns occur sporadically in response to local issues. Schlosberg and Collins (2015) point to examples like Hurricane Katrina as a flashpoint moment where a climate justice analysis was applied, and communities began to mobilize as part of the global Climate Justice movement. They also discuss how tensions often develop between already established environmental organizations and new Climate Justice groups because of differences in organizational style and the types of solutions emphasized by each. Fossil fuel divestment, one of a growing number of directed-network campaigns, can be seen occupying a middle ground that uses both established ENGO frameworks and grassroots movement building to create change. Where fossil fuel divestment targets high-level institutions and industries it reflects traditional ENGO methods, but, where CJAs are important to organizers, the on-the-ground organization and allyship efforts of divestment campaigns align with grassroots Climate Justice.

Grounding climate change campaigns in principles of equity is not only an approach to climate change and environmental action with ethical considerations, but also has strategic significance. Faber and McCarthy (2003) maintain that the most important outcome of Climate Justice movement coalitions is building community, increasing community capacity, and facilitating community empowerment. An accessible and inclusive environmentalism that can bring on-side many societal factions is also argued to be necessary leverage for swift and far-reaching political action on climate change (Bond, 2012). With this view, building diverse collective power within the environmental movement is not just an ideal, but essential for climate change solutions. However, it is difficult to say if the Climate Justice movement is as

coalesced as the literature reviews might suggest, because there is surprisingly little research on tensions within the Climate Justice movement. It is difficult to imagine that discussions and decisions made by the International Climate Justice Network when producing the 2002 Bali Principles would not have been contested and negotiated, even within a movement of allies. With the exception of the literature reviews noted above, most research on the Climate Justice movement makes site specific investigations. Many Climate Justice movement campaigns operate in vastly different local contexts, with different theories of change and ways of organizing. This does not necessarily lead to tension in the broader Movement, but as with any diverse coalition, when strategies and opinions differ there is potential for conflict. For Scandrett (2016),

The ‘organised’ Climate Justice Movement, which has mobilized protests and alternative narratives at international conferences, comprises a wide range of actors... However, there remain problems of cultural negotiation between this Movement, and the local community struggles within the broader climate justice movement, with their own traditions of dissent. (p.482)

While tensions play out within sites of resistance, representations of the movement in the literature generally forward broadly principled narratives that offer inspiring alternatives to the status quo of climate change action. Where the Climate Justice movement challenges concerned citizens to build more just relationships, communities, societies, and political and economic structures, climate justice organizing approaches appear to address the longstanding critiques of the mainstream environmental movement. The broader Climate Justice movement would be fertile ground for further research on tensions between the modificational and transformational climate justice approaches, as seen in divestment, within or across other campaigns.

## *Climate Justice in Canada and Indigenous Resurgence*

Indigenous voices are among the most audible in the global climate justice social movement... [they] call attention to how colonialism and capitalist economies facilitate the role of rich, industrialized countries and transnational corporations in bringing about risky climate change impacts.

(Whyte, 2016, p.9)

Academic and governmental literatures on climate justice often focus primarily on the vulnerability of countries in the Global South, and where the framework of climate justice is applied to understanding vulnerability of Indigenous peoples to climate change, ongoing colonialism is rarely considered (Whyte, 2016). First Nations in Canada are highly susceptible to climate change risks, including Northern communities experiencing escalated warming, communities directly dependent on natural resources for physical or culture sustenance, and communities suffering from other forms of marginalization (such as poverty and systemic racism). Whyte (2016), a Potawatomi scholar, highlights that this vulnerability is not simply a circumstance of geography and culture, but a continuation of “ongoing, cyclical colonialism both because institutions facilitate carbon-intensive economic activities that produce adverse impacts, while at the same time interfering with Indigenous people’s capacity to adapt to the adverse impacts” (p.9). He understands this to be an extension of “nonconsensual and harmful environmental change inflicted on our [Indigenous] societies in the past” (Whyte, 2016, p.8). Climate Justice in Canada is inherently linked to the injustice of colonialism by the state and society.

Leadership from Indigenous communities in Canada has also been largely overlooked in popular scholarship representing the global Climate Justice movement narrative. Indigenous resurgence movements like Idle No More have been critical in increasing awareness about the legacies and ongoing violence of colonization, including how fossil fuel resource extraction and



climate change impacts disproportionately affect First Nations communities.<sup>11</sup> Indigenous peoples are often leading forces in the broader climate movement and most divestment organizers said solidarity with First Nations was integral to climate justice. For Whyte (2016), “Climate justice is a matter of breaking the cyclical history of colonial strategies that interfere with our environmental responsibilities, rights to self-determined adaptation to environmental change and rights to reject industrial capitalist and colonial values” (p.12). However, it would be an oversimplification to directly equate climate justice with indigenous resurgence, reconciliation, or decolonization.

I recognize that this research does not sufficiently incorporate decolonial literatures and approaches, or address the complexity of decolonial climate leadership from Indigenous communities. This thesis is not meant to draw attention away from First Nations climate justice efforts, or to overemphasize the role of divestment in mobilizing CJAs relative to other climate justice movements. Some divestment campaigns are more explicitly tied to decolonial efforts. For example, the University of Winnipeg’s divestment campaign has been organized by a number of Indigenous student leaders, and has promoted its cause with banners such as “No Indigenization without Divestment!”. Moreover, my interviews indicate that climate justice can be an introduction or accessible avenue for Settler-Canadians to engage with decolonization and support First Nations resurgence. Climate justice has many forms and shows up in many ways, divestment is just *one* example; one which I am in a position to contribute analysis.

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<sup>11</sup> Other examples include, but are not limited to, Athabasca Beaver Lake Cree Nation in Treaty 6 territory fighting tar sands expansion in their traditional territory and the Coast Salish Tsleil-Waututh Nation’s efforts to prevent the expansion of the Kinder Morgan pipeline in North Vancouver area.

## FINDINGS:

### *Justification for Climate Justice as an Organizing Approach*

The term *climate justice* is as multifaceted and dynamic as the global movement that shares its name. As I began to analyze how critiques of mainstream environmentalism are being grappled with in divestment campaigns, two things were initially clear. First, climate justice was well aligned with themes found in critiques of mainstream environmentalism. And second, despite widespread recognition that climate justice was significant to divestment organizing, I found that interviewees associated a variety of meanings with the term. Interview participants were asked to explain how they understood climate justice as a concept, what it meant to them, and what organizers did to integrate climate justice into their campaigns (Q8-Q14). Interviewee responses provided the foundation for the description of Climate Justice Approaches (CJAs) and themes. I use the term “climate justice *approach*” to encompass the analytical and operational aspects of climate justice inferred by interviewees. Framing climate justice as an organizing approach, rather than say a lens, captures the diverse constructions of the concept, and connects the theoretical aspects of a justice-based analytical framework to concrete work of achieving an equitable and sustainable world.

Expressing climate justice as a range of approaches helps represent variants of climate justice that lean either towards modificational (system maintaining, system reforming agendas) or transformational (radical, revolutionary, systemic, or counter-hegemonic) change. I use the term modificational change in gesture to reformist politics, and also note Richard Falk’s (1971) description of three different orientations to social change referenced by Bratman, Shelly, Brunette, and Nicholson (2016): system maintaining, system reforming, and system transforming. Bratman et. al (2016) position universities as generally system maintaining or

reforming, and suggest that “the divestment movement is a newly emergent manifestation of a transformational approach to sustainability issues” (p.678). While both modificational and transformational CJAs exist in campaigns, and can work in complement to increase climate justice awareness, differing priorities in their approach to system change can become a source of tension. I provide this analytical account of CJAs in part to inoculate against potential conflicts, but also to put forward a common vocabulary for when conflicts tied to divergent climate justice approaches do occur. It is worth noting that, generally speaking, participants were observably more engaged in discussions of transformative CJAs, compared to responses that tended towards a modificational CJA. When considering that transformational CJAs embed organizer’s analysis in systemic oppression and politicized identities, it is perhaps unsurprising that transformational CJA responses were often very self-reflexive.

### ***Describing Analytical and Operational Approaches to Climate Justice***

Climate Justice Approaches in fossil fuel divestment have both analytical and operational dimensions. Within these classifications, aspects of a CJA can be further deconstructed into (1) analysis, (2) theories of change, (3) campaign strategy, (4) movement building practices. Together these categories represent all the types of information about climate justice shared by participants. By investigating climate justice in this way, the range of discrete interpretations is made visible and discrepancies can be pinpointed to a specific aspect of the CJA.

1. ***Analysis:*** *The scope and problem definition used to analyze climate change.* Climate justice as a frame for analyzing climate change within the context of particular epistemologies, environmental philosophies, and social, political, and economic systems. Climate justice analytical approaches are concerned with social equity and

interactions of power in its analysis. Modificational analysis tends to focus primarily on international differential responsibility for CO2 emissions. Transformational analysis describes climate change as a problem rooted in systems of colonization, capitalism, patriarchy, racism, classism, and intergenerational inequity.

2. **Theory of change:** *Beliefs about how change happens, and how to intervene in order to bring about desired changes.* Theories of change deduce a strategic method for identifying targets (i.e. asks “where does the power lie?”), goals, and what pre-conditions are required to make change. Climate justice analytical approaches imply a theory of change informed by analysis of power and systemic oppression. Continuing the example above, a modificational theory of change might be: *in order to fairly address climate change and differential responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions, the Global North must compensate nations impacted most by climate change damages.* Whereas the following constitutes a transformational theory of change: *in order to address climate change we must undo the systems of power that contribute to its creation.*

Both modification and transformational climate justice analytical applications were described by participants. For example, the following response from Alex H of UBC demonstrates what I consider a modificational climate justice analysis:

When I think of climate justice I usually think of the international picture and the imbalance of the damage of climate change, the imbalance around the world of it largely falling on the backs of the poorest countries and the poorest people. So I think of how we

should be allocating the carbon budget to reflect emissions histories of different countries. (Q8)

Similar responses additionally described climate change as an issue of intergenerational injustice or highlighted domestic inequity for climate change contributions and impacts:

I think within countries there's a massive inequality, you know, where the people who burn the most fossil fuels are not the people who bear the impacts, and the people who bear the impacts are those most marginalized by society in other ways, race and gender, and all the other traditional lines of oppression. And I think that in Canada the Indigenous non-Indigenous divide, which is in part due to sort of locals of living, but also in part due to our willingness to accept environmental impacts on different populations. (Participant, Q8)

Alternatively, Sydney L of UofT shares this analysis, which reflects a transformational analytical approach:

I think [climate justice is] recognizing that the systems and institutions that perpetuate social injustice itself are the same institutions that contribute to climate change, and in order to actually challenge or “solve” climate change you have to recognize the structures that give it its power and contribute to it. Which are systems and institutions that are embedded in patriarchy and capitalism and colonialism. (Q8)

For clarity, I interpret this response not to mean that, for example, colonization *alone* is the direct cause of increased greenhouse gas emissions. That would be too reductive. However, the values, ideologies, and relationships between humans and with nature, working in partnership with other systems of power, created the world we live in; a world in which most functions of modern

existence since the industrial revolution in an industrialized nation contribute to climate change. This type of climate justice analysis, which also highlights internalized and institutionalized intersectional oppression, tends to align with calls for transformational change.

The second dimension of a CJA is how the analysis is operationalized. In essence this asks: *what does climate justice look like in real life? How do movements pursue and practice climate justice?* Operational approaches of climate justice can be logically inferred from organizers' theory of change. The key distinction I make between operational expressions of a CJA are seen in the focus on 'ends' (Campaign Strategy) or 'means' (Movement Building Practices).

3. **Campaign Strategy:** *Prioritizing justice in campaign strategy, tactics, and external actions.* Using climate justice to guide decision-making, goals, and narratives of the movement. For example, prioritizing solidarity actions with impacted communities above efforts to build relationships with administration when the group allocates resources and capacity.
4. **Movement Building Practices:** *Collective practices and organizational norms that prioritize addressing inequity within movement organizing.* Drawing on intersectional analysis as a guide for equity-based organizing structures and (anti-oppression) practices that aim not to recreate the power dynamics that have contributed to climate change. Distributed leadership models, non-hierarchical or horizontal organizing are examples of how campaigns use social justice practices to embody climate justice in their structure. CJA practices might include opening meetings with an acknowledgement of Indigenous territory, consensus based decision making

processes, taking a ‘progressive stack’ where the facilitator holds intentional space and prioritize speaking time for voices who have less often participated in the conversation, etc.

A modificational approach to operationalizing climate justice maintains values of equity and analysis of systems of power, but focuses more on modifying environmental policy to account for inequality; it falls short of calling for system transformations. A transformational approach to operationalizing climate justice aims to unlearn or resist the recreation of structural power relations and systemic oppression. Most interview responses that referenced operational CJAs were more aligned with a transformational approach.

Within the operational dimensions of CJA Campaign Strategy, the importance of solidarity and allyship were strong themes. UofT organizer Amanda HS began with reflections on how marginalized and racialized communities who contribute the least to climate change are often the first and worst affected, but in addition to this analysis she emphasizes to the importance of leadership by marginalized communities:

Recognizing that because those communities are affected [they] need to be the ones that are leading the solutions. So in the Canadian context it's largely Indigenous communities that fit that role. I think that solidarity fits very much in the climate justice framework, supporting the struggles of people who have been directly affected by fossil fuel expansion and infrastructure, and actually listening to what their solutions are. And then also ensuring that our solutions to climate change aren't just remaking the same kinds of injustices, like not having renewable energy infrastructure that is just like fossil fuel

infrastructure in that it's infringing on Indigenous people and not respecting their land rights. (Q8)

Sydney L of UofT said "I see climate justice as being rooted in Indigenous sovereignty. I think a lot of my perspective is based out of my work with the divestment campaign." (Q8). While references to "standing in solidarity with First Nations" were common, a deeper examination of the meaning of Indigenous sovereignty was not taken up in my interviews. The extent to which this type of transformational CJA should be operationalized with campaigns has caused tension within the UofT campaign. For example, another organizer made this distinction when reflecting on the state of CJA in fossil fuel divestment campaigning:

I think one of the interesting things which the term climate justice takes on, which personally is not one that I ascribe to, but one that I've noticed in especially the youth and broader Canadian environmental movement, is essentially the lumping in of climate change with every other environmental issue... it becomes less actually about climate change and more about the direct impacts of mining and fossil fuel extraction, which are legitimate environmental issues, but to me they're not one and the same. They're closely connected, but you can have oil infrastructure that doesn't spill, it happens all the time, you can have a certain type of mining and extraction that do little to pollute the communities around them and can still be atrocious to the climate. (Q8)

These perspectives demonstrate that even when participants agree on the basic values and analysis of a CJA, there are sometimes divergent views on what should be included within the scope of climate justice. This is particularly relevant in the operationalization of climate justice because the distinction between modificational and transformational approaches infer different obligations when it comes to embracing related environmental and justice issues.



Movement building practices, including the skills required to maintain a campaign and work collectively to implement strategy, was another way interviewees often described integrating climate justice into their campaigns. Throughout the interviews it was clear that the skills participants develop through campaigning together are seen as one of divestment's significant social impacts. This includes organizing skills like facilitation, collective decision-making, strategy development, media training, outreach, or how to plan and execute events and actions. A transformative CJA could infer that each of these skills and practices is enacted in a way that considers how to redress traditional lines of injustice. For example, Stephanie G's definition of climate justice illustrates how a CJA is operationalized through movement building practices:

In terms of in finding solutions to climate change, you aren't being problematic and oppressive in doing so. So making sure you're creating a very inclusive movement that's really supporting the voices of people who have been pushed out, and who are continuously pushed out of conversations for so long, and really having their voices lead... I think just looking at the issue of climate in a very holistic way and acknowledging that there are systemic barriers for people who are trying to get involved, and who are trying to have a voice, and who might be trying to be a part of a campaign and things. And that you need to address that. (Q8)

Dalhousie's Simon GS gives an example of how campaigns try and address systemic inequity. He says "Anti-oppression is more like an organizing style, where we acknowledge that if we want to make meaningful change, that change as it occurs, as we do this, as we organize, needs to reflect what we want in the end" (Simon GS, Q18). Of course this is not to say that oppressive power-dynamics do not persist within fossil fuel divestment organizing. Each campaign grapples

with internalized privilege and systems of oppression. Multiple interviewees acknowledged that while justice is the intention of their CJA, it does not play out flawlessly in practice. Divestment, in this way, is just one site that mirrors conversations taking place across social movements pursuing social justice.

Social movements, like the languages and strategies they employ, are fluid, complex and ever adaptive. By giving an account of CJAs, this work provides a snapshot of how divestment organizers in Canada interpret and articulate the meaning of climate justice, and divergences between modificational and transformational currents. Recognizing that the tendency of academics to generate categories is not always analytically helpful and risks distorting the complexity of social movements (Choudry, 2015), this is not intended as a rigid framework or exhaustive criteria for CJAs. Rather, it is my hope that embracing this inclusive reading of CJAs helps in communicating the analysis, values, priorities, and practices of the fossil fuel divestment movement. This investigation makes it clear that CJAs are critical to divestment organizing, and are used to advocate for transformative system change. Divestment reframes climate change action as a collective economic, social, and political issue. Here and throughout this thesis I make the case that through CJAs the movement is grappling with issues of colonization, systemic racism, privilege, and the inadequacy of solutions thus far presented by mainstream environmental sustainability paradigms. While not ubiquitous, and not always successful, CJA examples demonstrate how critiques of mainstream environmentalism are being confronted within the divestment movement.

### *Divestment Campaigns as an Introduction to Climate Justice*

Interviewees were asked where they were first introduced to climate justice concepts, and about any experiences that were critical in shaping or had added depth to their understanding. It became clear that divestment campaigning is a site where CJAs are introduced and developed. Seven of the fifteen participants from the main case study campaigns referenced divestment campaigns as where they initially came to understand climate justice, with an additional two organizers describing that divestment campaigning enhanced their understanding of climate justice significantly towards more transformative perspectives. UofT campaigner Sinead D described how she initially joined the divestment campaign because it espoused climate justice values, whereas few other organizing opportunities on campus had embraced that approach:

I've always been really concerned and interested with climate change, but what drew me to the campaign specifically was the idea of climate justice and the shape that the environmental movement has taken in the last couple of years I would say. So the focus on intersectionality, and the intersections of different injustices and different struggles really drew me to climate change because I saw it as a way of addressing a lot of different issues... (Q3)

Other key sites of introduction to CJA included: Power Shift conferences (4 interviewees), which in the case of Dalhousie was where the idea for a divestment campaign was initially formulated; courses in high school or university (4 interviewees); experience with frontline climate change impacts (4 interviewees); other social movement spaces (3 interviewees); personal research (2 interviewees); and following the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (2 interviewees)<sup>12</sup>. One example of an experience that augments a sense of climate justice

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<sup>12</sup> Note that some participants listed more than one site of introduction to climate justice, hence the overcount of interviewees.

is this reflection on privilege shared by Kate H of UBC when telling a story about protesting the construction of additional fossil fuel infrastructure. She says:

One of the key moments in the evolution of my understanding of climate justice was during the Burnaby Mountain protests against the Kinder Morgan pipeline. I went up with a group of high schoolers, and two of my good friends got arrested. And the way that they were treated when they got arrested was with such care and kindness. And then the next day there were First Nations protesters that were getting dragged away, you know, carried by their arms and legs, and you could just see such a contrast there. And you could see that us, as young white female organizers were being treated with far more compassion than the people from Tsleil-Waututh nation and others who were defending their land. And that was the first time I was really noticing how I held privilege within the climate movement. And how for others this fight was so much harder. So that's when I started to think critically about those issues. (Kate H, Q10)

## DISCUSSION:

### *Climate Justice Critiques of Mainstream Environmentalism*

The findings of this research demonstrate the prevalence of CJAs in Fossil Fuel Divestment, which has been a prominent form of environmental organizing for young people in recent years. The participation of youth who prioritize climate justice within the broader environmental movement is expanding the conceptual construction of environmentalism and pushing on-the-ground practices of the mainstream environmental movement towards social justice. My interviews additionally show that divestment participants are using climate justice

analysis to directly critique mainstream environmentalism. For example, Ben DW shares this reflection:

I think Environmentalism is an ideology that, at least in the West, came out of the idea that nature could be protected, that gardens had benefits, and that didn't challenge the core of the economic system of early and mid-industrial capitalism. Climate justice is different because it problematized industrial capitalism or modern capitalism, and everything that's come with it - from the patriarchy to white supremacy- as what is driving the problem. Whereas environmentalism challenged just the acts of waste of nature. I guess climate justice differentiates what nature is being wasted, and for whom, and by whom. (Q8)

He further suggests that many organizers are brought into the divestment movement out of concern about climate change in line with mainstream environmentalism paradigms, but through campaigning begin to question systems of power in a way they hadn't before. Multiple organizers specifically described how they previously considered themselves environmentalists, but their perspectives and identity shifted after developing a climate justice worldview.

Climate justice was not only applied in critique of the environmental movement, but elicited critical self-reflections on participants' education trajectories, career paths, and personal priorities as related to environmentalism. Simon GS of Divest Dal reflects that when environmental degradation is seen as an attribute of capitalism, as is the case in transformational CJA analysis, pursuing a career in the environmental field can feel insufficient. "Lots of the environmental jobs are consulting jobs, which is making lights go green for industrial development that is either going to hurt the environment in some way or irreparably damage the climate" (Simon GS, Q19). He describes how his work protecting wood turtle habitat in Nova

Scotia feels incompatible with the scale of environmental issues, and in this case does not address colonial dislocation of land. “[Climate justice] spoils you in terms of environmentalism... It’s like ‘oh we’ve protected this piece of land - well that wasn’t our land to begin with’... It almost trivializes some of the mainstream environmental movement” (Simon GS, Q19).

Organizer Kate H at UBCC350 describes the personal transformation associated with learning climate justice perspectives:

I have come to realize that climate justice isn’t just about environmentalism, and environmentalism tends to be a very exclusive and classed movement. And the kind of environmental work that so many people are doing I find tends not to be subversive in that it encourages small scale changes, like behavioural change, planting gardens and encouraging people to recycle, over the kind of systemic large scale changes that we need to see if we are going to actually challenge climate change... climate justice has forced me to think about the privilege that I hold as an organizer, and the ways that I act out that privilege in the work that I do. And within the movement itself, it’s opened my eyes to the fact that we need to be better at standing in solidarity, at being allies to marginalized communities, and at breaking down the structures of colonialism, and patriarchy, and capitalism, that underlie climate change. (Q19)

Power and privilege were common themes in organizers’ discussion of climate justice. UBC campaigner Julie V reflects that there are many “textbook definitions” she could use to define climate justice, but that “it really comes down to where the power is associated with climate change. And what I mean by that is, who has the power? Who has had the power to change the climate, and who now has the power to fix the climate?” (Q8). When organizers frame climate change as a political issue, it is more than an inference that climate change must be

addressed through formal political structures and engagement. Rather, where climate change is deemed ‘political’ through CJA analysis, it refers to the root of politics: that which structures the distribution of power. Connected to these analyses of structural or systemic power is an awareness of privilege. UBC campaigner Alexandra J described climate justice as recognizing that those who aren’t as affected by climate impacts, or who have more power and resources to act, have a “duty to take a role in climate justice and fight for it here, for those marginalized voices and those who can’t” (Q8). Particularly where CJAs lean towards transformational system change, organizers are reflecting on both personal and institutional privilege.

With an awareness of privilege, organizers echo academic critiques of mainstream environmentalism highlighted in the first chapter of this thesis. Sinead D says “historically the environmental movement has been very white” (Q8) and reiterates the focus on setting aside natural spaces that are inaccessible to many people, and a lack of attention to environmental racism or Indigenous rights and sovereignty. This analysis has also been applied to the divestment movement in Canada by organizers, which remains disproportionately white on many demographically diverse campuses. I asked interviewees if they thought their divestment campaign included diverse voices and perspectives, and received mixed responses. While I did not survey participants on their own racial identity, four participants self-identified as persons of colour, Latinx, mixed-race, or Indigenous during our interview. A number of participants also self-identified as white during our interview, and a clear majority of participants in this research are white. It is widely recognized among organizers that the divestment movement should be genuinely inclusive and diverse. But even as organizers aim to understand and challenge systems of power and privilege, those existing systems (in which we are all embedded) can be reproduced within campaigns. This was also recognized by interviewees. To further comment on the overall

demographics of the divestment movement, or make more constructive suggestions, an intentional investigation into this aspect of the movement would be valuable.<sup>13</sup>

As a national divestment campaigner at 350.org, Katie P extends the call for more diversity in divestment to movement-scale representation. While local campaigns get media attention regionally, the national narrative has been dominated by schools that carry conventional prestige - McGill, UofT, and UBC have received the most national coverage. Meanwhile at the University of Winnipeg the divestment campaign has been led by Indigenous youth. Their campaign explicitly connects fossil fuel divestment with Indigenization on campus, reconciliation for First Nations communities, and justice for Indigenous people's the world over where fossil fuel (and other) resources have been extracted at their expense. Kevin S, one of the Indigenous youth leading Divest UWinnipeg and also the former president of the University of Winnipeg Student Association, describes climate justice as doing frontline work and challenging corporations that are disproportionately responsible for climate change. He says:

I think that one of the best tactics in terms of the overall global climate strategy is divestment, and also frontline action. My concept of divestment is that it's a great tool for decolonization. So I also look at this from a decolonial framework- because what happens with colonization is that it separates Indigenous people from the lands, and then it allows for the state or the corporations to take those lands and use them for economic benefit, while the lands and people suffer... so the global divestment movement is good for

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<sup>13</sup> Joe Curnow's work with the UofT campaign provides two excellent examples of exploring systemic power relations in divestment, which I believe requires more depth and engagement than could be done within the scope of this research. In 2017, Jody Chan and Joe Curnow published an analysis of gendered power relations in the UofT campaign, titled "Taking Up Space: Men, Masculinity, and the Student Climate Movement?". This research was mentioned by a number of UofT interviewees, but had yet to be published at the time of my interviews. Curnow, Lila Asher and Amil Davis also published "The limits of settlers' territorial acknowledgements" (2018) based on the UofT campaign, which asserts that the practice of territory acknowledgements in environmental organizing spaces have largely failed as decolonial pedagogy. A similar research approach that considers other forms of intersectional analysis would be very revealing.



challenging corporations. Then frontline action, and encouraging people to get involved with community through frontline action, is part of popular education; taking what you're learning and putting it into practice. (Q8)

As the University of Winnipeg campaign is a leading example embracing CJAs in divestment, more should be done by other campus campaigns to amplify their work and promote the Divest UWinnipeg campaign at the forefront of national narratives.

There are additional ways that the divestment movement could extend its contribution to climate justice. For example, campus divestment organizers could apply their divestment experience in support of Indigenous peoples who have embraced divestment from banks and companies financing fossil fuel expansion and extraction projects as a tactic in solidarity with frontline resistance. I have seen this take place to some extent, but if the divestment movement concentrated its efforts to connect with site specific fossil fuel infrastructure resistance it could further leverage its base of supporters and resources.

### ***Limitations of Divestment Campaigning***

Identifying the current limitations of the divestment movement, and the tactic writ large, is important both in the pursuit of the movement's goals and in negotiating its role within the suite of tools used by climate activists. Interview participants were forthright with their critiques of CJAs in the fossil fuel divestment movement. Sydney L reflected, "I don't actually think that divestment is the best way to achieve climate justice, I think it's a tool for other things" (Q8), noting that other grassroots movements and land-based resistance to fossil fuel infrastructure more directly support climate justice. Operationalizing climate justice appeared to be a point of particular tension in the UofT campaign, but members of other campaigns also shared that they

found putting their climate justice analysis into practice was sometimes difficult in the context of divestment. For example, decisions about how to allocate limited capacity towards solidarity efforts have been a challenge for some groups and revealed divergent priorities when it comes to climate justice. Available funding (if any), organizers' time, external and campaign commitments, and high student turnover are all capacity constraints for a volunteer-based movement. Capacity constraints can make it difficult for groups implementing solidarity strategies because building long-term relationships of trust requires an ongoing commitment to showing up when asked. Campaigns and organizers sometimes grapple with conflicting climate justice priorities, or conflicting interpretations of climate justice, when allocating capacity towards external solidarity, or when deciding to endorse other social justice campaigns that might be connected through their focus on systemic justice issues but not directly connected to divestment or climate change. For many participants, gaps exist between the theoretical understanding of climate justice and having confidence in what it is to *do* 'good' climate justice organizing *in* divestment. These knowledge-practice gaps have been a particular source of tension for groups that do not have a cohesive CJA.

Interviewees expressed greater frustration about scenarios where CJA priorities diverged around campaign strategy, revealing rifts between the modificational and transformational orientations of CJAs. One example that draws out this tension is when campaigns decide which narrative to prioritize in the public discourse. The type of CJA embraced by individual organizers in this case might shape how they would like to see divestment framed, who the target audience is, and who is speaking at an event or represented in the media. Where organizers with a modificational CJA appear to prioritize narratives that address an administration's financial concerns or soft public messaging for broad appeal, organizers with a transformational CJA

appear to prioritize narratives of systemic injustice, or prioritize representation that addresses traditionally unequal relationships of power. For example, during my time at Divest Dal the group put forward a minimum gender parity approach to media and public representation after recognizing that male organizers had participated in most media interactions despite Divest Dal being predominantly comprised of female-identifying organizers at the time.

While one strategy emphasizes the value of inviting publics not conventionally engaged in social justice struggle, with the aim of introducing them to divestment's climate justice connection, the other strategy emphasizes the importance of securing and maintaining strong relationships with other climate justice and social justice groups. Organizers with perspectives that lean towards either modificational or transformational change both understand and articulate climate change as an injustice, but these examples illustrate how CJAs can affect strategic choices and campaign priorities.

It appears as though the procedural operationalization of climate justice, the movement building practices, are easier to implement because of their internal focus. No specific barriers were mentioned when it came to movement building practices like embracing a territory acknowledgement, hosting anti-oppression trainings, or promoting individuals' participation in solidarity actions within the group. However, that does not mean that they are these practices are executed flawlessly. Stephen T shared this reflection on how campaigns struggle to live up to their stated intentions and climate justice values:

I think what I believe the divestment movement is, tries to be, and can be, are sometimes at odds. I think we fail a lot at being good allies. We fail a lot at holding non-hierarchical and anti-oppressive organizing structures. And I don't think that should be excused. We are not immune to really fucking up. I think it's important we put ourselves in vulnerable

positions so that we can make mistakes, so that we can learn.... I still think that [divestment] acts as a forum for those things in a better way than anything else I've been a part of, but it's not everything for everyone. (Q17)

While CJAs can be a recurring challenge, organizers continued to stress the importance of ongoing learning and attentiveness to equity and justice.

Another frustration expressed was that 'climate justice' itself was a convoluted or vague term - a criticism perhaps validated by my own need to deconstruct and define it. One organizer described climate justice as a niche concept within social justice circles, and lamented that internal disagreement about CJA caused tension within the campaign.

We've spent so much time as activists arguing with other activists, who on the scale of Canadian public opinion are such a small fraction of the population, that we have left behind the discussion of how do we actually sell these ideas to the other 95% of the population. And I think that the inclusion of climate justice and those ideas is important, is incredibly beneficial, but it's not if it's just us patting ourselves on the back and feeling good about having agreed on this — it needs to be about changing people's' minds outside of our movement who don't currently agree with us. (Q24)

This again echoes the tension between messaging that will reach beyond the usual sympathizers, and messaging that seeks to entrench a principled intersectional climate justice narrative.

Other common language used in divestment and climate justice communities can have similarly ambiguous definitions depending on context. Many organizers made reference to Indigenous sovereignty and decolonization, with few identifying their meaning in concrete terms. Not further clarifying these concepts during my interviews is a limitation of this research.

Organizers recognize that divestment is a limited tactic. They will most likely tell you that divesting alone is not enough, that there is no one silver bullet climate change solution. But, despite its limitations, most believe divestment remains necessary and useful because of its social impact and movement building potential, a point I return to in the conclusion. While the ebb and flow of social movements can be unpredictable, what is clear is that within campaign groups, and between campaigns in the movement, a range of analytical and operational CJAs are being applied. It appears that divestment, similar to other campaigns with visions for transformative social change, tempers its transformational perspectives for public consumption as a strategic choice. Investigating how a campaigns outward discourse compares to their internal CJA would be an interesting analysis for future research.

## CONCLUSIONS:

For almost all organizers interviewed, climate justice is integral to the fossil fuel divestment movement. In some cases, climate justice was a cause of tension within campaigns, particularly if priorities were not aligned at key moments like decision-making and escalation periods. While my analysis highlights the range and complexity of climate justice approaches, the majority of organizers were more oriented towards transformational change. CJAs are bringing forward conversations about systemic oppression through racism, colonization, patriarchy, and economic inequality, which reflects a shift in focus for environmental movement organizing beyond ‘nature’ and conservation based campaigns. Organizer’s critiques of mainstream environmentalism demonstrate that CJAs are not a passive force in environmental discourse, rather, those whose perspectives have been shaped by CJAs are consciously and

actively challenging mainstream environmentalism. It appears that fossil fuel divestment is one site where calls by academics and activists for an inclusive environmentalism are being realized through iterations of the CJA. However, pervasive “green growth” paradigms remain the political and economic norm, and progress can still be made to amplify the role of justice in mainstream environmentalism.

Climate Justice Approaches contribute to transformative personal learning for participants and define worldviews. Where participants’ conception of climate justice is based in intersectional systemic critique they understand themselves as participating in broader social transformation. Not only is the divestment movement broadening the discourse about possible interventions for climate action, the recognition of structural injustice within divestment organizer networks is contributing to the perceived need for systemic transformation as a climate change solution. Organizers’ ongoing participation and leadership in environmental and justice work is having impacts on the broader environmental movement in Canada, and is cultivating space for subversive organizing practices. This type of social impact is less often considered in the academic or public discourse of divestment, but remains what most divestment organizers consider their campaign’s biggest impacts (Q23). Through the integration of transformational CJAs, fossil fuel divestment holds counter-hegemonic movement building potential. In the following chapter I further investigate one aspect of transformational climate justice analysis: critiques of neoliberal capitalism. Little attention has yet been given to anti-capitalism in the fossil fuel divestment movement, but I demonstrate that despite the tactic’s inherent connection with capital markets the divestment movement sustains a critical economic discourse.

## **CHAPTER 3: Climate Justice critiques of capitalism in Fossil Fuel Divestment**

### INTRODUCTION:

#### *Exploring Anti-capitalism in the Fossil Fuel Divestment Movement*

A climate justice framework questions and challenges capitalism, and questions and challenges white supremacy and colonialism. The goals we have in our campaigns, for instance, it's to see not only less emissions but to call into question the economic system that got us here and to work to undo it.

(Stephen T, Q20)

Divestment is a tactic that necessitates participation in capitalist markets, but the movement for fossil fuel divestment has become fertile ground for critiques of neoliberal capitalism among young people engaged in environmental activism. This is perhaps surprising given the market-oriented nature of the divestment tactic, but my research shows that many divestment organizers have worldviews critical of capitalism, and see their work as participating in a broader movement to challenge this economic paradigm.

I take my definition of capitalism from Geoff Mann (2013), who describes it as an economic and political system characterized by the following four essential features: private enterprise for commodity production; market exchange; a monetary system based on the production of bank-credit money; and a distinctive role for the state in relation to those features. Mann's description of Marxist theories is also useful for understanding capitalism as a systematic set of social relations wherein the means of life are mediated by capital. I use the term 'neoliberal' in reference to the current phase of capitalist ideologies that prioritizes individual freedoms and responsibilities, strong private property rights and a highly competitive labour market, regulated to maximize capital accumulation; and its corresponding values of competitive

individualism, privatization, and the infiltration of market logic into all areas of social life (W. Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005). With these definitions in mind I acknowledge that anti-capitalism in divestment, as I describe it, does not address or challenge some of capitalism's key features. Anti-capitalism articulated through a climate justice analysis, as it manifests in the divestment movement, does not appear to engage with questions of property or private ownership (a gap that should be addressed in future manifestations of the movement). Instead, anti-capitalism in divestment is primarily focused on questions of profit, especially as it relates to growth and capital accumulation through investment. It calls into question neoliberal capitalist hegemony by asking: profit for who? Profit made how? And profit at what expense?

In this thesis I take anti-capitalism to mean a commitment to systemic transformation away from capitalism. This transformation can move in multiple directions: socialist, anarchist, forms of Indigenous sovereignty, or possibly variants of right-wing anti-capitalism, though the term is mostly used for the radical left. I use anti-capitalism in reference to expressing critiques of capitalism, or being subversive or resistant to capitalism's mediation of social and material relations. To many of my interview participants anti-capitalism was a natural fit for the divestment movement. Eleven out of fifteen interviewees from case study campaigns directly claimed or appeared to hold anti-capitalist perspectives, and, again, eleven out of fifteen (though not all the same participants) thought that anti-capitalism was present within the divestment movement. But clearly divestment organizers, and broader movement supporters, are not unified on this front. As an organizer from UofT, who did not view divestment as characteristically anti-capitalist, said:

I think it's been a very interesting fact that the movement has accrued so many anti-capitalist members, because it is a movement that is inherently about shifting where



institutions hold their private equities, of its using the stock market, to try and influence public opinion on climate change, which is the epitome of capitalist tools. (Q17)

Fossil fuel divestment organizers recognize that the divestment movement is not inherently anti-capitalist. They often rely on financial arguments in favour of divestment that are consistent with free-market principles<sup>14</sup> in order to address the concerns of institutional decision-makers, particularly around fiduciary duty. It is clearly possible to support divestment as a “green growth” approach to climate action, and likewise for divestment campaigns to exist without critiques of capitalism. However, across the spectrum of Canadian campaigns with which I engaged this was rarely the case. Simon GS responded to a question about how climate justice approaches influence strategy and goals by saying:

We could just do this as a “green capitalism” thing, whereby we’re going to save the university some money, we’re going to avoid this Carbon Bubble and our stock portfolio is going to be healthier, through economic theory, on the outset. But I’ve never met a divestment organizer who thinks that way... Certainly no one in Divest Dal has really focused on that. It’s always been as a certain cog in the climate justice promotion... putting climate justice ethics into this little part of our institution, and our institutions writ large, then maybe it will be a foot in the door to get climate justice in every institution. (Q20)

While the mechanics of divestment as a *tactic* may be consistent with capitalist logic and principles, individual movement participants hold views critical of neoliberal capitalism. This chapter will explore the specific themes of anti-capitalist critique being articulated by divestment

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<sup>14</sup> See section on financial argumentation in Chapter 1: *Divestment: Tactics, Movements, Rationale & Strategy*

organizers, and how organizers view their work within the fossil fuel divestment *movement* as having systemically subversive potential. My analysis reveals that divestment organizers are working through critiques of capitalism distinct from what many might think of as conventional anti-capitalism. By bringing forward conversations about climate justice and creating space for students to grapple with systemic power structures in their local context, divestment can be a site of transformative learning experiences for young environmentalists to become attuned to the restrictions of capitalist approaches to climate action. I argue that while the surface level goals of divestment call for modificational change, participant engagement with climate justice approaches is pushing the bounds of anti-capitalist and systemic critique within the movement and contributing to transformational movement building.

My analysis of participant interviews suggest that the fossil fuel divestment movement is part of a new anti-capitalist vocabulary of protest<sup>15</sup> based in climate justice. The following sections outline where critiques of capitalism are being articulated, the anti-capitalist analysis organizers are using to frame their criticism, and how they understand the fossil fuel divestment movement as contributing to a broader challenge of neoliberal capitalist legitimacy. I draw on select critical political economy literatures throughout, including works by John Bellamy Foster (2013), Wendy Brown (2015), Matthew Huber (2013), Karl Polanyi (1944), and concepts from Antonio Gramsci, to demonstrate how themes in divestment's critical analysis of capitalism are consistent with broader scholarship. Yet divestment organizers are articulating their critiques of capitalism without identifying with conventional anti-capitalist theorists. For example, no one interviewed referenced Marx. When asked about what resources they used to develop their

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<sup>15</sup> I draw from Guha & Martínez-Alier's description of *vocabularies of protest* in "Environmentalism of the Poor" (1997), where they say that the "ideological dimensions of social protest needs to be inferred even when it is not formally articulated...Most forms of direct action, even if unaccompanied by written manifesto, are both of purpose and of belief" (p.13).

critical thinking around divestment and theories of change the majority of participants did not engage with academic texts, but preferred resources developed from within the movement such as organizer training guides and activist produced materials, or online articles and think pieces. Interviewees also discussed how the development of their perspectives took place in casual social settings, through conversation and experiential learning within the campaign. The only voice of critical political economy with a presence in academic anti-capitalist discourse that organizers referenced was Naomi Klein and her book *This Changes Everything* (2015), which employs similar arguments on climate change in the neoliberal era, and mentions divestment as a strategy that has shifted parts of the environmental movement away from industry alliances. Though traditional anti-capitalist theory and understandings of class struggle no doubt contribute to the layers of analysis taking place, organizers are articulating another form of anti-capitalism; one developed through climate justice frameworks of analysis, grassroots organizing theories of change like those taken from the work of Marshall Ganz (see: Ganz, 2010), collective knowledge-building, and lived-experience.

By putting political theory and contemporary anti-capitalist perspectives in conversation with the divestment movement's articulation of anti-capitalism, connecting these apparently distinct knowledge generators, I hope to reinforce their compatibility. For organizers, I hope to add depth to the movement-based analysis of capitalism and substantiate the fossil fuel divestment movement's role in transformative social change (see: Bratman et al., 2016), while drawing attention to aspects where their analysis could become more robust. Understanding divestment as embedded in a cultural politics of counter-hegemonic struggle could be a useful tool for organizers in strategic decision-making and help them reflect on the value of their efforts

beyond the campaign's public goals, particularly after administrations have rejected divestment. I also hope to encourage the field of critical political economy to consider fossil fuel divestment as a potential force for counter-hegemony, specifically through its role in establishing systemically subversive logics to neoliberal climate solutions within a new generation of environmental movement participants, and to view this as an opportunity to expand analysis in future research. O'Connor (1991), Clark and York (2005), Magdoff and Bellamy Foster (2011), Moore (2015), and others of eco-socialist or eco-Marxist traditions have all made significant contributions connecting capitalism and environmental degradation, implying or arguing that until environmentalists recognize capitalism's role in environmental struggle they will continue to fight against its symptoms. Divestment's unique position as a hybrid movement, a modificational tactic with transformative values, should encourage critical theorists to take seriously the divestment movement's potential role in anti-capitalist struggle and ask what can be gained from this strategy. How might the fossil fuel divestment movement be creating new spaces to align mainstream environmentalism with not only concerns of ecology, but also equity, social justice and anti-capitalism? What advantages accrue to this type of hybrid strategy when navigating political terrain where explicit anti-capitalism may not serve anti-capitalist aims?

In order for socio-political theory to offer accurate analysis of movements, to express and explain strategic outcomes, social movements and academic theorists must be in conversation. In 2013, at the outset of fossil fuel divestment's rise in popularity, Bellamy Foster asks:

Will the current struggle [that demonizes the fossil fuel industry] metamorphose into the necessary full-scale revolt against capitalist environmental destruction? Or will it be confined to very limited, short term gains of the kind comparable with the system? Will the movement radicalize, leading to the full mobilization of its popular base? Or will the

more elite-technocratic and pro-capitalist elements within the movement leadership in the US ultimately determine its direction, betraying grassroots resistance? (Bellamy Foster, 2013, para. 27)

Now, five years and many campaign cycles later, I begin to address these questions by exploring how competing visions and narratives for system modification versus transformation are articulated through climate justice, and how some campaigners are pushing the bounds of divestment in order to challenge concentrations of economic power in general, not simply the malfeasance of the fossil fuel industry.

#### FINDINGS:

##### *An Unsuspecting Site of Economic Resistance*

##### *How does Anti-capitalism show up in Divestment Campaigns?*

Fossil fuel divestment has found advocates and allies in a range of places: from factions of the financial sector to religious congregations, from long standing environmentalist David Suzuki (Suzuki & Hanington, 2016) to popular Hollywood icon Leonardo DiCaprio (Pittis, 2015). In 2015 the Rockefeller Foundation announced it would begin the process of divesting, a symbolic shift given that the fortune of the Rockefeller family has been heavily connected with oil (BBC News, 2014). In contrast to those who support fossil fuel divestment as a prudent and profitable investment strategy, the movement is also supported, mobilized, and organized by a considerably sized base of anti-capitalists. One organizer describes anti-capitalism in divestment by saying:

Some campaigns have been more explicitly anti-capitalist than others. Internally I think there were a lot of very anti-capitalist people. Externally we exhibited very little anti-

capitalism. And I think that for the most part in Canada most of the other campaigns have not been outwardly anti-capitalist. Or at least their public communication is not anti-capitalist, in my experience. (Q17)

This assessment is consistent with my research observations. While anti-capitalist narratives are largely absent in the public discourse, I hope to shed light on the extent to which anti-capitalist critique is held by participants, within divestment organizing communities, and the national narrative.

In every campaign I interviewed<sup>16</sup> individual organizers identified the current economic paradigm as contributing to irreversible climate change, or as a barrier to implementing either the required reductions in greenhouse gas emissions or broader structural solutions. Simon GS from Divest Dalhousie stated:

I think there's lots of people in divestment campaigns that are critical of capitalism, myself included, and that's embraced...It's a motivating factor, but no one's like 'once we divest, we'll have really stuck it to capitalism'. But in the same breath, once we divest we won't have stuck it to colonialism, we won't have stuck it to oppression, we will have done something good in a way that has been good. (Q17)

This suggests that organizers are aware that the divestment tactic has a limited role in directly challenging capitalism, but that the movement's role in developing an analysis of systemic injustice, and a commitment to justice as a shared value, is important for keeping organizers committed to the campaign.

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<sup>16</sup> Interviews included multiple participants of Divest Dal, UBCC350 and UofT350 and single interviewees from Mount Allison University, McGill University, and the University of Winnipeg, as well as my personal experience with members of Divest UVic.

Critiques of capitalism are not ubiquitous within all campaigns, or across the movement. Alex H (Q17) recognized that while many individuals hold anti-capitalist perspectives, it wasn't a part of the UBC campaign. Similarly, he described 'pockets' of anti-capitalist critique in the broader movement, but felt it wasn't central. As my findings will demonstrate in the section "A Climate Justice Vocabulary of Protest", climate justice analysis is foundational in divestment organizers' articulations of anti-capitalism. In my observation, the context through which campaigns are conceived influences the level of engagement with CJAs, which helps inform the development of shared values and campaign priorities. From this observation it is unsurprising that campaigns with a more unified mandate of climate justice, like Divest Dalhousie, had a more consistent critique of capitalism. In the case of UofT 350, it is clear that the tension noted earlier around climate justice priorities created social rifts. While ideological disagreements around capitalism specifically were not core to the conflicts experienced in the UofT campaign, it speaks to the broader challenge of balancing ideological diversity with effective consensus decision-making, and of "bringing people along" in learning systemic intersectional analysis.

### *Is Anti-Capitalism Present in Divestment Discourse?*

Anti-capitalist perspectives are largely absent from the public discourse of fossil fuel divestment. In Bellamy Foster's (2013) initial assessment of the emerging fossil fuel divestment movement, he recognized that movement strategy had not been to focus on capitalism, but on the fossil fuel industry as a "rogue industry". This demonization of the fossil fuel industry is still a significant shift in the climate change narrative, and something divestment has played a substantial role in promoting, but falls short of calling for economic system change. While climate change is widely understood to be a problem of large-scale social transformation (Clark

& York, 2005; Klein, 2014; Mangat et al., 2018), the Climate Justice movement in North America rarely forwards an anti-capitalist angle in its public narrative. Bill McKibben, for example, as a prominent public figure in the divestment and climate movement fervently demonizes the fossil fuel industry, but does not often go as far as linking the concentrated power of the industry to society's economic priorities, or directly call to question the capitalist system (Kahle, 2015). Mangat, Dalby and Paterson (2018) recently conducted a meta-discourse analysis on divestment, specifically looking at four narrative themes (war/enemy, morality, justice, and economic<sup>17</sup>) They investigate the prevalence of these narratives within three categories of discourse producers: 1) divestment activist produced content, which represents the movement speaking to the public, 2) alternative media associated with environmental and social justice, which represents the movement speaking to itself, and 3) mainstream media, which represents the centrist/progressive public speaking about the movement. They find that the war/enemy narrative, like that employed by Bill McKibben, is dominant across all sources. Interestingly the justice argument varied notably across the type of source, being significantly under-represented in major news sources, which tend to over-represent the economic narrative when framing divestment issues. These results confirm that there is a significant detachment between the most common public narratives of divestment and the justice values espoused by the movement.

In specific reference to critiques of capitalism in the Canadian national narrative, I can provide only one example: the Tyee, a British Columbia based independent online news media source, published an article in 2015 that interviewed one organizer from UBC (who was also an interview participant in this research) and one from Simon Fraser University. The author, Geoff Dembicki, writes “For young climate activists like Soron and Hemingway, such analyses

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<sup>17</sup> Mangat et al. coded articles with mentions of finance, economics, investment, returns, unburnable carbon, stranded assets, etc. as using ‘economics’ narratives.



overlook the divestment movement's broader aim: which is to remake the value structure of capitalism.” (Dembicki, 2015). The piece also points to the potential social impact of a generation of divestment supporters who will be “consumers, voters, and leaders of the next several decades” (Dembicki, 2015), one of the relatively few pieces in the public discourse of divestment to connect the movement with broader shifts in economic and social tides.

Mangat, Dalby and Paterson’s (2018) work also shows that justice and economy narratives are rarely combined. This is in contrast to the portrayal of the divestment movement by Bratman et al. (2016) and Grady-Benson and Sarathy (2015), that position justice as central across the divestment discourse. My interviews with Canadian divestment organizers confirm Mangat et. al’s speculation that while “the argument about justice is not central to the discourse (it may, however, be important to the motivations of divestment activists as [Grady-Benson and Sarathy] imply) and the economic argument [in favour of divestment] appears for the most part to be an instrumental articulation rather than one central to the activists’ storylines” (Mangat et al. 2018, p.9). Organizers at each of the case study campaigns communicated concern that expressing explicit anti-capitalism in their messaging and public narratives would be a barrier for people they hope to corral into supporting their efforts. Sydney L spoke directly to the limited role of anti-capitalist narratives in the media, saying:

In trying to get the media to pick up our stories we frame it in a certain way, right. So if we’re doing this big anti-capitalist critique no one is going to pick up on it in the news...I think our campaign purposefully framed it in a way that would get media attention, that would get us published in newspapers. So I think that in trying to make it accessible to lots of people we purposefully do that. (Sydney L, Q17)

It appears to be a strategic choice by organizers not to pursue anti-capitalist narratives in the public discourse in order to maintain broad public appeal. In conversation about divestment as an approach that nudges capitalism toward being concerned with more than profit, while not deterring people who have yet to confront the systemic implications of capitalism, Stephanie G says:

I think it's a really strong way of actually doing so. When you have those conversations about how you need to think about more than the financial risks and benefits at the end of the day, because there are a whole lot of other risks and benefits that are happening outside of this financial bubble, but, divestment opens that conversation without just being like 'shut down capitalism!' (Q17)

However, some organizers question this method. Another member of UBC C350, Julie V, reflected on the absence of anti-capitalism in the public discourse:

The less radical the solution is the more likely it is to be accepted. Which isn't necessarily helpful because we need radical solutions. But it's easier to have the conversations around small steps, rather than big transformational changes. That's why I don't think it's part of the narrative. (Q17)

Julie V felt confident that criticism of capitalism was implicit in divestment's analysis of institutionally invested capital and climate change, once you "zoomed out the lens" and made the connection between local divestment situations and the big picture of economics and climate change.

The "layered" nature, as it was described by multiple interviewees, of arguments in favour of divestment has contributed to its broad appeal, and helped organizers engage strategically by pivoting their arguments according to the audience. This approach helps

campaigns negotiate political realities where blatant anti-capitalism may not serve anti-capitalist goals. In this way, fossil fuel divestment can offer theoretical analysis an example of how to develop and maintain anti-capitalist values, along with other aspects of intersectional systemic critique, within traditionally modificational tactics.

Clearly a significant proportion of people organizing divestment campaigns are undertaking critical economic analysis, and even those who do not personally ascribe to the connection between anti-capitalism and divestment recognize it has a significant role in mobilizing others within the movement. As researchers concerned with social impact have gestured towards (see: Bratman et al. 2016; Dembicki, 2015; Grady-Benson & Sarathy 2015; Rowe et al, 2015), the worldviews and organizing norms developed within the fossil fuel divestment movement and carried forward by a generation of organizers educated in this context will have impacts on the future of the environmental movement. An area of unexplored potential is how the prevalence of anti-capitalist critique and climate justice analysis will shift the alignment of mainstream environmental movements and traditional conservation and preservation environmentalism (Bratman et al., 2016). The following sections provide further clarity on the critiques of capitalism being articulated by the movement, and explore how the movement itself acts subversively to neoliberal capitalist hegemony while also recognizing the limitations of the divestment tactic.

***A Climate Justice Vocabulary of Protest: What critiques of capitalism are being articulated by the fossil fuel divestment movement?***

Movement based research on fossil fuel divestment by Bratman et al. (2016) argues that while the divestment tactic has a number of practical advantages, justice is a fundamental goal.

Chapter two's findings substantiate their claims, and examples of transformational CJAs further identify the current economic paradigm as inherently connected to the systemic crisis of climate change. In some cases, divestment campaigns are offering a more politically robust analysis of neoliberal capitalism than has been articulated in mainstream environmentalism. This chapter has thus far gestured in broad terms to anti-capitalist critique, but this section aims to unpack the major themes and forms of anti-capitalism in the context of fossil fuel divestment. I investigate how organizers understand and articulate forms of anti-capitalism, what type of analysis organizers use to ground their criticism, and what select literatures from critical political economy can offer the movement analytical support. Three main lines of critique emerge from organizer interviews: 1) the climate crisis has developed from the onset of global capitalism, and therefore solutions will not come from within the system that has caused and continues to exacerbate the problem, 2) decision-making bodies with the power to act on climate change have been compromised by the interests of profit and fossil fuel capital, and 3) an economic paradigm that relies on infinite growth is incompatible with sustainability on planet of finite resources. Organizers articulate their critiques of capitalism most often through the lens of climate justice.

*Climate Change has Roots in Capitalism: "System Change Not Climate Change"*

In the analysis, at least the analysis that I was taught and that I put forward, capitalism, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and many other isms are causes of climate change. And the economic system that we have, that exploits people and our planet, is not working. Or it is doing exactly what it is programmed to do, but that is not look out for the people or the land that we all live on... I think the idea and the understanding that capitalism is at the heart of this is quite prominent.

(Joanna B, Q17)

The first and most widely articulated line of anti-capitalist critique within the fossil fuel divestment movement is a social justice based analysis of climate change that focuses on

systemic inequity, within which the current economic paradigm constitutes one layer of intersectional exploitation. Globally, the growth of greenhouse gas emissions has mirrored the spread of industrial capitalism (Steffen, Grinevald, Crutzen & McNiel, 2011). A climate justice analysis highlights how the climate change crisis is disproportionately caused by exploitation of resources and marginalized peoples in order to build and sustain the economic wealth of the ‘western’ world’s industrial capitalist societies. It follows that neoliberal capitalist state and social hegemony prevents action to address climate change on the scale required to mitigate the problem (Mangat et al., 2018 reference Newell & Paterson 2010; Klein, 2014). In North America, domestic and international bodies have long struggled to restrict carbon intensive or extractive industries that have a powerful role in sustaining economies and lifeways under capitalism (W. Brown, 2015). Climate change also has disproportionate impacts on marginalized social groups who often have contributed least to the problem and have fewer resources for mitigation or adaptation efforts (Klein, 2015). A common conclusion organizers draw from this analysis is that the historical and contextual power relations embedded in these systems, which are maintained through institutional structures and social norms, recreate oppressive power dynamics and resist change - including changes necessary to address climate change. Sydney L, an organizer at UofT, said when explaining her conception of climate justice, “I don’t think you can achieve climate justice without challenging capitalism, or without being an anti-capitalist movement, or without being an anti-colonial movement. So I think it’s recognizing the systems at the foundation of the injustice” (Q8). Neoliberal policy approaches and modificational system changes have not adequately prevented significant increases in global average temperature, which reinforces organizer scepticism. Therefore, a justice-based alternative suggests that climate change solutions must be systemically transformative, and will likely not materialize

from within the economic, political, and social paradigms that created, are maintained by or benefit from, the problem. Solutions developed at frontline sites of community resistance that challenge forms of intersectional systemic oppression, including the racialized class relations of capitalism, are those which transformational CJAs seek to elevate and prioritize.

This perspective mirrors arguments made by Magdoff and Bellamy Foster (2011) who say that environmental problems caused and perpetuated by capitalism cannot be solved by the same system. Their analysis demonstrates how capitalism is inherently at odds with environmental sustainability because the expropriation of nature, or environmental resources, is a fundamental process through which capital is extracted. Meanwhile, environmental harms are considered externalities. Their conclusion remains that both the foundational principles and function of capitalism are in contradiction with environmental sustainability, and that “greening” capitalism will fail to address climate change because the conditions for creating the problem are not challenged.

Through transformational CJA-based critiques of capitalism, divestment can create space for organizers to collectively work through their understandings and refine their articulations of anti-capitalism, which can serve as a first step to engaging with alternative economic paradigms. Divestment may not be viewed as subversive to neoliberal capitalism by the general public at this point, but within the movement organizers are doing the work, the often unseen work, of learning how to be with one another in resistance to capitalist hegemony.

### *Corporate Capture of Democratic Institutions*

The experience of participating in divestment campaigns on campus has led many organizers to think more critically about their university’s administration and management

structures, as well as question the reach of fossil fuel industry into democratic institutions. Interviewees described how their campaigns revealed a lack of democratic accountability and transparency in university decision-making processes, and that the administrative bodies are often more beholden to external donors than university constituents. In July of 2015 members of Divest Dal began filing freedom of information requests to investigate Dalhousie's relationship with major oil and gas companies. Their probe revealed that during the time period when the administration was deliberating on the motion to divest its endowment from fossil fuels, Dalhousie was also negotiating a new donor agreement with Shell Canada (Cousins, 2015). The deal was not only laden with stipulations about the company's representation and participation within the engineering faculty, but reporting by the National Observer later revealed that senior executives at Shell had informed the Dean of Science that the company was monitoring the divestment decision and, in essence, Shell would not invest in any school that had decided to support fossil fuel divestment (Mandel, 2016). Interviewee Stephen T with Divest Dal helped file the freedom of information requests and launch the story about Dalhousie's relationship with Shell. He is also an engineering faculty alumni. He likens this experience to the broader struggle for environmental action against corporate power, and the political institutions caught in between:

I think so many of the battles that we're fighting in our communities, in our municipalities, in our provinces or states, and with our federal governments are pretty analogous to the fights we have with our universities administrations. And a lot of the ways that you hold power are analogous. So when we find ourselves in the 'real world' after our university experiences, we find ourselves with this brilliant, beautiful toolkit for

how to work with one another and for how to fuck shit up a little bit...And I think divestment has a lot to do with that. (Q23)

These interactions with institutional power contribute to the experiential learning that informs participants' critiques of neoliberal capitalism. Organizers responded to the scenario between Dalhousie and Shell by publicizing the agreement to exemplify corporate capture of democratic institutions. In this way divestment creates a new opportunity for political intervention that anchors broader critiques of neoliberalism within public discourse. Ben DW describes it in this way:

So Divestment is a capitalist tool. That being said I think that modern capitalism has a really interesting vulnerability, where because money now connects every single thing and every institution...now institutions are connected to bad systems in a way they might not have been before. Which allows institutions that proclaim to be democratic to be vulnerable to movements that are democratically organized to take a stand. And in that space of questioning investments we're able to question how money works in capitalism, and where it flows and why, and who has power, and how money trumps democracy a lot of the time. Which creates a moment for education for people who may not have been having those conversations before. (Q11)

Campaigning to change investment practices at public universities reveals that the participatory political structures are too restricted by economic priorities to address student concerns. Movement organizers use this to articulate new and climate justice based narratives of anti-capitalism.



*Contradictions of Logic: “No Infinite Growth on a Finite Planet”*

The final critique of capitalism prevalent in the fossil fuel divestment movement discourse focuses on the conflicting logics of infinite economic growth on a planet of finite resources. Many organizers referenced capitalism’s growth imperative in brief, noting the systemic ideological contradiction, but did not further unpack this analysis. For example, Simon GS of Divest Dal says, “we’ve got an economic system that seems to think that infinite growth on a finite planet is going to end well. Terrible idea. So that’s pretty scary that our entire world works on that premise, which is thermodynamically impossible” (Q17).

How divestment organizers problematize capitalism’s growth paradigm appears to be the line of critique most directly linked to contemporary anti-capitalist scholarship. Magdoff and Bellamy Foster forward this argument in the third chapter of *What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism* (2011), titled “The Growth Imperative of Capitalism”. They describe the need for continual growth through capital accumulation and investment as a foundational characteristic of capitalism, necessary for its continued recreation and expansion. They argue that the maintenance of capitalism requires prioritizing profit and growth over social or environmental well-being, which inherently leads to social dislocation and environmental harm. As growing profit remains the economic, political, and social priority, decisions about long-term investment in sustainability projects (including those that work to address climate change) are less appealing than those with immediate financial rewards, despite potential social or environmental benefits that can be difficult to measure. Addressing environmental concerns only becomes a priority to the capitalist class when it can be made profitable, which has spurred some ecological economists to become proponents of financial valuation for ecosystem services as Natural Capital to address climate change and other forms of ecological degradation.

Some divestment organizers are making connections to more theoretical anti-capitalist concepts. Sinead D (Q24) links capitalism's growth imperative with accumulation by dispossession, which Harvey (2003) describes as the neoliberal approach to channeling wealth and power away from the public sphere through manipulation of capitalist systems and logics (privatization, financialization, manipulation of crisis, and state redistribution). The implicit extension of this process is that as resources (including labour, land or money) are exhausted in one realm, capitalism must reach into new social and physical space to maintain its growth, which has sweeping social and ecological consequences. This analysis of capitalism reinforces the overarching claim that crises in the natural environment cannot be adequately addressed without understanding the power relations that underpin their socio-political and economic context. Organizers and academics have suggested that the corresponding climate justice solution is to build a broad and transformative social movement that seeks to remodel the dominant economic system, among other goals. Sinead goes on to say:

[Leaders of the climate justice movement] explicitly argue 'we need to challenge capitalism and the logic of growth without end or the accumulation of dispossession in order to combat climate change' ... although divestment is just one little tool that you can use, and there's a lot of limitations with it, hopefully you have people doing [divestment] from that kind of framework - and then moving on and doing other work that's rooted in those understandings. And that will affect how you do the divestment work, and what kind of relationships you make, and how you build solidarity. (Q24)

Sinead D's perspective sheds light on how organizers use divestment as a flexible and strategic form to elevate anti-capitalist discourse and hopefully, eventually, action. Divestment maintains a space for organizers to hold and spread radical values and anti-capitalist perspectives while still

negotiating political realities where brazen anti-capitalism isn't always in the service of anti-capitalist goals.

***A Movement for Transformative Change: How does fossil fuel divestment organizing challenge capitalism?***

Another connection between anti-capitalism and fossil fuel divestment warrants consideration: the role of divestment as a social movement that acts to subvert capitalist hegemony. In this section I focus on how the process of organizing divestment campaigns challenges the neoliberal capitalist logic, systems, and power structures. I orient interviewees' reflections on the impact of the divestment movement within three frameworks of theoretical analysis. First, organizers view campaigning as a means to disrupt the individualized narrative of neoliberal climate change solutions by building communities that work collectively with climate justice based priorities, practices, and processes. Second, organizers use the tactic of divestment to challenge the logic of capitalism that prioritizes profitability and economic growth as the foundations of success, and force economic decisions at their local institutions to be re-embedded, in Polanyian terms, in social and political priorities. Finally, the divestment movement creates a space for practical and theoretical critiques of capitalism, in parallel with transformative personal experiences, to emerge among young people interested in participating in environmental and social justice communities.

Many of the divestment movement participants have anti-capitalist values that predispose them towards moving beyond the targeting of one industry and challenging the coercive effects of concentrated economic power more generally. Accessible and explicit challenges to neoliberalism, questioning profit and calling for economic re-embeddedness, and participating in and spreading a discourse of anti-capitalism, can be understood as three stepping

stones that reflect how divestment offers an anti-capitalist trajectory. There is no guarantee that divestment organizers, or the movement, will ever take up a full-fledged or public anti-capitalist stance. However, when organizers are exposed to anti-capitalist critique through the course of their organizing and connect it to their campaign and broader struggles for climate justice, it creates an opportunity for divestment to engage new terrains of contention that can lead to a more entrenched anti-capitalism.

Many organizers emphasized that divestment is just *one* avenue for participating in systemic change, but consider its potential for social transformation a critical contribution of their role in organizing. The divestment movement promotes transformative politics through the development of counter-narratives to status quo capitalist hegemony, critical thinking about power, and organizing skills that strategically assess where and how best to intervene for social change.

### *Challenging Neoliberal Logic and Climate Solutions with Collective Action*

International political regimes like COP21's Paris Agreement and domestic attempts to regulate carbon through market mechanisms demonstrate the longstanding neoliberal approach to climate change (Andrew et. al, 2010). Not only have these neoliberal policy mechanisms been ineffective at substantially reducing carbon emissions in line with the Paris Agreement's aspirations, the emphasis on their deployment has re-enforced neoliberal narratives wherein the most efficient avenue for the average citizen to voice their values is through demand-side economic shifts via individual consumer choices. Climate change solutions in mainstream North American culture occasionally require democratic participation, but this is largely reserved for election cycles that tend to overly politicize the science of climate change and under-politicize

social dimensions and decision-making or policy possibilities. The cognitive dissonance between the most recent projections for global warming and climate change consequences, and the public and policy responses to the problem have even been called “the new climate denialism” (Klein & Daub, 2016; Crist, 2017). Some examples of “denialist” solutions are those that (1) overly depend on international regimes or assume action is futile without top-down leadership, (2) continue to delay substantial shifts with the belief that technical advancements will provide solutions without structural social disruption, and (3) “green” capitalist or free-market and consumer based changes. Each of these avenues de-politicize the role of the individual in collective society and, for those with a desire to act on environmental concerns, individualize the responsibility for climate action within the bounds of lifestyle modifications in neoliberal society.

Wendy Brown (2015) has explored how neoliberal rationality not only remakes economic priorities, but also restricts the social and political imaginary. Her most recent book, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (2015), describes how the human is no longer subject or citizen, but has become *homo oeconomicus*, an individualized structure of human capital who think about themselves and their social world in neoliberal logics. Huber (2013) furthers the analysis of identity under neoliberal capitalism to demonstrate that fossil fuel capital has reshaped North American cultural politics, leading to a profound connection between oil and identity. Climate change action that counters neoliberal capitalist logics of individual entrepreneurial success or fossil fuel dependence is resisted, because it is deeply felt as an attack on the individual and their way of life (Huber, 2013). Fossil fuel divestment campaigning is one example of movement-based collective action that challenges the neoliberal focus on individual responsibility by engaging organizers in collective and participatory political processes.

The fossil fuel divestment movement works counter to the prevalence of neoliberal climate solutions in two ways. First, the overarching movement narrative that demonizes the fossil fuel industry for its disproportionate role in causing climate change resists the framing of individualized responsibility used in demand-side economic arguments. Organizers are often painted by divestment adversaries as hypocrites for participating (even minimally) in fossil fuel dependent society, which ignores the drastically different scale of responsibility for the problem. For example, the 2017 Carbon Majors Report (Griffin, 2017) by the Climate Accountability Institute and the Carbon Disclosure Project posits that just one hundred companies are responsible for 71% of global emissions since the establishment of the IPCC in 1988. By spotlighting the disproportionate role fossil fuel companies have played in contributing to global emissions and preventing action on climate change (funding climate denial, lobbying against ambitious climate policy, etc.) the fossil fuel divestment movement has challenged the narrative of neoliberal solutions and individual responsibility, alternatively emphasizing systemic analysis and action that targets structural power. Laura C describes this by saying “I feel like [divestment] shifts the conversation away from just environmentalism, or more individual actions, to bigger issues and more system change” (Q20).

Interviewees from multiple divestment campaigns discussed the important role that organizing plays in countering the individualization of responsibility for solutions to climate change. Discussing the strategic implications of organizing for fossil fuel divestment, Sinead D says:

Neoliberalism as an ideology, I think one of the things it's done is individualizing climate change solutions to very consumer based things — which is just bullshit. And I think that's made it very easy for people to feel very complacent and feel like they're doing

their part - like recognizing that climate change is bad, but feel like they're doing their part by buying recycled clothing. So I think divestment inherently makes it a collective response, and makes it so that institutions need to respond and do something not just as individuals changing their lifestyle. So I think that's valuable. (Q23)

Multiple organizers talked about how these types of lifestyle or “green consumption” actions no longer felt like enough the more they learned about climate change and climate injustice, which led them to question the efficacy of mainstream environmentalism’s solutions. Katie P describes her perspective about climate and environmental action prior to her involvement in divestment and exposure to CJAs:

I guess until I started divestment campaigning I considered myself an ‘environmentalist’, because I did as much as I could in my day to day life to reduce my impact... I think those were the options that I saw as being available to me but it never felt like enough. And then I went to Power Shift in 2012, and it really felt like ideas about climate justice started to make sense to me... I mean climate justice was hardly even on the radar in 2009 as a national narrative. Even in 2012 I feel like it was still not really part of the conversation. (Q8)

While not unique to the divestment movement, some organizers credit fossil fuel divestment with being the first student campaign to re-politicize environmental action on campus and to recognize itself as contributing to building capacity for broader social change. Bratman, Brunette, Shelly, and Nicholson state that “environmental policy in higher education is largely depoliticized and pursued independent of intersectional concerns of environmental justice” (p.679). Mangat, Dalby and Paterson (2018) make the case that “divestment [has a] role in a distinct repoliticisation of climate change through an emphasis on the questions of power,

legitimacy, and conflict” (p.190). Stephen T exemplifies this in his reflection about the on campus environmental initiatives before and after divestment, and the role that the campaign played in elevating collective action in response to climate change:

I can speak to pre and post divestment. So the groups that I was part of before, (Sustain Dal, Sexton Energy Ethics, groups that were organizing for sustainability things) the tactics that they used were education based, which were important but also very individual. So a lot of film screenings and panel discussions. A lot of encouraging folks to bike, encouraging folks to change their light bulbs, encouraging folks to create and use less resources, be less consumerist. Which are all important parts of this puzzle, but to get those things across, they were very institutionally accepted tactics. They were setting up a table in a lobby, hosting a discussion in a university hall. With divestment it seems, and with the social justice lens of divestment in our case, tactics of going straight to where we think power is held and questioning it and fucking with their shit a little bit is all of the sudden on the table. We all the sudden understand what’s at stake, we feel emotionally what’s at stake.

In addition to pursuing tactics beyond those conventionally accepted and applied by prior sustainability initiatives, Stephen’s reflection also reveals how shared experiential learning through social justice organizing develops individual and collective agency for participants.

I think the introduction of anti-oppressive and climate justice frameworks lead to tough discussion, lead to vulnerability, which leads to a lot of things and one of those things is trust and love. This makes direct action, or civil disobedience, or directly challenging



power more doable - the trust of people you're doing the action with. So that frankly didn't exist in the organizing I was doing before those topics were introduced. (Q20)

It is clear that one of the common appeals of the divestment movement from an organizer perspective is the opportunity to build collective spaces for acting on climate change in ways that offer a different approach than the status quo of neoliberal sustainability action. Divestment empowers those involved to politicize climate issues and find ways to intervene in institutional power. Engaging young people in collective action challenges neoliberal logics that reinforce individualized and entrepreneurial approaches to addressing climate change, and in this way the fossil fuel divestment can be seen as acting subversively to neoliberalism and as an entry point for extended anti-capitalist critique.

### *Re-embedding Economics in Social and Political Realms*

While the tactic of divestment may on the surface look similar to neoliberal consumer models of engagement that call for individuals to “vote with your dollars”, divestment can also contest neoliberal logic by prioritizing moral values determined by constituents (and exerted through democratic processes where referendums have taken place, such as at UBC) above profit. While fossil free investments have proven to be profitable (Trinks et. al, 2018), it is the assertion that publicly chosen moral or political values outrank ‘profit-above-all-else’ that is important for demonstrating how divestment can challenge logics of neoliberal capitalism.

The fossil fuel divestment movement challenges the logics of capitalism by attempting to force a re-embedding of economic decision-making into social and political realms by prioritizing ethical and moral considerations above profit. It calls on people and institutions to recognize the political nature of personal and public finances, that economic decisions do not and

should not operate distinct of values, and that the status quo or free-market approach allows institutions to be complicit in immense harm. Many institutions claim that the act of divesting from fossil fuels is too political, that the endowment is only for profit making and not for taking political or moral stands (without recognizing that the current path is too a political one). However, many of the same universities at one time divested from Apartheid South-Africa, or screen their investments from industries like child labour, tobacco, or in some cases weapons manufacturing. This inconsistency contradicts their argument that public funds are without social values.

Karl Polanyi's economic history *The Great Transformation* (1944) describes how the Industrial Revolution's blend of technological, political, and social shifts developed the foundations of modern capitalism. Given that the Industrial Revolution is generally benchmarked as the starting point for anthropogenic climate change, this narrative aligns with climate justice analysis of systemic causes for climate change. Polanyi's concept of 'embeddedness' provides a valuable analysis of systemic changes brought with capitalism, demonstrating how prior economies were subject to political rules and socio-cultural norms, and designated as a function of these structures in service of society's needs: resources, infrastructure, maintenance, or socio-cultural and political functions (no doubt some problematic in their own right). As a result of emerging 'market society' - to use his term - the hierarchy of social and political realms has been restructured so that maintaining the economy becomes the primary function of social and political life; for Polanyi, the economy becomes disembedded from society. In line with Wendy Brown's (2015) analysis, as all systems are embedded within the economy the very functions of life then become dependent on the existing economic order and capitalist logic. For capitalism's free-market principles to function, economic priorities must supersede social and political

intervention, yet require intervention to be established and maintained (Polanyi, 1944).

Embeddedness is a useful concept for understanding how divestment, when pursued for ethical and moral rationales above economic rationales, can be subversive to a key principle of market society: the primacy of profit. Kate H draws a nuanced picture of this analysis in divestment when asked if the movement engaged with anti-capitalism:

Yes in the sense that we are challenging the notions of fiduciary duty that have kind of upheld the anti-divestment movement - especially coming from our [Board of Governors] last year. So as a movement, we have been pushing back against the notion that financial responsibility takes priority over moral decision-making. But in another sense, we speak the BOG's language as much as we can and we try to make financial cases for divestment. So in one way we are challenging capitalism and in another way we are trying to work within its constraints...I think that divestment is inherently subversive, because we are taking on an industry that makes a lot of people a lot of money and we're saying you can't do this anymore. And divesting from the fossil fuel industry, in the very short term, is not something that people operating within the pure rules of capitalism would do. And you have to look outside of that, and you have to look at the bigger picture, in order to make the decision to divest from fossil fuels. So I think in that sense it is a subversive movement, and an anti-capitalist one. (Q17)

Simon GS suggests that economic cost of divesting actually strengthens the tactic of divestment as a political statement. He goes on to say:

I think it's important to us as organizers to always know that this is about climate justice and it's not about tightening up the bottom line of the university and making more money for them in the endowment... we need to spend some money to be on the right side of

climate justice. (Simon GS, Q5)

Like most divestment organizers, Simon GS acknowledges how centering climate justice in divestment is key to challenging profit above all else, reinforcing the position that capitalist critiques are foremost part of divestment's climate justice analysis. Sinead D affirms this perspective and adds that fossil fuel divestment, when connected to CJA and collective action, can challenge neoliberal politics of austerity and privatization because addressing climate justice requires massive investment in public infrastructure. By prioritizing transparent and democratic decision-making, social responsiveness and community values above market logic and profitability, divestment is reasserting social and political domain over economic decision-making. Divestment is one example of how social movements intervene<sup>18</sup> in capitalist hegemony and re-embed the economy in service of human social and political needs.

### *Building Anti-Capitalist Counter-Hegemony in Fossil Fuel Divestment*

Fossil fuel divestment has become a social movement space for transformative personal learning, collective knowledge building and mobilization. Campaigns for fossil fuel divestment have been an incubator for intersectional CJAs, including a shared development of anti-capitalist analysis among young people in the environmental movement. Using Gramscian theories of hegemony and social change, divestment can be seen as contributing to a broader shift of 'common sense' economic perspectives, and in this way divestment can act as a counter-hegemonic force. According to Mann (2013), Gramsci describes capital's hegemony as:

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<sup>18</sup> Polanyi (1944) would describe this as a "double-movement". He refers to the historic social push back that at times challenged the worst repercussions of capitalism, but in the process of lessening its exploitation also maintain it.

power to shape the ‘common sense’ we tacitly share about the state, the ruling classes, and their power: that those relations are natural, that they serve a necessary function, that they are the only way to keep peace. Those in power construct an effective hegemony when the existing order appears to be not only in their interests, but in everyone’s interest. It is the practices that render a given social formation ideologically ‘normal.’ (p.52)

Social movements that imagine alternatives to those relations and challenging their reproduction thus contribute to counter-hegemony.

Multiple organizers considered how fossil fuel divestment has started new conversations or shifted the conversation about climate change towards systemic analysis:

[Divestment] creates a moment for education for people who may not have been having those conversations before. And what I think is exciting, and the only thing that’s really kept me in the movement, isn’t thinking that UofT’s portfolio is going to change the course of climate justice, but that the conversations that go on in Canada’s biggest university and the norms that people learn might shift the attitudes they have towards the fossil fuel industry and capitalism and colonialism... It’s safe to say that there are hundreds of people that have had to think about colonialism at UofT who wouldn’t have before if it weren’t for the divestment campaign; and who have taken a more radical position because of it. (Ben DW, Q11)

As participant worldviews shift, divestment creates pockets of anti-capitalist critique that challenge the status quo or ‘common sense’ assumptions and norms of neoliberal capitalism. Divestment organizers identify the shift in their worldviews as part of a process of learning,

unlearning, reprioritizing. Below organizers discuss how climate justice and divestment has impacted their perspectives:

[Divestment and climate justice] changed my priorities. Like my priorities are definitely more about challenging white supremacy and challenging capitalism and building across movements- a cross-sectoral movement that uses a new economy approach. That we have to be working with people who are, like, affected by carding and police violence, and linking that in a common fight to change the economy. Because divestment isn't going to be doing that, but changing our economic system will. (Ben DW, Q19)

I never thought about class, racism, and I never connected those things to climate change or bigger systemic issues until I started climate justice organizing. And so I think it's just impacted the way that I relate to the land around me, the way that I relate to people that I meet, and the way that I also treat myself. (Katie P, Q19)

Gramsci argued that shifting social consciousness is a long-term strategy for mobilizing the power of civil society to challenge powerful elite interests' grip on political institutions (Cox, 1983). Stephen T articulates this theory in experiential and practical terms, connecting transformative personal shifts with the implications of these collective experiences across the movement:

I think divestment allows for transformative change, and through that transformative personal change it grows a movement of people that are willing to take action so that transformative systemic social change takes place. I see myself as a product of this. I see divestment as sort of uniquely good at that personal transformative change. (Q24)

Stephen T describes how strong campaigning and divestment ‘wins’ send a signal not only to the fossil fuel industry and other universities, but also to other people concerned with climate change. He believes that the divestment movement empowers and inspires people by reinforcing the message that change is possible through collective action.

[Divestment has] garnered this sort of army of people who are extremely well versed in how to make change, and all of the sudden they graduate out of university and go back to their communities, or stay in the cities where they had these campaigns, and begin looking to make that change in all kinds of institutions. That could mean divestment in municipal or foundational contexts, but I think that means a whole host of climate justice goals and campaigns. (Stephen T, Q24)

Of course not all divestment participants continue to be organizers, or involved with other environmental and climate justice initiatives after leaving campus-based campaigns.

However, it appears that many youth climate leaders across the country have at one time been involved with divestment organizing. A survey of campaign alumni would provide a more substantial picture of divestment participants’ trajectories and current influence.

Scholars have acknowledged that the divestment movement’s attack on the fossil fuel industry’s social license has contributed to shifting the public discourse of climate change responsibility (Mangat et.al, 2018; Schifeling & Hoffman, 2017), which represents a challenge to corporate fossil fuel hegemony. But in its movement building capacities, divestment also contributes to counter-hegemonic intellectual and cultural struggle, which Gramsci advocates as key to transforming social power<sup>19</sup>. In Satgar’s (2017) most recent appraisal of the global

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<sup>19</sup> Gramsci also offers an analysis of how the status quo is neutralized, ensuring the citizenry that the current array of power structures are inevitable, perpetual, and in the common interest, rather than a social construct with a complex

Climate Justice movement, he argues that "Systemic alternatives have to unleash an alternative logic, build new values based institutions and enable momentum for democratic transformation through system reforms" (Satgar, 2017, p.7). Divestment, when understood as a social movement creating space for transformative personal change and collective interventions, is one site where counter-hegemonic logic is being negotiated. Divestment serves as a counter-hegemonic force both through the space provided to develop and articulate critiques that aim to redefine institutional 'good sense', and through participants' personal transformations and worldview shifts that contribute to the consciousness of today's environmental movements.

## DISCUSSION:

### *Limitations of Divestment Anti-capitalism*

While conceptually linked to longstanding anti-capitalist critiques, organizers' analysis is primarily being informed by lived experience and collective knowledge sharing within the movement. For example, rather than using the language of Marxism or identifying themselves with such movements, organizers are predominantly framing their critiques through climate justice analysis. In divestment's anti-capitalism, critiques of neoliberalism are more explicit than other contemporary anti-capitalist ideas like challenging the private ownership of key productive assets. Divestment organizers are effectively addressing problematic assumptions about market growth, but have yet to consider big questions about property and ownership or the distribution of non-financial capital. While the climate justice lens of anti-capitalism has been useful and

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political and cultural history. University administrators often refute divestment as a political act, refusing to acknowledge the political nature of 'business as usual'. The divestment movement's politicization of investments, challenges this norm as well.



mobilizing for participants, it is also important to consider that there are limitations, or blind spots, with this approach.

It is my hope that the current state of anti-capitalism discourse in divestment inspires participants to continue learning. I would recommend that the movement take up the work of contemporary anti-capitalist scholarship that would help participants to articulate more robust critiques. For example, in addition to the awareness of capitalism's gendered relations, divestment organizers have been well primed by intersectional and transformative climate justice analysis to forward critiques of racial capitalism. Laura Pulido's (2016) work merging environmental justice with racial capitalism in the Flint water crisis is a revealing analysis that connects racial devaluation with the community's surplus labour status. She says "The devaluation of Black (and other nonwhite) bodies has been a central feature of global capitalism for centuries (Robinson, 2000) and creates a landscape of differential value which can be harnessed in diverse ways to facilitate the accumulation of more power and profit than would otherwise be possible" (Pulido, 2016, p.1). Racial capitalism discourse, which demonstrates how culturally and socially enforced differences (including race, gender, nationality) are exploited under capitalism to extract additional value, is well aligned with the intersectional analysis currently being articulated within transformational climate justice approaches. By engaging in critical assessments of capitalism, divestment can generate conversation that acknowledges how white supremacy has been upheld by capitalism, the extraction and exploitation of people of colour, their labour and land. Not only would this strengthen divestment's own narratives for transformational climate justice, but also help encourage continued connections with other sites of struggle<sup>20</sup>. Student campaigns have at times allied themselves with other campus based

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<sup>20</sup> Relationships with other student campaigns or external grassroots activism are not always a given, but as campaigns have matured many have developed relationships of solidarity with other organizing groups. The

activism that represents more traditional forms of anti-capitalist resistance, such as supporting student worker unions or protesting tuition hikes as a form of financial exploitation. By deepening relationships with justice work traditionally aligned with anti-capitalism and by engagement with contemporary anti-capitalist critique, divestment could support additional strategic interventions in capitalism and participate in growing critical economic discourse.

Many interview participants have come to their critiques of capitalism through divestment campaigning and lived experiences. Their critiques of capitalism, grounded in climate justice, have at times served as an introduction to anti-capitalism without necessarily providing an in-depth analysis across capitalism's key features. Still, by lifting the veil on capitalism's hegemony, divestment organizers are placed on a trajectory where they are exposed to arguments that challenge capitalism's 'common sense'. As previously mentioned, developing anti-capitalist politics is of course not a guaranteed outcome from participating in the movement, but the milieu of critical perspectives within the divestment organizing community makes the process of radicalization possible because anti-capitalist analysis is alive (and being actively grappled with) in campaigns. This begs the question, what keeps people on a trajectory towards anti-capitalism?

Divestment, in a way, is a placeholder. It is just a campaign, but in observing the experiential learning about structural injustice, and how divestment creates space for radical

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following is a sampling of external groups or campaigns that have been endorsed or supported by at least one of the main case study campaigns: TA & RA student union strike, Black Lives Matter!, Boycott Divestment and Sanctions of Apartheid in Israel, fighting tuition fee increases including those that disproportionately affect International students, support for victims of sexual and gendered violence, Mi'kmaq resistance to Alton Gas, Kinder Morgan Pipeline resistance, Energy East Pipeline resistance, the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition, No Frack NS, renewable energy groups, etc. Some of these relationships are ongoing and some represent moments of support. Some relationships are clearly an extension of social justice principles, that were not initially conceived as connected with divestment: I recall a moment of learning in Divest Dal where the campaign's participation in a Board of Governors meeting overshadowed resistance to a substantial fee increase for international students, after which the campaign received internal and external criticism. In the action debrief it was decided that more coordination was needed with other student activism so organizers could support other justice issues rather than compete for administrators' attention.

critique, politicization, and building social movement organizing skills, one can see that divestment represents as a counter-hegemonic force with underemphasized transformative potential. Organizers are understanding their participation in fossil fuel divestment as a bridge movement that brings new young people into environmental activism, builds their capacity for continued organizing or political participation, and develops worldviews based on climate justice approaches. This is what many participants view to be the most significant aspect of their participation.

Moving money one way, from one thing to another, is not the holy grail or silver bullet of climate action. However, I think the act of campaigning for divestment is really important for bringing the discussion about climate justice to campuses... It's such an easy concept to grasp, but it has such profound implications about the conversation around climate change and who's responsible... And once students campaign with divestment they just get involved with so many other things. I call it a gateway drug. Divestment organizing is the first of many things that people will get involved with once they take that pill and their minds are open to the reality of what climate justice means. (Katie P, Q22)

When we consider divestment as a counter-hegemonic movement, that develops climate justice based anti-capitalism, we begin to understand its potential role in transformative social change. As divestment campaigns do strategic goal-setting and organizing, their vision is not just about winning divestment. These movement spaces are one of many sites where people are charting a path that recognizes collective values, the power structures in which we are embedded, and where it is strategic to intervene in order to create change. From formal visioning sessions at strategy retreats to conversations between friends that grapple with power and climate change, cultivating anti-capitalism in the movement can help develop alternative narratives to the

neoliberal depiction of the ‘good life’, which has proven to be unsustainable and fraught with inequality and worsening climate change.

## CONCLUSIONS:

### *The Power of Fossil Fuel Divestment: Why does anti-capitalist critique matter?*

This research shows how student campaigns for fossil fuel divestment are articulating a movement-oriented anti-capitalism based in climate justice approaches. The findings reported are a step towards understanding where and how fossil fuel divestment campaigns are growing their criticism beyond a specific attack on the fossil fuel industry to connect with broader system critique, addressing concerns raised by Bellamy Foster in 2013. While the technical mechanisms of divestment may not challenge prevailing free-market principles, the CJAs underpinning many fossil fuel divestment campaigns are cultivating anti-capitalist perspectives. Campaigns with transformative CJAs appear to create pockets where a desire for structural-alternatives are being expressed, even though the movement has not gone so far as to directly propose alternative economic structures. Given the personally transformative and worldview shaping experience that divestment participants have described, many organizers interviewed recognize the social impacts of the movement as being the most profound. When asked about the impacts of the fossil fuel divestment movement, one organizer shared this reflection:

I think it has engaged hundreds or thousands of young people on Canadian university campuses in big picture discussions on climate change that wouldn't have otherwise been engaged. I think that's the biggest thing. The biggest impact we've had, is that we've had all these people who didn't think about climate change, or how it manifests itself, and asked them to grapple with questions about the social responsibility of the Canadian

fossil fuel industry and associating ourselves as universities with it — which inherently leads to discussions of ‘is this industry ethical? And should we as a society be subsidizing it \$3 billion a year? Why should they be able to pollute for free?’ and it’s those latter discussions which I think are the important ones which lead to social change, not the discussion of what the university does with its private assets. But the discussion over what the university does with its assets started all those other conversations with thousands of young people who are going to have careers, they are going to be voters, to think about these things and really internalize them, of how am I as an individual engaging with these issues. And I think that’s the biggest thing that divestment has accomplished. Just that, it’s developed a new commitment to climate change among lots of young people who didn’t have it there before. (Participant, Q23)

As more than one organizer raised, the long-term impacts of divestment are just beginning to emerge as the first wave of organizers engaged by CJAs move beyond the university context. When discussing the effectiveness of the divestment movement, Simon GS’s personal reflection affirms how divestment acts as an entry point that can lead to a lasting commitment to environmental activism. He says, “Certainly [divestment is] a piece. No one ever says that it’s the end all be all. If Dalhousie told me that they were going to divest tomorrow, I’m not retiring from activism” (Simon GS, Q22). The many hundreds of young people engaged in divestment organizing across the country, and many thousands in the global movement, will likely bring forward the worldviews developed in divestment to other careers, political activity, volunteer work, or future activism. Interesting research could be done with campaigns to trace the continued involvement and trajectory of divestment organizers. This would also be valuable for the movement in tracking its own networks.

## **CHAPTER 4: Divestment Discourse & Concluding Discussions**

As I have argued throughout this thesis, the embrace of climate justice approaches in fossil fuel divestment demonstrates that the movement is working to address long-standing critiques of mainstream environmentalism. While climate justice was important for all divestment campaigns, my account of CJAs shows that despite common language, organizers interpret climate justice on a spectrum inclined towards transformational or modificational change. Divergent CJAs have at times caused tension within campaigns and, even where transformational CJAs are prioritized, as campaigns try to operationalize climate justice they continue to grapple with internalized and structurally embedded systems of oppression. Still, most of the interviewees advanced transformational CJAs. Given the prevalence of transformational CJAs across the movement, and the role divestment plays in developing these perspectives among young people concerned with climate change and environmental sustainability, divestment can be seen contributing to an expanding social justice orientation within the environmental movement.

Despite the reformist appearance of the tactic, core organizers of the movement predominantly hold transformative views. The inclusion of both modificational and transformational CJAs helps to maintain broad support for the movement, creates space for radicals and reformists to work together, and has ushered participants that arrived to divestment with mainstream environmental perspectives through a process of politicization that shifts worldviews towards a transformational CJA. But further asserting the movement's transformational orientation also has benefits. Embracing transformational CJAs across the movement not only represents an opportunity to strengthen relationships with social justice allies

and embolden calls for climate justice in Canada, but also an opportunity to expand the critical economic discourse already taking place.

An underacknowledged aspect of divestment discourse is the connection between intersectional climate justice analysis and anti-capitalism. The prevalence of anti-capitalist perspectives in divestment exemplifies how the movement counters “green growth” paradigms of mainstream environmentalism. Chapter three has looked more deeply at the primary frames of anti-capitalist critique exhibited by divestment organizers: (1) system transformation in response to climate change and the exploitation of people and ecological resources, (2) corporate capture of democratic institutions, and (3) the contradictory logic of economic growth without end. My analysis suggests that divestment campaigns can also actively subvert neoliberal capitalist ideology (1) by shifting the emphasis away from small-scale individual climate action to collective political action, (2) by challenging the disembeddedness and depoliticization of public finance and institutions; and (3) by spreading a social consciousness within the movement critical of capitalist hegemony. While this critical economic analysis is primarily framed through climate justice, engaging more deeply with contemporary anti-capitalist literature could help the movement consider other unaddressed characteristics of capitalism, such as private property. This might inspire a broader conversation about proposals for more democratic control of collective pools of capital, public investment, or public ownership. Campaigns to divest pension funds have started in a number of cities and unions, but other forms of intervention that disrupt fossil fuel capital, many eco-socialist in nature, could complement the ongoing work of the divestment and climate justice movements.

This research helps depict a more nuanced picture of the fossil fuel divestment movement in Canada by accounting for climate justice and grounding the narrative of divestment in the

voices of movement organizers. I have demonstrated throughout this thesis the significance of CJAs in organizing for divestment. But what is the significance of divestment campaigning to the broader environmental movement and movement for climate justice? Addressing the remaining guiding research questions (what impact do organizers think the divestment movement is having? What do they consider the most significant outcomes of their campaign?) provides insight into how these movements reinforce CJAs and reveals why, despite an acknowledgement of the tactic's limitations and a public perception of reformist approach, radical organizers continue to show up for divestment. In this concluding chapter I highlight how academic literature on divestment often prioritizes economic considerations, and in doing so overlooks powerful social impacts of divestment most valued by organizers, including the counter-hegemonic potential of transformative CJAs.

### ***Overview of Divestment Literature and Research Contributions***

Over 800 institutions around the world have pledged to divest from fossil fuels, with an approximate organizational asset value of \$5.57 trillion (Fossil Free, 2018). Movement supporters promote these figures to demonstrate the speed of growth and international success of the fossil fuel divestment movement. Demonstrating the growth of divestment can be understood as a strategic choice by organizers to maintain narratives of movement momentum, but alone forms an inadequate representation of the divestment movement. For a campaign with an objective to socially and politically stigmatize the fossil fuel industry, focusing on quantitative and economic indicators seems an incompatible, or at least incomplete, form of measurement. Yet, given the popularity of these metrics, it is perhaps unsurprising that academic consideration of divestment's effectiveness is likewise often framed in terms of money moved, institutional



acceptances, or impact on companies' bottom line. This is true for both economic research critical of divestment (see: Ansar et al. 2013<sup>21</sup>; Linnenluecke et al. 2015; Ritchie & Dowlatabadi 2014, 2015; Tollefson 2015) and that which favours it as an effective portfolio strategy (see: Ansar et al. 2013; Beer, 2016; Leaton et al., 2013; Rubin, 2016; Sanzillo et. al, 2018; Trinks et. al, 2018). But this economic framing fails to engage with divestment's higher level movement goals, and does not consider the social impacts of divestment.

The divestment movement has been dismissed as having a limited direct effect on actual greenhouse gas emissions reductions - and therefore discredited by some as an ineffective tactic for addressing climate change. For example, the Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions published a report by Ritchie & Dowlatabadi (2015) titled "Fossil Fuel Divestment: Reviewing Arguments, Implications and Policy Opportunities", which evaluates three core assumptions of fossil fuel divestment campaigns for the consideration of institutional investors. Of note is the limited characterization of divestment campaigns' scope, focusing on the assumption that "divesting from publicly listed energy companies will keep fossil fuels in the ground" (Ritchie & Dowlatabadi, 2015, p.12), which they deem unfounded. But their argument hinges on the declining role of publicly traded companies in global energy production, and fails to examine how shifting social and political landscapes contribute to pressure against developing fossil fuels (including nationalized resources). This type of divestment analysis invisibilizes key movement-building functions, like the development of climate justice approaches, that have the potential to strengthen the environmental movement's role in making transformational change. It is not the act of divesting that has a singular causal relationship with keeping fossil fuels in the ground, it is

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<sup>21</sup> Ansar et al. 2013 is listed as critical and favourable of divestment because their report demonstrates that direct impacts of divestment on fossil fuel companies or the industry have been limited, though coal is the most vulnerable to divestment. However, they also recognize the stigmatization of the industry through divestment to be significant.

the *movement* for fossil fuel divestment that contributes to conditions wherein those fossil fuel reserves must be abandoned.

Social movement studies and historical analysis has more effectively embedded the fossil fuel divestment movement in the political context of similar protest tactics. Apfel (2015) and Dordi (2016) compare fossil fuel divestment with divestment campaigns to end apartheid in South Africa. However, Apfel's (2015) analysis "Exploring Divestment as a Strategy for Change: An Evaluation of the History, Success, and Challenges of Fossil Fuel Divestment" generally still discusses divestment success with an economic frame. This is interesting, because an under-attended point of divergence between fossil fuel and Anti-Apartheid divestment is how moral versus financial arguments have been prioritized. Most accounts of the Anti-Apartheid Divestment movement (like Soule, 1996 & 2008) imply that campaigns did not concern themselves with finding alternative investment opportunities for their administrators.

My research has built on recent literature about the significant role of 'justice' motives in divestment (Bratman et al., 2016; Grady-Benson & Sarathy, 2015; Mangat et al., 2018; Rowe et al, 2016) and adds depth to discourse on the movement's qualitative political and social impacts. Grady-Benson and Sarathy (2015) published what appears to be the first evaluation of fossil fuel divestment in the social sciences to consider themes of transformational change. They summarize:

The DSN [Divestment Student Network] politic also encourages students to understand the potential of their collective power to make systemic change, and engages students in FFD [fossil fuel divestment] organizing to shift the policies of institutions in contrast to individualized behavioral change. In essence, students transform their own understandings about societal distributions of power and root causes of environmental

harm through their participation in the DSN and local FFD campaigns. (Grady-Benson & Sarathy, 2015, p.6)

My research substantiates Grady-Benson and Sarathy's observations about the US student divestment movement, and further analyzes the role of climate justice in politicizing youth, shifting worldviews, and developing a politic of transformational change.

Analyzing Climate Justice Approaches also offers unique insight into how more radical climate justice narratives, like anti-capitalism, have developed within a tactic that relies on engagement with the dominant socio-economic systems. University divestment campaigns represent an important struggle in the contested cultural hegemony of neoliberal capitalism because post-secondary institutions are pillars of intellectual hegemony and thought leadership. By engaging with campus divestment campaigns' critiques of capitalism, this research also contributes to conversations about the neoliberal university's relationship to corporate capital in a petro-producing country. Further research in this direction could use the university fossil fuel divestment movement, and the unique challenges it faces in Canada, to explore questions about the relationship between the corporate power of fossil fuel industries and Canada's public institutions. For example, what might comparing fossil fuel and Anti-Apartheid divestment movements tell us about the nature of the university institution today? Has increased dependence on external investments and donations impacted universities' ability to respond to crisis of ethical responsibility? What might be learned about the relationship between students and administration, or administration and their fund managers, by comparing Anti-Apartheid divestment campaigns to fossil fuel divestment in this light?

## *Social Impacts of Climate Justice Approaches in Divestment*

What does winning look like for social movements? Campaigns reach targeted goals, achieve stated demands, or fail to do so. But how do you measure the success of a social movement like divestment against an ever evolving landscape of social and political change? How do we measure movement success when justice is the goal? Understanding the CJAs learned and applied within divestment reveals what types of change organizers seek to make, and allows us to evaluate the impacts of the movement based on what goals and visions campaigns are setting for themselves.

The responses shared by interviewees when asked what they consider the most significant impact of the fossil fuel divestment movement stand in stark contrast to the framing of the PICS report and other economically focused assessments. All interviewees focused on social impacts of divestment. Most interviewees told stories of personal growth and transformation through divestment organizing that led them to engage more deeply in climate justice issues. Multiple interviewees referred to divestment as a “gateway drug” to activism, and reflected on the ongoing involvement and leadership in the environmental community from young people who became politicized in divestment campaigns. Organizers reflected on the significance of community-building processes that shift individualized responsibility for climate change and isolated attempts at climate action towards an embrace of collective action. This collective power can be mobilized for participation in institutional politics, but also lays the foundation for action outside the scope of formal civil society engagements<sup>22</sup>. These examples of social impact have been touched on throughout this thesis. Below I elaborate on common themes from organizers’

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<sup>22</sup> For example, Alex H notes another advantage of fossil fuel divestment is the ability for campaigns to maintain momentum outside of election cycles, which confine or divert many NGOs and civil society campaigns. He says, “I think elections are really important. But they’re not the only thing, and organizing has to happen 365 days a year. So finding constructive outlets to organize around an issue that is not tied to the electoral cycle is really important. So that’s part of what attracted me to divestment.” (Alex H, Q27)

reflections that highlight additional social impacts, such as building skills for social movement organizing, developing relationships within activist communities, participating in solidarity and allyship efforts, and engaging the public in critical thinking about climate change. While often qualitative in nature or difficult to measure, these social impacts of divestment organizing convey a story of movement success beyond the narrative of campaigns won or lost.

Building skills for social movement organizing was a major theme reported by interviewees when discussing divestment's impact. The logic is that through building a broadly coalesced environmental movement wherein organizers have the skills to strategically challenge the power of the fossil fuel industry (and more), the suite of tactics will create a movement strong enough to keep fossil fuels in the ground. Organizers describe the value of building a student movement where young people learn to think critically about their institutions, begin to strategize around formations of structural power, and, often from the disillusionment of engaging with unresponsive or un-transparent public bodies, become comfortable engaging in non-violent direct action tactics. This serves as a lesson in theories of change beyond conventional participation in democratic institutions, and primes young people to take radical action outside of the university setting. This can be seen in the mass arrest of students and youth on Parliament Hill in the fall of 2016, who aimed to deliver the message to newly elected Liberal federal government that "climate leaders don't build pipelines" in opposition to the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain expansion project (Cheadle, 2016). The protests, peacefully executed by participants, were organized by many of the same young people who campaign for divestment (see: Cutmore, 2017 for publication on Climate 101 protests by research participant).

In the development of activist communities, the process of building relationships through campaigning together is understood as key to retaining organizing capacity (McAdam, 1988). This rings true in divestment, where organizers emphasized the importance of personal relationships in motivating their involvement in divestment<sup>23</sup> and in maintaining the campaign through difficult times<sup>24</sup>. Choudry (2015) further argues that social change requires places where people can come together and learn collectively, and that the informal learning that takes place in activism “can greatly enrich, broaden and challenge dominant understandings of how and where education, learning, and knowledge production occur and what these look like” (Choudry, 2015, p.1). This perspective affirms that the *process* of organizing and learning through the movement building practices employed are integral to the value of the divestment movement.

Where approaches to climate justice focus on solidarity and allyship organizers also believe that divestment can have tangible benefits for communities on the frontlines of climate justice and other social justice issues. Some of the examples referenced by participants include Divest Dal’s support of Mi’kmaq resistance to the Alton Gas project, UofT 350 organizers bringing supplies for Black Lives Matter! Tent City, UBCC 350’s support of the Coast Salish nations fighting the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline expansion, Divest UWinnipeg organizers visiting the resistance camps at Standing Rock or supporting Shoal Lake 40 in their fight to access safe water and community services, and additional demonstrations of public support for a range of social issues. It is not my place to make claims about the quality of

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<sup>23</sup> In response to a question about why he got involved with divestment, Simon GS said “why I got involved was 90% because of the people that were already involved in it. So there were some key individuals that were already involved in it, that were really influential to me, and I respected them a lot..As far as what drew me to divestment, it was the people.” (Simon GS, Q3)

<sup>24</sup> Stephanie G in response to Q4: “But definitely we subscribe to the idea that you stick around in organizations, and sometimes emotionally draining organizations, for the people and because you are working towards those things together.”

allyship from the divestment movement, nor would it be possible to make broad assertions given the diversity of campaign approaches. In fact, many organizers shared critical reflections on their campaign's solidarity efforts and expressed the need to improve allyship within divestment. Still, building relationships of solidarity with frontline, Indigenous and marginalized communities is understood as being crucial to the ongoing work of climate justice.

The external impact of fossil fuel divestment campaigning most discussed by organizers is public education on climate change. Specifically, divestment organizers credit the movement with infusing campus discussions with climate justice narratives, and shifting the perception of who is most responsible for climate change impacts and action. Congruent with common knowledge in activist communities, Hall and Turay (2006) discuss how social movements can also play a major educative role for broader publics. Organizers see this as an important contribution of their work and believe that by highlighting stories of industry negligence and climate change denial the divestment movement has challenged the presumption that the fossil fuel industry should have a seat at the table in climate change discussions.

Not only do organizers believe that their campaigns have generally elevated the issue of climate change on campus, many think that through teaching climate justice in divestment they are participating in a shift toward more radical positions on social issues. Alex H referenced the Overton Window concept, to explain that even without achieving the stated goals of the campaign, divestment groups can still have a significant impact. Srnicek (2015) describes the Overton Window as:

the bandwidth of ideas and options that can be realistically discussed by politicians, public intellectuals and news media, and thus accepted by the public. The general window of realistic options emerges out of a complex nexus of causes...Though

emerging from the intersection of different elements, the Overton window has a power of its own to shape which future paths are taken by societies and governments. (Srnicek, 2015, p.134)

Schifeling and Hoffman (2017) apply similar theory, referred to as the “radical flank effect”, in their analysis of Bill McKibben influence on the public discourse. They conclude that the presence of radical flank actors like Bill McKibben and 350.org, leading advocates of fossil fuel divestment, increased the legitimacy of preexisting (liberal) policy ideas that had previously been limited to the periphery of popular climate conversation.

This result expands theory on indirect pathways to institutional change through a discursive radical flank mechanism, and suggests that the actual influence of Bill McKibben on the U.S. climate debate goes beyond the precise number of schools that divest to include a shift in the social and political discourse. (Schifeling & Hoffman, 2017, p.1)

Simon GS, describes this as a process of trying to weave values like transparency and justice into the fabric of institutions<sup>25</sup>. As divestment expands and re-politicizes the climate change conversation, campaigns serve as an incubator for climate justice perspectives.

Social impacts of the divestment movement are clearly of paramount importance for organizers. Accounting for these social impacts is also critical if we are to assess the divestment movement’s role in contesting the limitations of conservation and sustainable development paradigms in mainstream environmentalism. This is because divestment campaigns understand themselves as a *movement*, above a financial transaction, that is interacting and building

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<sup>25</sup> Simon GS in response to Q11: “I always thought it was like, weaving climate justice into the fabric of your institutions. So once you have an investments pattern that’s got climate justice in it, then we can have a urban planning thing... It’s got to be a lens through which you look at the world, and if you start with finances in institutions, I think that’s a really good place to start.”



momentum for broader climate and environmental transformation (Rowe et al., 2016). And movements reshape what is possible; movements change the world. Experience with divestment organizing is contributing to a generation of young environmental leaders' worldviews, frames of analysis, and movement-building practices. I have argued in this thesis that divestment's alignment with climate justice is working towards a more conceptually inclusive environmental movement, which recognizes the social construction and cultural politics of 'environmental problems' and contributes to a justice-oriented environmentalism. This, in concert with the many social impacts highlighted by organizers, leads me to believe that ongoing organizing and political engagement by divestment participants has not only advanced the climate movement, but will also have long-term ripple effects on mainstream environmentalism.

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