

SOLIDARITY, NOT CHARITY:
MUTUAL AID IN NATURAL DISASTER RELIEF

By Zoe Kenney

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Janine Schipper, Ph.D., Chair

Yvonne Luna, Ph.D.

Douglas Degher, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

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This paper focuses on Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR), a grassroots organization providing natural disaster relief rooted in the principles of mutual aid and autonomous direct action. Through participant-observation of a series of workshops and semi-structured interviews with activists and organizers, this research explores why it is that individuals are motivated to act within this grassroots network, as opposed to participating in other efforts in response to natural disasters. Through an exploration of MADR's collaborative approach to disaster relief and their focus on the social implications of climate chaos, as well as an analysis of their guiding principles and organizational structure, this paper highlights the ways in which state, federal, and industrial non-profit assistance often fall short in meeting the needs of marginalized individuals and communities, while speaking to how these gaps might be filled in ways that would reduce vulnerability while building longitudinal resilience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction _____	2
2. Literature Review _____	8

Disaster Studies _____	8
Social Construction of Natural Disaster _____	25
Mutual Aid _____	30
Neoliberalism _____	33
3. Methods _____	37
Methodology _____	38
Participant Observation _____	39
In-depth Interviews _____	42
Limitations _____	45
Positionality _____	46
4. Findings and Analysis _____	51
Care and Connection _____	51
Conceptualizing Disaster _____	54
Critiquing Conventional Relief _____	57
Mutual Aid as Resistance _____	60
Mutual Aid as Birthright _____	63
The Urgency and Impact of Climate Change _____	64
Other Motivating Factors _____	65
Defining Vulnerability _____	66
MADR: Aid Grounded in Analysis _____	69
5. Conclusion _____	70
6. Appendix A _____	74

Chapter One: Introduction

In the world of disaster relief and recovery, there is ongoing debate about how best to respond to the needs of those impacted by natural disasters. Well-established, conventional non-profits, as well as relief efforts originating within the state, are both lauded and critiqued for their

efforts to support and protect communities before, during, and in the wake of extreme weather and geologic events. The significant roles and public visibility of organizations such as FEMA and the Red Cross cannot be understated in the days, weeks, and months following hurricanes, wildfires, earthquakes, floods, and tornadoes; time and again, these groups seek to mitigate the devastation caused by such disasters and return affected communities to “normalcy.”

Over the years, however, there has been mounting debate over the efficacy of these “top-down” approaches to disaster relief and recovery. Perhaps most acutely since the socio-political shortcomings surrounding Hurricane Katrina in 2005, relief efforts in the United States have come under question for their ability to effectively and equitably distribute aid and restore affected regions to states of stability. In response to these perceived failures, a number of grassroots relief organizations have emerged, gaining visibility and traction as alternatives to traditional relief models. These groups provide “bottom-up” relief to communities in ways that challenge the conventions and assumptions of governmental and large-scale non-profit philosophies and tactics.

One such grassroots organization is Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR), “a grassroots network whose mission is to provide disaster relief based on the principles of solidarity, mutual aid, and autonomous direct action” (The Action Network 2018). In this thesis, I seek to explore why individuals are motivated to act within this grassroots capacity, as opposed to participating in other forms of volunteer or activist work in response to natural disasters.

While there is a significant body of social science literature evaluating, critiquing, and exploring various forms of response to natural disasters, with many studies evaluating the practicality and effectiveness of various organizational response or the experiences and outcomes of individuals and populations impacted by disaster, few engage directly with the participants

and organizers of grassroots relief efforts. With this thesis, I aim to contribute an analysis of a one horizontal organization comprised of volunteers who engage directly, autonomously, and mutualistically with the communities to whom they seek to provide relief. Through interviews with various individuals involved with MADR, as well as participant-observation during a two-day workshop hosted by the organization, my research explores the beliefs, motivations, and efforts of actors involved. In doing so, I discuss how MADR affiliates define the work that they do in relation to conventional relief and recovery and understand their role in a society that creates a range of disaster experiences and outcomes.

In the next chapter, I explore literature pertinent central to disaster studies, as well as both mutual aid and neoliberal responses to relief, recovery, and social justice. Chapter Three discusses the methods employed in this study, including participant observation in a two-day workshop hosted by MADR and a series of in-depth interviews I conducted with seven affiliates engaged with the organization in various capacities and disaster contexts. The findings from the qualitative data I gathered are analyzed in Chapter Four, wherein key themes from my field observations and interviews are elaborated upon. The centrality of care, the social construction of natural disaster, critiques of conventional relief efforts, resistance to social injustice and oppression, the innate value of mutual aid, and the looming threat of climate change are framed as underlying motivations compelling participants to act within MADR's capacities. Definitions of vulnerability in contemporary United States society are also discussed through the lens of MADR's mission, presenting ideas about vulnerable populations that both align with and depart from how these groups are viewed in sociological literature and conventional relief efforts.

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief: History, Philosophy, and Organization

On their website, MADR traces their roots to two organizations: Common Ground, established in New Orleans in the months following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and Occupy Sandy, a volunteer network responding to Hurricane Sandy in 2012, whose mobilization was facilitated by the ongoing Occupy Wall Street protest in Zuccotti Park. Many principles and an indeterminate number of participants from these groups were subsequently involved with the development of MADR. While Common Ground and Occupy Sandy were organized in the aftermaths of isolated natural disasters, MADR differs from its predecessors with regard to its longitudinal, cross-national vision for establishing a network of volunteers, organizers, and activists prepared to respond to a number of disasters in their given communities and beyond.

Currently, MADR consists of a national network of activists and a steering committee of roughly twelve members, as well as various affinity groups and semi-autonomous working groups throughout the United States. MADR is modeled on decentralization and horizontalism, emphasizing within their organizational design that “everyone who shares the mutual aid disaster relief vision and principles is welcome to join, and can choose ‘Mutual Aid Disaster Relief’ or any other name for the independent efforts that inspire them” (MADR 2017).

MADR follows the Zapatista principle “*mandar obedeciendo*” (“leadership from below”) in encouraging a shift away from reliance on capitalism, the state, and the industrial non-profit sector and toward the principles of mutual aid. Their focus on direct action with the intention to build sustainable networks illustrates the intention to provide more than just disaster relief, but to nurture lasting resilience and social change. With an emphasis on coalition-building, MADR aligns itself philosophically and materially with nearly 60 organizations, listed on its website as “co-conspirators,” including Black Lives Matters, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Appalachian Medical Solidarity, Islamic Relief, and the Indigenous Environmental Network.

MADR acknowledges that natural disasters can present “shocks” to affected communities, disrupting the normalcy of day-to-day life and presenting opportunities for various interventions from a range of actors and institutions. These shocks present the opportunity for the rapid and undemocratic implementation of neoliberal economic policies, also known as “disaster capitalism,” in which there are “opportunities for the rich and powerful to consolidate power and to take advantage of shocks in order to institute economic reforms that further reinforce their privileged status” (MADR 2017). MADR’s horizontal structure and community-oriented efforts are intended to mitigate the imposition of such responses that are profit-motivated and out-of-touch which the unique needs of each community, especially vulnerable populations.

A Note on My Personal Motivation

While this project explores the motives behind actors’ involvement with MADR, I want to speak briefly to my own motivations in pursuing this line of research.

From the ages of three to twenty-one, I lived on the Gulf Coast of Florida. I spent my childhood in a quintessentially Floridian, suburban development, right down to the stucco-wall homes and golf course bordering backyards. My parents and I relocated from Maryland one month before Hurricane Andrew devastated South Florida in 1992, and in the years that followed, I experienced many tropical weather systems firsthand. Fortunately, our home was built to withstand hurricane-force winds and our property was not flood-prone.

A few days after one particularly direct hit, my mother, a reporter for the local newspaper, took me along with her as she reported on the hurricane’s impact on our area (public schools were still closed as cleanup efforts were underway and the electric company worked to restore power in our area). We drove out the front entrance of our neighborhood, crossed a busy

road, and pulled onto a much rougher street, sloping downward. I had hardly noticed this street before, as it was obscured by well-established live oaks, their branches blanketed in Spanish moss. We'd barely progressed down this street before we were faced with feet of standing water. The houses on either side of the aging pavement were flooded to their rooflines and second floors. My mother and I were greeted by a local resident (I'm not sure how my mom knew this woman, but she has always had a way of making connections in our community) who helped us into a small boat and gently motored us along for a tour of the flooded street. I walked away from the experience shocked at the devastation, which was unlike anything my sheltered childhood had exposed me to, wondering how people living less than a mile from my own front door could be confronted with a different reality from mine altogether.

That late Florida summer day, humid and sunny, without a cloud in the sky, exposed me to the inequalities latent in disaster impacts and the intensity of subsequent recovery. Until then, I thought that the whole of disaster relief entailed garbage cans full of fallen branches, new shingles for the roof, long days with no air conditioning, and a few days off from school. The dramatic difference between my own family's experience and that of the neighbors I never even knew I had shed light on how vulnerability and hazard were shaped by our social locations; that day, the blinders of my solidly middle-class upbringing fell away.

In the chapters that follow, I explore dynamics of disaster relief and recovery from my current location, as a graduate student of sociology. The awareness of difference informed by my education, as well as my deep, personal interest in both social justice and natural disaster issues motivated me to explore this topic. By focusing on grassroots disaster relief efforts, I hope to shed light on the ways in which communities can come to know one another more authentically, by both reaching out and accepting aid from neighbors we may not have noticed in the past.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In order to develop my analysis of Mutual Aid Disaster relief and the motivations of individuals who choose to act within this grassroots network for disaster relief and recovery, I will ground my project in the following areas of relevant literature: disaster studies, mutual aid, and neoliberalism. Through an examination of these fields of study, I hope to emphasize the fundamentals of the natural disaster relief and recovery field and explore various ways that pertinent concepts have been conceptualized historically, pointing toward how they might be re-envisioned for the future.

Contributions from the field of disaster studies — namely, the concepts of resilience, vulnerability, and risk — demonstrate how matrices of socioeconomic conditions, geography, and resources create various conditions under which individuals and communities experience

natural disasters and their aftermaths. Literature on mutual aid and neoliberalism illustrate two differing social, economic, and political orientations, each of which manifest variously in the realm relief and recovery organizing; it is important to understand both of these theories (and their material outcomes) in relation to one another, as they provide distinct rationales for disparate relief and recovery tactics and philosophies.

Disaster Studies

Disaster studies explore the concepts of risk, vulnerability, and resilience in populations and systems by examining a range of disasters and their eco-socio-cultural impacts. Risk, vulnerability, and resilience are related concepts, each of which ties into the other, providing tools for understanding the ways in which various socially constructed groups and identities navigate disaster and recovery.

Resilience

In socio-ecological literature, resilience is defined as “the ability of social entities [...] to absorb the impacts of external and internal system shocks without losing the ability to function, and failing that, to cope, adapt, and recover from those shocks” (Tierney 2014: 6). Intuitively, resilience has deeper roots in communities frequently exposed to disaster risks, whereas “in locations characterized by less frequent hazard activity [...] a more challenging risk management environment” exists (Paton 2006: 5). Despite public debate surrounding climate change and the risk of rising sea levels, Neumann, et al (2015) document the demographic shift toward rising population in coastal areas, with density and urbanization on the rise in sea-level rise-prone areas

worldwide. Between the documented increase in natural disaster frequency and shifts in social geography, the cultivation of resilience is of heightened importance.

Speaking to the effects of natural disasters on population-dense urban environments, Pelling (2003) discusses Wildavsky's (1988) six principles of resilient systems, adapting them to explore environmental risk in the city. Among these, the flatness principle, in which "overly hierarchical systems are less flexible and hence less able to cope with surprise and adjust behavior," and the high flux principle, which emphasizes the need for resources to be able to move quickly through a system, seem particularly pertinent to resilience as set forth through MADR's principles (2003: 8). These resilience principles were embodied in the efforts of Occupy Sandy, an organization with similar philosophical and practical alignments to MADR, in 2012. Indeed, a 2013 report titled "The Resilient Social Network," published by an analysis center sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security, attributed Occupy Sandy's effective response to their rapid emergence and "lack of traditional leadership" (44). The DHS's acknowledgement of the strengths of response efforts rooted in the Occupy movement – a movement established to critique capitalism and the state – speaks volumes to how alternative, grassroots relief organizing can inform perspectives on resilience in contemporary society.

Principles of resilience can apply to individuals, with factors such as "age, sex, education, ethnicity and employment status" playing a role in people's varying abilities to absorb shocks (van Kessel, et al 2015: 329). However, as Lowe, et al (2015) indicate, "individual- and community-level resources and exposure operate in tandem to shape post-disaster resilience" (13). Lowe points to the interplay of individual factors, such as age, ethnicity, habitation status, personal exposure to prior disasters, and mental health, along with community-level factors such as median household income, population density, and infrastructural exposure to prior disasters

in shaping the psychological resilience and outcomes in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy (2015: 5). In addition, emergency management systems, public health interventions, direct communication, and community capacity all contribute significantly to resilience in times of unforeseen disaster (van Kessel, et al 2015). On the level of policy, Bakkensen, et al (2017) note that “despite risk management to lessen impacts, losses have increased over time,” in the wake of natural disasters, ushering in new management strategies to strengthen resilience at the governmental, corporate, and nonprofit levels (982, 999).

Expanding upon the concept of socio-ecological resilience, Folke, et al. (2010) define this concept’s three key components: persistence, adaptability, and transformability (3). Among these facets of resiliency, *transformability* is perhaps the most aligned with the principles of mutual aid and the scope of this project, in which the transformation of social conditions beyond the immediate scope of the disaster event is the ultimate goal. As Folke, et al. indicate, “transformational change often involves shifts in perception and meaning, social network configurations, patterns of interactions among actors including leadership and political and power relations, and associated organizational and institutional arrangements” (6). The transformative potential for disaster relief rooted in socio-ecological resilience speaks to the positive potential for meaningful efforts to generate grassroots movements oriented toward restorative justice, not only as a way of doing relief work, but as a means of generating lasting social change. As Baharmand, et al. (2016) note, while there is a significant amount of literature addressing the importance of resilience in disaster relief, “adequate insight into how response organizations try to foster and approach community level resilience in the aftermath of a disaster is still largely absent from the academic debate” (3). Through this project, I intend to speak to

this gap in the academic literature around the facilitation of resilient social structures and practices in an increasingly disaster-prone world.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability “conceptualized as a function of exposure to risk and as an ability to adapt to the effects” speaks to the ways in which populations have more-or-less limited abilities to cope with the impacts of disaster (Molnar 2010, 6). When one considers the risks of interfacing with the state faced by marginalized, criminalized, and underprivileged groups, it is no surprise that these factors can prove detrimental to certain populations in the path or aftermath of disaster, often resulting in challenges to obtaining the same relief resources that are accessible to others.

Drawing on the Foucauldian theory of biopower, Achille Mbembe (2003) proposes a theory of necropolitics, arguing that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (11). Critical evaluations of administrative violence perpetrated against marginalized groups indicate the reality that in the case of natural disasters “the politics of disposability is increasingly operationalized in local and global places faced with rebuilding after disaster or crisis” (Nix-Stevenson 2013: 1). This politics of disposability can be considered in terms of necropolitics through which “whole populations are consigned to death” (Haritaworn, et al 2015: 7).

Within this necropolitical framework, vulnerability is crucial in the maldistribution of life chances, particularly with regard to impacts among marginalized groups. Necropolitical analysis assumes that the right to survive is formulated as a privilege invisibly afforded to the normative citizen with reliable access to both public and private resources, while those who fall outside of this construction struggle without the support of the state or access to capital. Ultimately,

structural violence and neglect are central to necropolitics (Haritaworn 2015). Similarly, we see these two factors in the experience and aftermath of natural disasters; whether through administrative violence or through the politics of disposability central to necropolitics, the right to survival is often compromised among those located within vulnerable populations.

Vulnerable populations

Vulnerability, in its myriad dimensions, can be understood through proximity to resources. Disparities in access to resources can manifest in heightened vulnerability for certain populations at all points on the disaster timeline. In anticipation of trackable disasters, such as hurricanes and wildfires, evacuations can be encouraged or mandated by public officials. However, the ability to evacuate in a safe and effective manner is not universal. While Mayor Ray Nagin strongly encouraged evacuation as Hurricane Katrina barreled toward the Gulf Coast of Louisiana, criticism circulated that this announcement came too late for many residents to take effective action. Furthermore, it is documented that “many didn’t have cars or other means to [evacuate], and officials knew that the city’s plans to help transport them had significant holes, including a lack of sufficient drivers” (Fink 29). As Klein (2007) argues, “the images of people stranded on New Orleans rooftops will not only be a glimpse of America’s unresolved past of racial inequality but will also foreshadow a collective future of disaster apartheid in which survival is determined by who can afford to pay for escape” (530).

Race can be a key determinant in the vulnerabilities faced by certain populations. Regardless of any given point in the timeline of a disaster, certain communities face universally heightened vulnerability. Some of these communities, such as racial minorities and the elderly

are the focus of substantial research. Powell, et al. (2006) discuss the potential for transformation in regard to race in the United States through the lens of Hurricane Katrina and its impact on New Orleans. In order to realize this potential, the authors urge a “structural frame of analysis” allowing for “a move away from the discourses of meritocracy and separation [...] to a framework that realizes ‘we’re all in this together’” (80). Until this transformative potential is realized, racial categories continue to define certain populations as more vulnerable, reflecting “present inequities in light of the historical injustices that have allowed them to emerge” (80).

The racialization of natural disasters is not a new phenomenon, and race has consistently been documented as a marker of vulnerability in disaster contexts (Hartman and Squires 2006; Marable and Clarke 2008; Bullard 2018). In his historical analysis of the social construction of natural disaster in the United States, Ted Steinberg (2006) traces the inscription of racialized assumptions and social dynamics in disaster contexts as far back as the 1886 Charleston earthquake, noting that “the obsessive focus on black emotionalism is perhaps the defining rhetorical feature of the white postdisaster reaction” (13). Today, natural disasters continue to be experienced in varying ways that are informed by race and rhetoric. While white disaster survivors may be seen as resorting to “appropriating behavior,” black survivors are publicly criticized for “looting” — in many cases, the intentions behind these behaviors are the same, rooted in necessity and survival (Barsky, et al. 2006). Rebecca Solnit (2009) critiques the use of the word “looting” in popular discourse, arguing that it is “an inflammatory, inexact word that might best be excised from the English language” (237). Furthermore, studies indicate that media representations of racialized looting are inaccurate and often function to generate fear in the population (Fischer 1998; Barsky, et al 2006).

Those with health needs make up another vulnerable community facing disproportionate threats in the face of natural disasters. The Center for Healthy Communities at the University of South Alabama (2007) indicates that sick and disabled are confronted with “a constellation of post-disaster environmental and social disruptions [that] overlap and intertwine to severely impact patients' daily lives and chronic disease management” (19). These disruptions include shortages of basic resources (food, water, safe shelter), loss of electricity (essential for the medically energy-dependent), and loss of reliable transportation. Furthermore, anxiety is considered a crucial factor in wellness, as “fear and stress about meeting basic needs may exacerbate chronic conditions, especially among the elderly” (CHC 2007: 19). In the days leading up to Hurricane Katrina, Mayor Nagin encouraged individuals with significant health concerns to relocate to the Superdome for shelter. However, as history showed and scholars have subsequently analyzed, the Superdome was a site representative of the massive administrative failures that was the official response to Katrina’s, failures which “were not due to any one person or organization, but rather were problems of coordination at the interfaces between multiple organizations and multiple levels of government” (Bier 243).

The vulnerability of the infirm often intersects with another profoundly vulnerable community: those occupying lower socioeconomic positions. Again, we observe this dynamic when we look to Katrina as a case study. Klein (2007) highlights the disparity at the nexus of health and poverty through a comparison of treatment, resources, and the relative vulnerabilities between outcomes at Ochsner Hospital (located on the less flood-prone, whiter, middle-class Westbank) and Charity Hospital (located in the heart of downtown New Orleans, a behemoth complex that remains shuttered to this day). The dissimilitude between the lower and middle-upper classes in New Orleans is also evident when one considers patterns of evacuation, in which

“the economically secure drove out of town, checked into hotels, and called their insurance companies” (515-6). Meanwhile, approximately 120,000 New Orleans residents stayed behind and faced the devastation of the engineering and administrative failures that came to define Katrina (516). A sub-group of the socioeconomically underprivileged, the homeless, face hazards similar to those living in poverty more broadly, including heightened exposure, social stigma, and unequal resources (Settembrino 2017).

Similarly, physical and mental ability are factors in vulnerability in the face of natural disaster. Mobility, energy dependence, access to medication and medical equipment, personal independence, and differences in communication present a small handful of ways in which one’s ability may present heightened risk during the disruption to normalcy presented by disaster events. In *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), Alison Kafer speaks to the ways in which compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness shape the experience of disability, advocating for reimagining social arrangements in ways that center justice. Unfortunately, in the context of contemporary neoliberal society, the needs of those seen as disabled are relegated the private realm of the family to bear the burden when disaster strikes. Without a communitarian orientation informed by the lived experiences of the differently abled, vulnerability can only remain heightened, ignored by the state and rendered invisible through social forces.

Gender can also factor into the vulnerability of certain populations, and the preponderance of disaster studies literature that does address gender focuses on women’s experiences. Jones-DeWeever, et al (2006) center women in their analysis of poverty and vulnerability in the face of natural disasters, noting that “acknowledging and addressing the needs of women ultimately amounts to fulfilling the needs of children, families, and entire communities” (96). The authors argue that centering women’s issues in regard to vulnerability

directly correlates to building resiliency through increasing opportunities for training and education, closing the wage gap to support greater economic freedom, extending access to financial and medical benefits when disaster strikes, engaging the black middle class in matters of planning and rebuilding, ensuring access to affordable childcare, and addressing the roots of poverty in meaningful ways (97-99). Furthermore, domestic violence — an issue that disproportionately threatens women in society — is known to spike during natural disasters (Enarson 1999; Fisher 2010; Parkinson and Zara 2013). Understanding and addressing the distinct vulnerabilities faced by women in times of disaster and recovery may likely help to mitigate the heightened risk they face, as well as generate resilience within their communities broadly.

While gender does receive a significant amount of attention in disaster studies, this focus rarely extends beyond the confines of the gender binary. In comparison to women's issues addressed in the literature, a relatively limited body of research speaks of the ways that queer, trans, and gender non-conforming people experience natural disasters. However, these already vulnerable populations face unique threats that are worthy of sociological attention. As Dean Spade argues in *Normal Life* (2015), equality frameworks illuminate the limitations of the law in addressing the needs of all persons, as they are predicated on the assumptions of normalcy and visibility: law-abiding citizenship, the gender binary, and productivity within a system of capitalism. Within such a system, trans people are especially susceptible to administrative mistreatment at the hands of the state that fails to recognize their needs, their identities, and even their very existence. For marginalized people, interfacing with the state presents a dramatically heightened risk in any context, at times to the degree of fatality. State-operated shelters can present sites of heightened vulnerability for trans and gender non-conforming people as they may

be coerced into outing themselves or facing exclusion on the basis of identification categories that do not apply (Yamashita, et al. 2015; Gaillard, et al. 2016)

Documentation status also impacts the extent to which people experience vulnerability in the face of natural disaster. Carter-Pokras, et al (2007) note that “increased anti-immigrant sentiment and efforts to restrict immigrant access to driver’s licenses, educational opportunities, health care, and other services have had ripple effects throughout the Latino community,” including limiting responses to natural disaster such as Hurricane Katrina and the Northridge Earthquake that impacted Los Angeles, a city with a massive immigrant population (475). UnidosUS, the largest Latino advocacy nonprofit in the United States, released a white paper in 2006, one year after Hurricane Katrina, noting multiple ways in which undocumented immigrants were left vulnerable during and following the storm. This report critiqued FEMA for failing to provide emergency shelter to undocumented people, a lack of clarity around benefits administration for households with mixed citizenship status, and lack of effective communication around evacuation efforts (Muñiz 2006) The “reluctance of immigrants to ask for help” was also cited, as one community-based organization reported “several immigrants who had not been evacuated from an apartment complex in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Latino Memphis delivered food, water, and other supplies to needy residents who preferred to stay in moldy apartments that lacked electricity rather than visit the FEMA distribution site located across the street or the Red Cross because of fear of arrest and deportation” (Muñiz 2006: 8). It is reasonable to assume this reluctance would be maintained in the face of a newly unfolding disaster, with Immigration and Customs Enforcement deporting 256,085 immigrants from the United States in the 2018 fiscal year (The New York Times 2018).

In regard to global vulnerability, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicates climate change and increasingly frequent and intense natural disasters as drivers of displacement in countries around the world. Citing a 2018 report from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, UNHCR notes that the world saw 18.8 million disaster-related displacements in the year 2017 (UNHCR 2018). While people displaced by climate are often referred to by the media, scholars, and in popular discourse as “climate refugees” or “environmental refugees,” the UNHCR argues that this terminology is inappropriate, as there is no international law pertaining to people displaced by natural disaster and climate change “affects people inside their own countries, and typically creates internal displacement before it reaches a level where it displaces people across borders” (UNHCR 2018). However, Todd Miller, a journalist who covers border and immigration issues, points out the transnational reality of the climate change threat on human security, noting that “climate change doesn’t know human political boundaries, it doesn’t only occur in one bounded territory and not impact another” (2017: 210). The inconsistency around how best to categorize people displaced by environmental conditions reflects the ongoing international debate about who is responsible, and to what extent, for the mounting consequences of climate change.

As with any matter of identity, it is essential to consider how intersecting social locations can shape the ways in which the world is experienced. In their discussion of intersectionality, Collins and Bilge (2016) note that “when it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division [...] but by many axes that work together and influence each other” (2). In regard to natural disaster, vulnerability may manifest in unique ways at various intersections of identity. For example, when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, residents who were black

and of lower socioeconomic status experienced loss and challenges in recovery at levels that exceeded those of other groups (Elliott and Pais 2006; Fussell et al 2010). Considering the impacts of disaster on groups at the intersections of their identities provides a more nuanced and urgent lens through which to conceive of vulnerability.

Risk

Together, vulnerability and resiliency can be considered in terms of various social, economic, and political forces, which in turn create matrices of risk that disproportionately affect some groups over others. Risk, however, does not always imply solely negative outcomes. Today, risk can be understood much more dynamically in terms of processes and social conditions than it was to be in the past. As Hannigan (2014) notes, risk assessment, once understood strictly as “a technical activity where results were to be formulated in terms of ‘probabilities’” is now often understood through a constructionist lens (140). However, understanding risk from such a perspective does not remove the material reality of probability and its outcomes altogether. Indeed, Hannigan proceeds to note that “while risk is certainly a sociocultural construct, it cannot be confined to perceptions and social constructions alone” (2014: 143).

Paton (2006) critiques the static association of risk with loss within disaster relief studies, calling for “a return to the original conceptualization of the risk concept, as the probability of an event occurring combined with an accounting for the *gains and the losses* that an event could present” (306). In this sense, risk indicates the potential latent within a moment of intervention to normalcy, a moment in which the potential for adaptation and growth exists alongside the potential for devastation and loss. Klein’s (2018) analysis of Puerto Rico following the

widespread devastation of Hurricane Maria takes this approach to risk, speaking to the “belief that Maria has opened up a window of possibility, one that could yield a fundamental shift to a healthier and more democratic economy -- not just for electricity, but also for food, water, and other necessities of life” (10). In this sense, Puerto Ricans involved with community relief efforts “didn’t just discover what didn’t work [...] They also learned very quickly about a few things that worked surprisingly well” (Klein 2018: 10). Among these risk-generated lessons in resilience, Klein’s interviewees spoke to the strengths of solar power, traditional farming methods, and access to aid through community and diaspora connections in the aftermath of the hurricane.

The probabilities of risk, however, must be factored in seriously if worst case scenarios are to be avoided. While all risks have the potential to be mitigated, human history has shown that the complexities of doing so present real challenges and harsh consequences. This is increasingly the case in the urban environment (many of which are coastal, and therefore confronted by one of climate change’s many threatening faces) wherein “the demographic expansion of cities, increasingly fueled by natural population growth, is a fundamental contributing factor to risk when it outstrips the capacity of the urban economy and skills of urban managers to generate sufficient resources to offer ways of meeting the basic needs of a city’s citizens” (Pelling 2003: 44-45). This inability to effectively manage risk is no doubt associated with New Orleans, where leading up to Hurricane Katrina only two out of eighteen flood-prone hospitals had “located both their generators and electrical switching gear above the ground floor” (Fink 2013: 30). Considering the high rates of energy dependence among ill and hospitalized people in the urban environment, the failure among health administrators and public officials to mitigate this risk raises serious questions about the efficacy of risk management strategies.

Disaster Relief and Recovery — Top-down vs. Bottom-Up approaches

Historically, the state has been one of, if not the most, prominent actors in any given natural disaster in Western society. In the United States, The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is the primary responder to declared emergencies — natural and otherwise. Founded in 1979, FEMA is a far-reaching organization housed within the Department of Homeland Security with a budget of roughly \$15 billion (DHS 2018). In addition to federal responses from FEMA, populations are also subject to state involvement through declared states of emergency, mandatory evacuations, the operation of public shelters, enforced curfews, heightened police and military presence, and, in the most extreme situations, the declaration of martial law. While each of these state-led operations are promoted as interventions with safety and public interest at the forefront, it is important that we consider the limitations of such approaches — whose safety and best interests are being protected, and whose fall by the wayside, creating unsafe and potentially life-threatening conditions as a result?

In recent decades, a substantial body of work has emerged around official responses to natural disasters, including a fair deal of critical interrogation around the shortcomings and failures of “top-down” approaches to relief. Rojas Blanco (2006) argues that local adaptation strategies are necessary alternatives to top-down approaches, as the latter “have become inadequate, due to their inability to create appropriate solutions for local communities” (140).

Illustrating one site of inadequacy within top-down approaches, Liboiron and Wachsmuth (2013) discuss how the comprehensive planning efforts of the Office of Emergency Management and Regional Catastrophic Planning Team in New York City were largely ineffective in response to Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The authors invoke Lee Clarke’s argument that disaster plans are “fantasy documents” that often provide minimal effectiveness in the face of natural disasters’

material realities. The case is made for “action without plans,” in which “networks, rather than plans, provide aid more quickly than ‘the official response’” (5). Clarke emphasizes the “fundamentally rhetorical” nature of so-called “fantasy documents,” disaster plans implemented by business and governments, which are rarely utilized, but rather function to virtue-signal security and preparedness. The conclusion is drawn that such plans do little to secure safety and that the public would be better off (and more prone to developing meaningful alternatives) if large institutions were not to assume and insist on the effectiveness of such fantasy documents.

Again, we turn to Katrina, an event now ingrained in the public psyche as a prime example of top-down failure. Images of stranded New Orleanians “making desperate SOS signs or rafts out of their refrigerator doors [...] shocked the world because, even if most of us had resigned ourselves to the daily inequalities of who has access to healthcare and whose schools have decent equipment, there was still a widespread assumption that disasters were supposed to be different” (Klein 2007: 516). Indeed, it was assumed that the state would “come to the aid of the people during a cataclysmic event,” yet history has shown that this was a deadly assumption indeed (Klein 2007: 516).

Alongside criticisms of top-down relief, many scholars have noted the potentials of “bottom-up” approaches to recovery, also known as community-based or grassroots approaches. Francis Odehmero (2014) emphasizes the unmatched value of local knowledge regarding flood water management in the urban environment of Warri, Nigeria, indicating the strength of community adaptation in combating the effects of climate change and natural disasters. Similarly, Christina Goulding, et al. (2018) explore community-based interventions following the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan, examining “how this community in crisis draws upon social networks, traditions, cultural practices, and collective action to rebuild from

within” (887). Goulding, et al. argue that three phases of community-based disaster relief are central to full recovery, involving engagement pre-disaster, immediately after the disaster, and planning for the future, highlighting the temporal strengths of localized relief organizing (899).

Solnit (2009) discusses the emergence of “disaster communities,” a phenomenon in which social groups coalesce organically in response to crises. Discussing a range of such disaster communities throughout the 20th century, Solnit argues that “these remarkable societies suggest that, just as many machines reset themselves to their original settings after a power outage, so human beings reset themselves to something altruistic, communitarian, resourceful and imaginative after a disaster” (18). The existence of such disaster communities challenges the notion that communities are not capable of organizing in response to crises and that, therefore, the state must intervene in their best interest. Contrary to this narrative, “disaster sociologists’ studies demonstrate not only that panic in the face of disaster ‘is rare,’ but that people in such situations are more inclined to engage in acts of mutual assistance, community solidarity, and altruism” (Miller 112).

Klein (2018) provides an embedded exploration of one such disaster community in Puerto Rico. Casa Pueblo, a public house located in the mountainous inland municipality of Adjuntas, had existed for nearly two decades before Hurricane Maria struck the island. In the aftermath of the storm, and during the state-wide failures that resulted from its impact, this community center transformed into the site of an emergent disaster community. Equipped with solar panels, Casa Pueblo became a local hub for information, electricity, networking, and makeshift healthcare services (2-3). In addition to providing much needed immediate services, activists from Casa Pueblo initiated a grassroots campaign for solar energy proliferation on the island, known as #50ConSol, with the intention of generating long-term resiliency for the island

through the widespread implementation of solar energy, in hopes that local residents might fare better in future natural disasters (Klein 2018: 9). Herein we witness the potential for grassroots responses to climate, both in the short- and long-term, in addressing the self-articulated needs of local communities who have weathered storms and intend to develop sustainable and resilient systems moving forward.

The social construction of natural disasters

Environmental sociologists indicate that what is considered to be the “natural world” is often far-from biologically essential. The very notion of the Anthropocene -- a proposed epoch in which humans and the evolution of the so-called natural world they inhabit are inextricably linked -- indicates that nature, in our post-industrial, globalized world, is socially constructed (Purdy 2015). The social construction of nature is witnessed in tangible (e.g. humans’ direct impact on ecological systems, such as the introduction of pollutants into water sources) and intangible (e.g. through processes of meaning-making) ways. If, indeed, the reality of the Anthropocene is that what is deemed “natural” is, in fact, a product of society, we can extend this framework to our understanding of so-called natural disasters.

Calling into question just how “natural” natural disasters are, Ted Steinberg (2006) explores the role of human intervention, elucidating the economic, political, and sociocultural roots of these events. Through analysis of multiple historical examples, Steinberg critiques the inherently political approach to natural disasters in the United States that “overemphasize[s] the natural factors at play while diminishing the human, social, and economic forces central to these phenomena,” criticizing “the state’s increasing role in rationalizing disaster” and urging the reader to question which interests the normalization of “calamity” have historically served (xxi-xxiv). Steinberg extends his critique of intentionally constructed natural disaster rhetoric to its

ability to further marginalize the disadvantaged, noting that the perpetuation of the status quo in regard to popular ecological understandings “will only help to recruit nature to capital’s side in the war against the poor” (2006: 210).

Likewise, Kathleen Tierney (2014) notes the human interventions that shape the experience of natural disasters, noting that “studies of disasters of all kinds locate their origins in actions that organizations and groups of organizations have either taken or failed to take [...] The origins of risk, harm, and loss are primarily social, not natural or technological” (83). As Solnit (2009) notes, “Katrina was a succession of disasters” composed of the storm itself, the human error on behalf of the Army Corps of Engineers that resulted in the failure of the levee system, and “the social devastation of the failure or refusal of successive layers of government to supply evacuation and relief, and the appalling calamity of the way that local and then state and federal authorities decided to regard victims as criminals” (235). Hartman and Squires (2006) extend the argument that Hurricane Katrina far transcends the world of natural phenomena, and “is in fact a shorthand for a set of economic, social, and political conditions that characterize most of metropolitan America” (3).

Certainly, discourse plays a significant role in the social construction of natural disasters, particularly in regard to the perpetuation of popular understandings of these phenomena. As Miles and Morse (2007) indicate, “interpretation and selection processes lead the media away from mere information dissemination and toward the social construction of problems (Vasterman et al., 2005) in which dominant subnarratives can be perpetuated in media narratives of disasters” (366). In this sense, information that is presented and understood to be objective is actually rooted in deeper societal narratives that influence the ways in which disasters are understood, experienced, and responded to. Interestingly, Miles and Morse (2007) found that news media

discourse around two natural disasters, Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, centered on socio-political discourse, emphasizing built, human, and social capital significantly more than natural capital (2007: 369). These findings indicate that, quite literally, natural disasters are constructed and conveyed as socio-economic and political phenomena, detached from their ecological roots.

Liboiron (2015) echoes the claim that socioeconomic factors center in the social construction of natural disasters. In the case of yet another hurricane, Liboiron indicates that “grassroots data-driven-representations portray Superstorm Sandy not as an extreme weather event, but rather the exacerbation of a chronic crisis of poverty” (144). This research utilizes the concept of the “Second Sandy” to refer to the secondary (read: socio-political) disaster, composed of a long-term matrix of challenges in the wake of the initial natural disaster. Cohen and Liboiron (2014) develop “the Two Sandys framework” which speaks to both the “disruptive event” that was Hurricane Sandy, and “an exacerbation of systemic inequalities” in the storm’s wake. The crisis identified is one that existed before the storm took shape, but has now rerouted and intensified “the underlying sources of vulnerability and economic insecurity, namely inadequate housing, precarious employment and inaccessible essential services” (2). The authors advocate that this second type of crisis requires a second type of response, one that is coalitional and geared toward addressing the long-term needs of vulnerable communities. Here, again, the need for resilient communities rooted in autonomous self-reliance is echoed, with Tierney noting that “powerful organizational and institutional actors often drift into unsafe practices, especially when there are no countervailing forces preventing them from doing so” (2014, 83). If social groups are equipped and empowered to fend for themselves and mobilize as disaster communities, resilience can be generated, vulnerability can be mitigated, and risk can result in the reward of effective, sustainable, community-driven relief.

Climate Change

It is impossible to speak about natural disasters and their social implications in the present without also discussing climate change. As an October 2018 report from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change indicates, curbing the most extreme outcomes of climate change “would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” (IPCC 2018). According to this report, human-influenced effects on the environment have already contributed to tangible effects around the world and are on a trajectory for creating significant chaos.

A study by Bergholt and Lujala (2012) found that “storms and floods adversely affect people and production inputs such as land, infrastructure, and factories, which in turn have a negative impact on the aggregate economy” (20). In addition to economic consequences, climate change poses threats in the form of intensifying natural disasters, leading to various and significant losses, as well as spreading social instability and geopolitical unrest (Miller 2017). Climate change can also be understood in terms of what Godfrey and Torres (2016) refer to as “systemic crises,” factoring in intersections of race, gender, and class in order to mitigate the inequalities exacerbated by shifting environmental conditions (10-11). At one such intersection, Black (2016) notes that, globally, “in less modernized settings, females have been closer to the sites of climate disruptions,” adding that their experiences and awareness can serve in how we think about responses to climate change (176). In regard to climate change, as well as environmental degradation broadly, the most negative outcomes are aligned with pre-existing social inequalities (Zehr 2014: 138). In our current era of climate change, we must consider disaster relief while also paying attention to our changing climate and its implications for various communities, especially those most vulnerable (Dodman and Mitlin 2013).

As McNamara (2017) points out, as with natural disaster relief, there is increasing criticism around top-down approaches to mitigation of climate change. While “the prevailing focus for climate change adaptation research and policy until more recently has been on technocentric “command and control” approaches to reduce the impacts of climate change,” this approach has come under “increased scrutiny for its contribution to potential maladaptation, exacerbating vulnerabilities and causing negative externalities” (Mcnamara 444). Here, too, the author points toward a focus on community-based approaches in seeking solutions to the deleterious effects of climate change. Failure to foster participatory community-based adaptation to the challenges of climate change runs the risk of top-down management that disadvantages communities economically disadvantaged communities. Dodman and Mitlin (2013) argue for the transformative potential of community-based adaptation, but that for this to be achieved, these approaches must “include tools and methods that enable a more explicit transfer of power to local communities, as otherwise decisions are made by those outside the community who are only partially or not at all accountable to local residents” (655).

Indeed, there is increasing awareness that climate change and disaster resilience go hand-in-hand. As Grove (2014) notes, “researchers and policymakers increasingly recognize that adaptations to short-term surprises and reducing hazard vulnerabilities can help build adaptive capacities for climate change’s long-term effects” (200). Grove proposes evaluation climate change and disaster resilience in relation to one another from a Foucauldian biopolitical perspective, emphasizing approaches to climate change adaptation and disaster resilience-building that seek “to combat the depoliticization of resilience and vulnerability” (206). In considering the amplification of resilience in the face of climate change, we must once again consider social factors contributing to vulnerability. Adger and Kelly (1999) note that “the

response to long-term climate change is facilitated and constrained by the same architecture of entitlements as adaptation to other social and environmental stresses” (255).

Through understanding climate change and disaster as co-mingling forces, developing localized resilience is applicable not only to one or the other. Developing resilience and the ability to effectively execute acute disaster relief can contribute to navigating the effects of climate change in our daily lives. Indeed, “climate change may be considered a natural disaster evolving in slow motion on a global scale” (Molnar 1). If we are living on the brink of (if not within the early stages of) a climate crisis, climate change itself is indeed a disaster, and the preventative and continual work we do in building resiliency and seeking out transformative potentialities should be considered ongoing disaster relief work.

Mutual aid

Mutual aid was first introduced by Russian social philosopher Peter Kropotkin in his seminal work *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (1902) as a critical reaction to social Darwinism, which was *en vogue* at the time. Refusing the Darwinian notion of “a pitiless inner war for life within each species, and to see in that war a condition of progress,” Kropotkin centers the law of mutual aid in the survival of humankind (6). Through historical analysis, Kropotkin argues that, “mutual aid is the primary factor of social life” and that “regardless of its form or the adversity of circumstances in which it operated, it was always present” (Shantz 2013, 64). Mutual aid challenges not only Darwinist social theory at the turn of the 19th century, it complicates the competitive focal point of global capitalism and militarism that permeate societies today.

A contemporary of Kropotkin, German anarcho-socialist theorist Gustav Landauer “theorized the rebirth of community from within the shell of statist and capitalist society,” emphasizing the central role of “local, face-to-face associations” in mechanical solidarity (“*gemeinschaft*”) and the social change it could generate (Shantz 2013, 52). Both Kropotkin and Landauer rely on this notion of mechanical solidarity in organizing social change oriented toward the just distribution of resources and progress of human societies.

Today, mutual aid is being recuperated as an organizing principle and political philosophy in the face of contemporary challenges on global and local scales. In response to the tensions of late capitalism and the insistence on individualism in Western society, social work educator William Schwartz argues that “people need each other and the social groupings of which they are a part; there is no wholeness or real existence in isolation” (Lee and Swanson 414). This concept is extended by Schwartz beyond social work to group work in a broader sense, wherein “the group is an enterprise in mutual aid, an alliance of individuals who need each other, in varying degrees, to work on common problems” (Schwartz, as quoted in Lee & Swanson 414).

Landauer argues that mutual aid is has always existed a factor in social organization. The revolutionary potential of mutual aid, therefore, lies in “the growing discovery of something already present in social relations” (Shantz 52). Andrej Grubačić and Denis O’Hearn (2016) elucidate the already-presentness of mutual aid through transnational explorations of resiliency among exilic communities living at “the edges of capitalism,” arguing that “mutual aid has been unduly neglected as an explanatory and conceptual tool in historical social sciences” (248). Through three radically different case studies — Don Cossacks in Russia, Zapatistas in Mexico, and prisoners in isolation — Grubačić and O’Hearn explore how communities in such exilic

spaces illustrate “geographical expressions of cooperation and concentrated mutual aid that may stand in contrast to the development of capitalism” (5). These cases disrupt the dominant narratives of progress and globalization that center on the merits of individualism and the benign necessity of the capitalist nation-state, pointing instead toward the Kropotkian notion that mutual aid is a naturally-occurring interactionist law of society with potential for social change that transcends time and space.

Solnit (2016) also discusses mutual aid among the Zapatistas, discussing how they “share an improvisational, collaborative, creative process that is in profound ways anti-ideological, if ideology means ironclad preconceptions about who’s an ally and how to make a better future” (91). Just as the Zapatistas — socialist peasant rebels in Chiapas — championed a movement rooted in self-determination, any activism rooted in the principles of mutual aid rejects the superimposition of static ideologies into localized contexts. Rather, autonomous direct action is characterized by the very improvisational, collaborative, and creative processes which Solnit has identified.

Klein (2018) witnessed a similar spirit of mutual aid in action following Hurricane Maria, documenting her visit to Proyecto de *Apoyo Mutuo Mariana* (the Mutual Aid Project of Mariana). Here, in the small eastern village of Mariana Barrio, the center is an “energy oasis” (not unlike Casa Pueblo across the island), where the community comes together to share meals, plan relief efforts, and utilize electricity for communication and medical use. Through their efforts at Proyecto de Apoyo Mutuo, Klein observed invested local actors as they engaged in the “process of discovering the latent potential in the community,” a potential that is realized when people are helped to see that “they don’t need to wait for others to solve problems — everyone has something they can contribute now” (67-68). As localized, historical accounts of mutual aid

demonstrate, “the embrace of local power doesn’t have to mean parochialism, withdrawal, or intolerance, only a coherent foundation from which to navigate the larger world” (Solnit 2016: 99).

Neoliberalism

Antithetical to mutual aid are the principles of neoliberalism, the defining characteristics of the age of globalization and the Anthropocene. Dean Spade (2017) defines neoliberalism by its trends toward “privatization, trade liberalization, labor and environmental deregulation, the elimination of health and welfare programs, increased immigration enforcement, and the expansion of imprisonment,” enacted on global and domestic scales (13). While mutual aid is fundamentally communitarian, neoliberalism is “radically individualistic” (Ritzer 2010: 292).

Historian Ted Steinberg (2006) implicates neoliberal priorities on the federal and corporate levels in the devastation of disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, claiming that hallmarks of neoliberalism such as “deregulation, privatization, and cutbacks in social programs have combined to produce a dark chapter in American history centered on a new moral imperative of ‘personal responsibility’” (210). Currently, domestic neoliberal policies are being enacted by the Trump administration, which recently cut nearly ten million dollars from FEMA’s budget, weakening the federal safety net for disaster relief, while inversely increasing funding to ICE (NPR 2018). This reallocation within the federal budget illustrates the “internal contradictions” of the neoliberal state, wherein “its authoritarianism co-exists uncomfortably with its supposed interests in individual freedom and democracy” (Ritzer 293).

Through the enactment of neoliberal policies, governments engage in a population-management modality of power. This understanding of neoliberal power dynamics “is not

primarily operating through prohibition or permission but rather through the arrangement and distribution of security and insecurity” (Spade 57). In this way, life chances are maldistributed by power enacted through the state (and its significant corporate influencers). Here, again, we see the necropolitical framework through which vulnerability is exacerbated to a potentially lethal degree through mechanisms of population-management and biopower.

Seminal among critiques of neoliberalism is Klein’s (2007) work elucidating what she refers to as “the shock doctrine” of disaster capitalism. Klein explores historical sites in which the theater of the shock doctrine — a defining facet of disaster capitalism rooted in the free market and the history of American imperialism and intervention — have played out. Klein’s critique of neoliberalism on a global scale involves two examples of natural disasters: the devastating tsunami in Southeast Asia and Hurricane Katrina, the aftermaths of which involved intense applications of disaster capitalism which have radically reshaped the social landscapes of the affected localities. In the weeks following Hurricane Katrina, Klein describes the Gulf Coast of the United States as “a domestic laboratory for the same kind of government-run-by-contractors that had been pioneered in [the] Iraq [war]” (519). In one such example of the contracting out of disaster recovery, Klein documents the affluent Audubon Place neighborhood in western New Orleans hiring Instinctive Shooting International, a for-profit Israeli private security firm (554). The name of this contracted firm alone speaks volumes about the applicability of the “warzone” metaphor in the wake of the storm.

Over ten years after publication *The Shock Doctrine*, Klein applied her previously articulated and historically documented critiques of neoliberalism to the manifestations of disaster capitalism that shocked Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Maria in *The Battle for Paradise* (2018). While Klein highlights a number of effective grassroots initiatives geared toward

sustainable relief rooted in mutual aid (as discussed earlier in this chapter), she also documents a number of steps rapidly taken by politicians, relief organizations, and opportunistic capitalists following the storm, noting that “central to a shock doctrine strategy is speed — pushing a flurry of radical changes through so quickly it’s impossible to keep up” (45). Klein compares some of these changes to those enacted in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, such as the privatization of the school system, highlighting neoliberal patterns of insidious socioeconomic manipulation that have become increasingly common in times of crisis. [A section from Klein’s book *This Changes Everything* will be added to this section in the final draft.]

Conclusion

In order to discuss any disaster recovery and relief efforts, it is necessary first to understand the myriad factors that shape the ways in which people experience natural disasters and their aftermaths. Through the lenses of vulnerability, resilience, and risk, disaster studies renders visible the social, political, economic, and geographic conditions that shape the heterogeneous realities of the disaster experience. The social construction of disaster contributes to this understanding by illustrating the ways in which the humans and the world they create play a significant role in how we come to define and experience so-called “natural” disasters. The element of climate change adds an immediacy to the discussion of natural disaster and relief efforts, as weather phenomena can be understood as intensifying and occurring more frequently.

Exploring the principles and practices of mutual aid, specifically in opposition to neoliberalism, can further ground understandings of different disaster relief responses. The MADR’s relief efforts are rooted in the philosophy of mutual aid, a socio-political orientation that stands in stark opposition to neoliberal trajectories of state-sanctioned and conventional non-

profit relief work. In order to understand what motivates individuals to act within a mutual aid capacity, we must be familiar with the ideas that inform such efforts; In order to understand *why* people who get involved with Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, we must understand the dynamics of the world of disaster relief and recovery -- with its inherent inconsistencies and challenges -- into which they are being drawn.

Chapter Three: Methods

With this project, I set out to explore why individuals are motivated to act within Mutual Aid Disaster Relief's grassroots network, as opposed to participating in other, more conventional forms of volunteer or activist work in responding to natural disasters. In discussing these motivations, I also gained insight into how the experiences and beliefs of those engaged with autonomous direct action speak to MADR's role in the relief and recovery world. In order to explore why it is that individuals are motivated to act in a grassroots capacity, I observed a two-day workshop hosted by MADR and subsequently conduct a series of interviews with MADR volunteers, activists, and organizers (these categories are not mutually exclusive, as was revealed through my conversations with various participants).

While I have tracked MADR's online presence for over two years (primarily through "following" their Facebook page and bringing updates about their activities directly to my social media feed), thoroughly explored their rather informational website, and have hosted MADR volunteers conducting relief work in my home, I lacked any first-hand experience with the organization. Attending the two-day workshop allowed me interface with MADR firsthand, obtaining direct access to tactical and organizational information, as well as insight into the function and appeal of this programming within the Tucson community. In addition to the data I was able to collect pertaining to motivation, I believe that personally developing a more informed, first-hand understanding of MADR provided a foundation from which I could more effectively conduct my analysis.

The second component of my data collection involved a series of seven semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals involved with MADR efforts. While my fieldwork exposed me to the mission, values, and organizing efforts of MADR, as well as a handful of firsthand accounts, my interviews allowed me to more deeply explore my participants personal accounts regarding their motivations to act within MADR's capacity, as well as their perspectives on grassroots, autonomous relief and recovery more broadly. Through these interviews, it became apparent that critical analyses of social, economic, and political structures were central to the beliefs and behaviors my participants. Ultimately, my fieldwork observations and interviews with MADR affiliates transcended an analysis of motivation alone, speaking to personal and organizational values regarding the inherently social nature of grassroots responses to natural disasters.

Methodology

From inception through data collection and analysis, I relied on the principles of feminist methodology throughout my research process. Feminist methodology centers power and privilege, calling upon the researcher critically consider their own social location in relation to the subject of their research. This methodology, rooted in feminist epistemology, assumes that knowledge is not universal, but rather socially constructed within a web of power differentials and dynamics of identification. Building upon this foundation of feminist epistemology, feminist methodology challenges the positivist assumption that objective truth exists and is obtainable through the virtue of rigorous objectivity, an assumption that “offers grounds for claiming authoritative knowledge of social reality” (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002: 42). This approach to knowledge construction (and the critical lens such a standpoint equips us with) is particularly

suited to sociological projects, as it is inherently social — one’s social location (and the power thereby conferred) is central to how one interprets the world (and their place within it), ascribing meaning to actions, ideas, and relationships. Simply put, “feminist epistemology is about the ways gender influences what we take to be knowledge” (Anderson 1995: 50).

Of course, the strengths of feminist methodology extend beyond the singular scope of gender difference. Indeed, rather than functioning in a narrow way, feminist methodology provides a functional approach to navigating difference in qualitative research endeavors, seeking to minimize imbalances in power (and acknowledging when it is limited or impossible to do so). Throughout my data collection and analysis, I encountered matters of difference and oppression. The marginalization of vulnerable communities was discussed in each of my interviews, came up throughout the workshop, and stands out as a prevalent focus in disaster studies. With race, age, gender, carceral status, documentation status, socioeconomic status, and ability coming into play throughout my process of data collection (as my review of the literature helped me to anticipate), it was essential that I conceptualize my research process within the framework of feminist methodology. This approach better equipped me to navigate the myriad and oft-imbalanced social implications of disaster relief and recovery.

Participant Observation

Emerson, et al (2011) note that the process of conducting fieldwork “involves both being with other people to see how they respond to events as they happen and experiencing for oneself these events and the circumstances that give rise to them” (2). At the same time that I was participating in the two-day workshop — absorbing the information being delivered in educational sessions, participating in break-out discussions, socializing during set periods of

times, and reading available literature — I was also observing fellow attendees and transcribing my observations into my fieldnotes.

Fieldwork involves more than just the observation of social actors. The physical and historical context of the observation site must also be taken into account and analyzed alongside (and through) the behaviors and appearances of people alone. Field notes that achieve this breadth and depth of observation are more likely to result in what is known as “thick description.” Joseph Ponterotto (2006) traces the origins of “thick description” back to philosopher Gilbert Ryle, who touted the merits of an analytically-ripe description which “involves understanding and absorbing the context of the situation or behavior,” as well as “inscribing present and future intentionality to the behavior” (539). As Ponterotto notes, this concept was subsequently (and popularly) built upon by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) and sociologist Norman K. Denzin (1989). In *Interpretive Interactionism* (1989) Denzin emphasized that thick description necessarily moves beyond atomized descriptions of social actors, paying close attention to history, emotion, chronology, and interactions. In essence, “it presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another” (Denzin 1989: 83).

My site of observation was the Global Justice Center in Tucson, Arizona, where the two-day MADR workshop was held. The Tucson workshop series took place in October 2018, at the beginning of MADR’s Fall tour of the western United States (other regions were toured earlier in 2018). The first segment of this workshop took place on a Friday evening and comprised an approximately two-hour informational session, titled “Protectors v. Profiteers: Communities in Resistance to Disaster Capitalism,” followed by an informal social gathering, allowing the opportunity for networking and exchanging information with the various other activist

organizations represented at tables in the back of the meeting space. Day two consisted of a longer (roughly seven hour) “training session,” titled “Giving Our Best, Ready For The Worst: Community Organizing as Disaster Preparedness,” wherein three MADR organizers facilitated a number of interactive sessions covering a range of topics central to activism, the economy, natural disasters, and organizing within the specific context of Tucson and the southwest United States.

Free and open to the public, the two-day MADR workshop presented an opportunity to educate myself further on the fundamentals of MADR and to network with affiliates. As an observer, I took detailed notes during both days of the event, as well as photo documentation of workshop materials, and obtained a number of independently-published zines pertaining to disaster relief and mutual aid (these items were available throughout the workshops, along with other organizations’ materials, for purchase or donation).

Due to the presentation-based nature of the workshop, in which the presumed intent by the organizers was to convey information effectively, the field notes I gathered regarding the content communicated were fairly straightforward — it was relatively apparent what the values, positions, and experiences being conveyed were, as these were often accompanied by textual and photographic slideshows and punctuated with designated opportunities for questions to be asked by attendees. However, my field notes included further subjective observations regarding the promotion of the workshops, number of attendees and their observable demographics; socialization during, before, and after the official workshop start and stop times; information being promoted passively by other organizations tabling at the workshop; the Global Justice Center as a meeting space in the South Tucson neighborhood; ideas, questions and critiques, shared by attendees; interpersonal dynamics among the organizers and attendees; and so on.

As Emerson (2011) notes, the transformation into words, selection of content, and framing of the information included in field notes all “reflect and incorporate sensitivities, meanings, and understandings the field researcher has gleaned from having been close to and participated in the described events” (9). As an attending participant in the two days of workshops hosted by MADR, the field notes I generated constitute my own account of this experience. Since the workshop was, primarily, an educational outreach event, it was not out of place for me to take detailed, handwritten notes throughout — I witnessed many (at times more than half) of the folks around me doing the same. The ability to easily transcribe my observations, questions, and experiences during the workshop allowed for me to take rather detailed notes. Staying two nights in a roadside motel nearby, I would return to my room to review my fieldnotes and type up analytic memos reflecting on the day’s experience, occasionally posing new questions to myself and drawing tentative connections to other sources of information and ideas. The six-hour drive from Tucson to Flagstaff allowed for further reflection. Once I arrived home, these final reflections rounded out my field notes.

Interviews

A few months after the Tucson workshop, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with a number of MADR affiliated people. As previously mentioned, my participants were volunteers, organizers, and activists (often identifying with more than one of these roles). Through these in-depth interviews, I was able to gather unique perspectives and accounts rooted in a range of personal experience. These experiences speak to and beyond the motivating factors that spurred engagement with MADR among these individuals.

The semi-structured interview is an intersubjective exchange, through which information is shared through guided conversation, with an outline of questions set by the researcher and information provided through responses from the participant. Roni Berger (2015) highlights one principle of feminist methodology wherein the researcher can “develop reciprocity with participants for the goal of equalizing the research relationship and conducting research ‘with’ rather than ‘on’” one’s participants (229). In doing so, Berger situates her participants as the “teachers” and herself as “the learner” (229). This reflexive orientation, echoing the principles of feminist methodology, inspired my interview process. Indeed, I acknowledge that I had much to learn from my interviewees. The method of semi-structured interviews allows for this dynamic restructuring between researcher and participant to be cultivated. For example, the use of organically-developed follow-up questions allowing for the interviewees to shape the content and thrust of the conversation in meaningful ways, elucidating new avenues of thought and exchange that can lead to profound analysis.

For my interviews, I prepared eight questions to guide each participant through their discussion of experiences with MADR and motivations for their personal participation. These questions were presented to each participant, although the order in which they were delivered and any follow-up questions were determined by the process of the interview itself (see Appendix A).

Interview participants were identified variously through the Tucson workshop, social media, my own personal social network, and connections referred from the aforementioned sources. Since MADR is a horizontal organization, my sample of participants is intended to reflect geographic range, as opposed to an approach centered on hierarchical diversity (which might better suit a project geared toward gathering a broad pool of experience-based information

on a more traditionally-structured organization). The participants in these interviews live across seven states, speaking to both the national reach of MADR’s efforts. The range of experiences presented also highlight unique regional efforts, needs, and community-based perspectives. With the intent to present a meaningful range of voices within MADR efforts, it is worth noting some aspects of homogeneity among the participants — each is a long-term resident within the United States and had the ability to volunteer physically in contribution to MADR’s efforts. While two of my interviewees identified as people of color, five identified as white. I did not ask my participants to disclose their genders or sexual identities (although I have seen many of them in person, so I did have preconceived notions about what gender I associated them with). Each of my participants’ ages places them within the Millennial Generation. Due to the grassroots networking that MADR’s efforts rely upon, most participants personally know at least one other person who participated in either interviews or the workshop tour, despite residential diversity. For each participant represented in this project, pseudonyms have been employed (unless the participant preferred for me to use their true first name) and identifying markers have been withheld from discussion in order to preserve the confidentiality of participants.

The following table contains demographic information for the seven interview participants, utilizing self-reported identifiers provided during our conversations:

	Alex	Demi	Erin	Lesley	Milo	Payton	Sam
Age	27	25	31	32	28	29	35
Race	White	Latinx	White	White	White	Black	White
Pronouns	He/him	They/them	She/her	She/her	They/them	He/him	He/him
Education Level	Some college	High school GED	Bachelor’s degree	Some college	Bachelor’s degree	Bachelor’s degree	High school

Location	Tampa, Florida	Portland, Oregon	New Orleans, Louisiana	Houston, Texas	Chicago, Illinois	Ypsilanti, Michigan	Tampa, Florida
Occupation	Service Industry	Unemployed	Elementary Education	Service Industry	Non-profit	Non-profit	“Odd Jobs”

Due to the spatial restrictions presented by the various locations of participants around the country, interviews were conducted by cell phone. In lieu of written consent, verbal consent for recording and research use of information shared was granted by the participant in each case. Through this informed consent process, each participant was made aware of the purpose of my research project and their own role within it, as well as informed of my own relative position as researcher.

Interviews were transcribed and coded to elicit significant themes and central ideas. This coding process involved identifying themes from both the interviews and workshops, highlighting common threads in motivation, experience, and beliefs pertaining to relief efforts, natural disaster, and society. This list of themes was consolidated into key topics defined by prevalence and centrality, which are presented and analyzed in the following chapter.

Limitations

As with any research methods, this project faces inherent limitations. Due to its decentralized, far-reaching organization, MADR volunteers and organizers are located throughout the country, and beyond its borders. With more time and resources, I would have preferred to have interviewed a greater number of activists and interviewees from a wider range of locations. Just as the needs of communities vary drastically, so do the relief efforts organized

in response to them at the grassroots level. Without gathering exhaustive data from all communities where MADR is active, there is no way to understand the full range of their efforts.

With only seven in-depth interviews, it is unlikely that my sample was truly representative of the demographics of MADR as a whole. Evaluating the representativeness of my sample also posed a challenge as MADR does not keep a database of its network's demographics. Among my interviewees, five out of seven self-identified as white and all fell within the age range of the Millennial generation. Again, there is no way to know if this provides an accurate representation of MADR's full range of affiliates. What my respondents did provide was a fair range geographic diversity within the United States: two live in Florida, one lives in New Orleans, one lives in a suburb of Detroit, Michigan, one lives in Chicago, Illinois, one lives in Washington state, and one lives in Houston, Texas. Still, despite this geographic variety, there are significant areas of the country that went unrepresented in my data collection. I was also unable to speak with anyone located in or who had engaged in Puerto Rico during the wake of Hurricane Maria, a complex and fascinating disaster community where MADR participated in significant on-the-ground efforts.

My position

As Guillermin and Gillam (2004) note, "A reflexive researcher is one who is aware of [...] potential influences and is able to step back and take a critical look at his or her own role in the research process" (275). Central to this process of reflexivity is acknowledging one's own position as researcher. By the very nature of intersubjective research, my own identity is present at -- and therefore relevant to -- every stage of my involvement the research process, including the choices made in selecting methods and sampling participants. Therefore, I want to

acknowledge my briefly acknowledge my own positionality before moving on to my findings and analysis.

In all research, and especially within the realm of qualitative methods, the assumption of neutrality on behalf of the researcher is not only naive, it is impossible (Llewelyn 2007). Therefore, it is crucial to maintain critical reflexivity in which “researchers strive to make explicit and scrutinize those value commitments that form part of the taken-for-granted world view of the research community of which they are a part” (Gewirtz and Cribb 150). Although I have not participated directly with MADR, I have participated in volunteer work with activist organizations rooted in the principles of mutual aid, such as autonomous direct aid, sustainability, intersectionality, and collective liberation. Through the past decade and a half of volunteerism and activism, I have developed a political and moral compass in alignment with the principles of MADR. My own leftist politics and critiques around state, capitalist, and militaristic interventions, particularly in the lives and communities of vulnerable populations, cannot be ignored -- although I have taken steps to maintain reflexive awareness around my own views to limit their influence over my research design and analysis. While I personally believe the work MADR does is important, my intention with this research is to let the personal experiences and educational outreach efforts of MADR-affiliated individuals illuminate the realities around their efforts (whether or not these are realities I could have foreseen or even personally agree with). Jill McCorkel and Kristen Myers (2003) discuss the importance of employing a research strategy that “involves a recognition and analysis of how the researcher’s positionality facilitates specific forms of understanding and impedes others” (228). My own personal history and position motivated my original interest in this project and are present at every stage of its development.

In addition to my own history of experiencing natural disasters (while always adjacent to their more devastating outcomes), my identities in relation to my interviewees and the broader subjects of my research ought to be reflexively engaged with. As an academic, I acknowledge that my position as a researcher is bound up in power relation wherein I am responsible for the production and replication of ideas that I utilize in my data collection and analysis. Over the course of my own interviews, I attempted to level the playing field between myself and my participants and build genuine rapport. Surely this was facilitated by virtue of being acquainted with some of my interviewees, one of whom I have known for many years and consider a good friend and one of whom I met once while hosting them at my home in New Orleans while they volunteered in Baton Rouge. Regardless of whether or not I was familiar with my interviewee, I entered into each interview bearing in mind that (as previously discussed) I had much to learn from each of them. I believe that being of the same generation and having participated with other mutual aid-based organizations are additional factors in generating rapport.

As a queer, cis gender woman, I strive to be aware (when I am not being forcibly exposed) to the ways in which gender and sexuality are normatively inscribed into our beliefs, behaviors, and interactions. While gender and sexuality did not come up over the course of my interviews, it is impossible to say whether or not the gendered dynamics between myself and my participants played a factor in our exchanges of information. Never wanting to assume the gender of my participants, I asked them to provide me with their pronouns and then assigned pseudonyms associated with these (including gender-neutral pseudonyms for those indicating gender neutral pronouns).

As a white person in the United States, I operate within a social structure that grants me immense privilege (as an academic as in every aspect of my life). Within the realm of academia,

scholars and institutions frequently reify hierarchies of oppression that marginalize the voices, experiences, and epistemologies of people of color and indigenous people. The topic of race came up at some point in each of my interviews and two of my participants are people of color. While race is a factor, to some degree, in every social context, natural disaster scenarios present particularly unjust situations for communities of color. As a white scholar, my first priority is deep listening. I attempt to let the literature and data around issues of race speak for themselves while fulfilling my own role as a facilitator or amplifier for these ideas, within my capacity. Similarly, I recognize that my statuses as a documented citizen of the United States and as an unincarcerated person have shaped both my academic understandings and personal experiences of natural disaster. Undocumented and incarcerated populations constitute extremely vulnerable communities in the face of natural disaster, a fact that is once again echoed in the literature, through my observations, and in my interviews. Research pertaining to these identities once again requires “strong reflexivity” on my behalf (McCorkel and Myers 2003).

In order to engage reflexively with my research, I attempted to question my own position at every stage of the research and writing processes. The following is an excerpt from my field notes, taken during the second day of the workshop, to illustrate this effort. During presentations and discussions over the course of the MADR workshop, I took detailed notes about the content being shared; during breaks (of which there were six total), I would engage in reflection about my experience, ideas, and questions I had during the previous session, writing by hand in a small journal I kept with me for the duration of the workshop (to be typed up after returning to my motel room). The following excerpt from my field notes was written during one such break:

During the second breakout session (roughly 10:45am), I disclosed my role as a researcher to my group. Four of us, all seated adjacent to one another, broke off for about 15 minutes to talk about pressing social issues in the Tucson community. Olivia provided this prompt and asked us to chat with the people sitting closest to us (there was

some confusion for a moment over who would talk to whom, as I think people are still warming up to this atmosphere and interacting with strangers... I know this is the case for me). We moved our chairs away from the large group circle and sat on the floor, fairly close to one another in order to hear (the breakout sessions fill the room with voices and it becomes a challenge to hear well). Two of my group members introduced themselves as students at the University of Arizona (they seemed to me to have been senior undergraduates or graduates -- they were articulate and critical) and the third did not disclose their role, although they also seemed quite aware of social issues in the Tucson area. I do not recall their names (need to work on this). Felt self-conscious about my lack of familiarity with Tucson and its communities, particularly when the group was so passionate and aware of current events (one spoke at length about an ongoing deportation case of a trans woman who had been detained and whose gender identity was not being respected by enforcement officials). We went around in a circle, sharing our ideas, and I spoke last -- I think this was due to what appeared to me to be passionate and informed insights on behalf of my group members, as well as my own self-consciousness around being from another town. When it was my turn to speak, I told the others that I was not aware of any particular issues in Tucson, that I live in Flagstaff, and that I am a Master's student in sociology, conducting research for a thesis on disaster relief. One person (one of the U of A students) commented "that is a great idea for a project" and I thanked her (I felt reassured about the legitimacy of my presence in this space). This interaction went well and I don't think anyone felt put off by my disclosure (of course, I cannot know this for certain, but this was the impression I got). Moving forward, I will continue to introduce myself as a researcher, but also acknowledge that I am here for my own personal edification, as this is the most honest approach and building trust seems to be an essential part of this particular workshop process. I don't intend to center myself or my role, but a simple disclosure (+ willingness to discuss further if anyone cares to) seems appropriate. It also feels okay that I am not from Tucson (this is the closest workshop by hundreds of miles, so I imagine I'm not alone in this?) but I think that means taking a backseat when it comes to any discussion of local importance. This is a good opportunity to learn (in more ways than one). Next session is starting shortly (I think Olivia said on roles in the community), so we will be reconvening with the full group. Some people are eating snacks and some are socializing (not all -- conversation seems primarily to be among those who came together).

Analytical Approach

For this project, I have employed a bottom-up approach to analyzing the motivations of MADR affiliates' motivations and perspectives, considering the prominent themes revealed through my data collection process. These central ideas have been extracted from the first-hand

accounts that were shared with me, as well as through the information I received and exchanges I engaged in during the workshop. Working closely with my own transcriptions from the in-depth interviews I conducted, as well as detailed field notes and reflexive memos generated throughout the data collection process, I engaged in a multi-step coding process, through which salient ideas were identified, categorized, and subsequently read in conversation with one another, noting significant patterns or dissimilarities. Working closely and multiple times over with each piece of data, connections among ideas regarding motivations, as well as personal beliefs, experiences, rhetoric, and communication tactics were rendered visible and subsequently analyzed.

As MADR's approach to disaster relief is relatively non-conventional, ongoing, and very much rooted in the unique experiences of its participants, I felt it most appropriate to pursue a grounded analysis for understanding the motivations of people acting within this capacity. Rather than assume common motivating factors observed among conventional non-profit organizations or within historical social movement literature, I relied on inductive reasoning to best understand how MADR actors conceive of the work they do and the factors motivating them to engage as such in the ever-changing world of natural disasters and their impacts. Ultimately, I set forth an analysis that is grounded in the data I have collected, informed directly by participants' beliefs and experiences.

In the following chapters, I explore this data and the key themes I have identified in detail. I believe that the range of experiences, motivations, and messages conveyed through the aforementioned methods provide a significant body of qualitative data, allowing me to formulate key themes and analytical takeaways. By speaking with individuals about their personal experiences and participating firsthand with MADR's outreach efforts during their fall tour, I

developed a more intimate understanding of why people are drawn to the work of MADR. Beyond this, I believe that these motivations, which are fundamentally rooted in analysis of social injustice, speak to critiques of inequality and visions for sustainable futures.

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

In the following chapter, I discuss themes drawn from my interviews with MADR volunteers and organizers, as well as observations from the two-day workshop hosted by MADR in Tucson, Arizona. Over the course of my conversations and observations, I identified care and connection, the social construction of natural disaster, critiques of conventional relief efforts, the role of resistance, the naturalization of mutual aid, and the urgency climate change as centrifugal concepts informing the motivations and efforts of MADR participants. I also explore definitions of vulnerability discussed and observed in relation to MADR by its actors.

Care and connection

The content of the MADR workshops, as well as the experiences shared by interviewees, indicate the centrality of care and connection in relief and recovery work informed my mutual aid. On the second day of the workshops in Tucson, organizers discussed seven aspects of

responding to crises (here and throughout the workshops, crises were spoken of not only in terms of natural disaster, but more broadly in regard to structural vulnerability and subsequent response). Among these aspects of crisis response, three pertain directly to care and connection.

First, attendees were briefed on the role of active listening in understanding the unique needs of communities faced with crisis. Listening to the needs of the most vulnerable was emphasized, as it was noted that these communities and individuals go overlooked and unheard most often. Next, the presenters cited the necessity of offering comfort. Organizers' efforts to distribute self-care packages in the wake of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico were highlighted for the positive impact they had, helping to establish connections between volunteers and survivors and demonstrate much-needed compassion. While care and comfort items might be deemed inessential by many relief efforts, MADR's workshop facilitators emphasized the impact that such gestures can provide in the aftermath of disaster. Finally, the importance of returning and following up was noted, signaling that meaningful connections should be cultivated over time, not only in isolated contexts of disaster. Ultimately, the facilitators urged attendees to prioritize "coming in a good way" to do relief and recovery work -- to engage in this work effectively, participants were urged to "come prepared," "not tokenize," and "set healthy boundaries." A follow up email sent to MADR's online mailing list recounting the 2018 tour contained an image of one person helping another with a leg cast and cane to walk, with the accompanying text: "take care of each other."

Later on in the second workshop, facilitators returned to the importance of self-care, expanding the conversation to self-care among volunteers. "It IS community care to take care of yourself!" read a large, handwritten poster at the front of the room. Facilitators used this prompt to initiate a group conversation, proceeding to discuss the importance of protecting your body

from toxic and otherwise harmful conditions present during relief and recovery, as well as the importance of practicing emotional and mental self-care (bringing calm energy into affected spaces, taking time to one's self to process and refresh, asking for help, and practicing preemptive care). Resources from The Icarus Project, a mutual aid support and education organization geared toward destigmatizing mental health challenges and centering wellness in states of crises, were recommended to workshop participants for further education. The emphasis on self-care among volunteers and organizers reflects the realities that the potential for negative outcomes in natural disasters extends beyond the immediate weather events, risks are not isolated to disasters' primary victims, and volunteer relief workers and organizers are not immune to vulnerability in times of crisis.

This blurring of the distinction between volunteers and victims was explored by the majority of the interview participants I engaged with. Erin, who volunteered her own manual labor and organized the labor of others in response to a flood that devastated Baton Rouge in August 2016, discussed the impact that communion and care had on her experience with relief work. "Even if you're not skilled, showing up and bringing food and communing and breaking bread and talking is so necessary," she offered. "That felt like what we heard was 'this is helping me heal.' Maybe not in those specific words, but that was the message we got, 'somebody cares.'" Erin noted that while she was "by no means an expert" in the disaster relief and recovery field, engaging in this care-based work on short-notice left an indelible impression on her and that she would not hesitate to respond in a similar capacity, were the opportunity to do so to present itself in the future. Milo, who had significant experience with other community-based and mutual aid groups in Chicago before working with MADR as an organizer, echoed the emphasis on care in their personal approach to relief work. "As much as it is about responding to

disasters, it is also about building power with each other and taking care of each other,” they said. “What I like about mutual aid disaster relief is that it’s all about mutual respect and affirmation and care.”

Lesley, who was involved in organizing autonomous relief work in the prolonged aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in Houston, affirmed that the orientation toward care is a strong point in MADR’s efforts, noting that “the main tactic that grassroots response wins over institutional response in disaster is the ability to be flexible and prioritize personal care and development.” For her, personalization and care reinforce the effectiveness of relief efforts. Lesley repeatedly emphasized the positive relationships that were established between the volunteers she organized with and those they provided relief to, as well as the strength of their efforts. The positive quality of these relationships was grounded in the reciprocal experience of caregiving in a time of crisis. “I think that was powerful for me,” she said, “and having that profound understanding of our capacity and aptitude for taking care of each other, the more that we can create culture and support mechanisms for that to stretch out beyond the immediate impact of a climate disaster, I think it’s really exciting and I think it’s something that people involved with the network right now really care about witnessing.” For Lesley, the connective capacity of mutual aid efforts facilitates a spontaneous community to form, one which carries the potential for deeper social transformation beyond the context of the immediate disaster that is being responded to. The notion of care as a tool in transformative justice is central in intersectional feminist and disability justice literature (Mingus 2017; Piepzna-Samarashina 2018; Brown 2019) and the emphasis on creating care networks -- on establishing new bonds and equipping them to navigate crises -- is rooted in mutual aid and reciprocity. What MADR participants such as Lesley are interested in creating are networks of care that are resilient and

long-lasting, equipping communities of volunteers and survivors to navigate difference, disaster, and future-building effectively, and with care.

Conceptualizing disaster

MADR's online dispatches (primarily through Facebook, Twitter, and their official website) often signal-boost media arguing that humans and their social conditions are complicit in the experience of disasters. This viewpoint was upheld throughout the workshops and interviews I engaged in with participants. While the phrase "social construction of natural disasters" that is frequently cited in sociological literature was never utilized verbatim in the workshops or interviews, this concept was clearly in play in MADR affiliate's understandings of these events and their impacts.

At the beginning of our interview, Payton, an MADR organizer and activist based out of Ypsilanti, Michigan, sought to clarify the working definition of "natural disaster" we would utilize throughout our conversation:

I think that when we talk about so-called natural disasters, people assume that we're talking about fires or floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes... these things that happen from the so-called natural world, as if human beings are apart from it. So if we're mending that in thinking of ourselves and recognizing ourselves as being completely immersed within the natural world, there is no natural disaster, right?

For Payton, humans are fundamentally inseparable from the world which they inhabit. This idea of society's interconnection and influence over the so-called natural world (as well as analysis of the discourse surrounding this relationship) is articulated throughout ecological and environmental sociological literature (Pettenger 2016; Hannigan 2014; Steinberg 2000). As

Payton continued to deconstruct the idea of a “natural disaster,” he articulated specific criticisms around social injustices that he viewed as directly informing what are popularly understood to be environmental phenomena:

But we see these unnatural disasters through industrial collapse, through political or economic or racial or gender-wise created disasters, where we’re seeing the people already being marginalized by disaster, which is capitalism coupled with colonization, fascism, patriarchy, and the whole grocery list of things that we despise. Those ongoing disasters of inequity and oppression create situations within our waste-based society wherein if a tornado, flood, earthquake, et cetera occurs, everything within our society collapses, for a moment, within the proximity to that space.

Payton proceeds to tie this analysis directly into his own motivations for engaging in grassroots relief work, noting that “what drew me into wanting to think about responding to disasters is, I think, my analysis of the disaster that we’re living in, which is capitalism.” Payton’s articulation of capitalism as the underlying disaster paving the way for the devastation of particular environmental phenomena reflects the critique of disaster capitalism, a popular concept in sociological literature (see pages 29-30).

While Payton’s explication of the social construction of disaster was perhaps the most thoroughly articulated, he was not alone in identifying underlying, human-made conditions that are often bound up in what is referred to as “natural disaster.” Demi, a musician who volunteered manual labor in the wake of Baton Rouge’s 2016 flooding, discussed humanity’s role in ecological destruction, observed that “we’re killing the wetlands with our consumption. It’s a man-made, human disaster.” Discussing the urgency of MADR’s efforts, Milo referenced the “decreasing line between ecological and social disasters.” Alex, who helped to organize a hub for

relief volunteers in Tampa, Florida around Hurricane Irma and volunteered to aid migrant farmworkers and their families in Immokalee, Florida in the wake of the storm, challenged the atomized conceptualization of disaster, proposing instead an understanding in which “the disaster has already been here for a while.” These frameworks of disaster set forth by the MADR participants in my research reflect what is discussed in a significant amount of disaster studies literature: that natural disasters are not anomalous events to be understood as freak events or facts of life; Rather, they are contingent upon and deeply implicated in the social realities of human history.

Critiquing conventional relief efforts

In discussing their relief and recovery efforts, the volunteers and organizers I spoke with often defined their work with MADR in opposition to other, more conventional forms of disaster relief and response. Throughout my conversations with various participants, the ability to respond quickly, directly, with precision and an awareness of potentially problematic power dynamics informed the efforts of those opting to engage in a capacity informed by mutual aid.

Demi and Erin, both of whom responded as volunteers to the floods in Baton Rouge, framed their participation within the broader legacy of natural disaster in southern Louisiana -- namely, in contrast to relief failures following Hurricane Katrina. “It was the only opportunity that I’d heard of at all to help the people directly in need,” Demi said of their involvement with gutting houses and fundraising for MADR efforts in 2016. “Hearing about how the Red Cross handled Katrina... you know, they have their place doing what they do, but they don’t do anything to help people directly in their situations at home.” As the immediacy of MADR’s approach resonated with Demi, it also informed Erin’s understanding of a mutual aid approach to

relief work. Erin networked directly with the pastor of a Baptist church in north Baton Rouge to identify those who were most vulnerable following the flooding, noting that the immediate connection between New Orleans-based volunteers and a member of the community who was intimately familiar with the locations and needs of his congregation facilitated a prompt and effective response. Erin notes the efficacy of this approach in terms of timeliness and precision, identifying how her team of volunteer laborers were able to serve seven flooded homes under the guidance of the pastor. She contrasted this with speculation about conventional relief efforts, and these organizations ability to identify those in needs with prompt accuracy. Erin pointed out that the folks the pastor was able to direct their volunteer contingent toward were typically homebound, sick, elderly, and/or poor. “The Red Cross,” she speculated, “do they know who they’re helping? I don’t know. We didn’t. Me and the other people who helped, we didn’t... but [the pastor] did, and that was essential.” Alex offered a similar critique of the effectiveness and vision of organizations such as the Red Cross. “The Red Cross, they come in and a lot of the work appears to the public to be helping people in need, but they don’t understand why they’re in need in the first place,” he said. Ultimately, Erin identified that allowing the community in crisis (in this case, a particular congregation in North Baton Rouge) to autonomously articulate and prioritize their own needs as an effective means of organizing relief efforts. Self-determination is a core value of MADR, one that sets them apart from conventional and federal aid and relief organizations.

Alex offered further criticism of Red Cross and FEMA relief, noting that “those organizations go together” and “have a history of not addressing the issues behind the issue.” Alex expanded on this idea of underlying factors, pointing out that:

It wasn't just the levees that broke down in New Orleans, it was the fact that there was rampant poverty and no way for people to get out in time, and that the response was largely racist. It did not go to communities of color, or the response they did get was a militarized one.

Alex extended his critiques of the Red Cross and the United States government, pointing to shortcomings of relief efforts in Haiti following the earthquake that ravaged the nation on January 12, 2010. According to Alex, the Red Cross' failures in Haiti are a direct extension of the legacy of colonialism and poverty impacting the country, and this historical analysis informed his own efforts with MADR. Alex framed the aftermath of the earthquake within the larger historical trajectory of Haiti's relationship within the global economy and geopolitics, with particular attention paid to what he viewed as the United States' economic exploitation of the island nation through predatory taxation limiting independent development:

You know, when you do that, you leave a nation and a people completely without any way to care for themselves, let alone build on and actually develop themselves into a country... even to survive. When the earthquake hit, it destroyed. There was no infrastructure anymore in Haiti [...] There was no way to drive on the roads. So many more people died than needed to in that earthquake. You know, you can't prevent an earthquake but you can prevent the death and destruction that follows when you have a that crisis years in the making.

For Alex, his own understanding of historical injustices and the interconnected roles of the United States government and international relief organizations in their perpetuation inspired him to act within the framework of MADR's relief. "I guess that's why I'm drawn to a mutual aid model," he said, "simply because you can't ignore the history behind the crisis."

Like Alex, Payton offered an analysis of conventional non-profit and state-sanctioned relief efforts, calling their potential for effective restoration into question. “We see large non-profits like the Red Cross creating immense wealth for their managerial class,” he noted, adding that, “the non-profit industrial complex silences people left and right, and then they have these mission statements that are so grandiose, oftentimes, that once again, people get left by the wayside and silenced as they are trying to recover on their own terms and conditions.” This rendering of the Red Cross as a wealth-driven organization with a vertical structure and a demonstrated lack of attention paid to marginalized voices stands in opposition to the core values and missions of MADR, which are intentionally horizontal and intersectional.

Mutual aid as resistance

During the MADR workshops, tendencies of the industrial non-profit sector and state (such as those previously mentioned by Payton) were referred to by Olivia, one of the workshop facilitators, as “oppressive structures that facilitate disaster.” The need to combat these structures was emphasized throughout the workshops and presented as being central to MADR’s efforts. In particular, MADR’s values of collective liberation and dual power -- each of which was discussed at length on the first evening and returned to often throughout the duration of the workshop -- reflect the orientation toward resistance and transformation that inform the organization’s efforts.

Milo discussed mutual aid as a fundamental capacity for resistance to systems of oppression that divide society in order to maintain the status quo of insidious power dynamics:

We have been structured into a world and society that is largely devoid of care and intimacy. I think that we have this sort of saying or theory or whatever that capitalism

and colonialism and all the other ‘-isms’ that are really gross very intentionally try to attack and undo mutual aid networks because they need to alienate and divide people and isolate us in order to be able to exploit us. So we, in turn, think of a return to mutual aid as an antidote to these programs.

Here, Milo returns to the caregiving capacity of the mutual aid model as an impetus for their involvement with MADR efforts. This focus on care is essentialized within the human condition, according to Milo, and counteracts injustices rooted in the unfair distribution of power in society. The “-isms” to which they refer are identified by Milo as “gross,” aggressive, and divisive. As an alternative, mutual aid presents opportunities to mend these oppositional structures, bringing folks together for the sake of “building power with each other and taking care of each other and building our own worlds together.”

Payton echoed Milo’s conceptualization of mutual aid as the natural antithesis to mechanisms of control and isolation that result in deep societal separations:

When these [social] connections are severed, we become atomized, we become isolated, and we become open to control and manipulation and corruption by these larger forces that seek, intentionally, to destroy those care networks. So in the society of isolation that we live in, it is, I think, the ultimate form of resistance to care about one another, to provide mutual aid even in the most subtle and simplest of forms [...] I think that us being able to tap into that power gives us revolutionary potential.

Lesley spoke similarly of mutual aid’s revolutionary potential, particularly in the context of natural disaster, noting that “disaster draws it out because it kind of breaks the scaffolding that the capitalist, colonialist system is built around in our understandings of society.” Lesley’s scaffolding metaphor was echoed by Alex’s claim that “when we break the structures of society

as a whole, the complex institutions and the nation-states and governments and stuff like that, when we replace those structures with ones that are more cooperative and founded on the idea of mutual aid, I think that will create much better structures for all humans to flourish and engage in.” For Lesley and Alex, as well as other MADR participants I observed and spoke with, the social systems that break down in disaster are oftentimes those in need of dissolution in order to achieve justice and cooperation in society. This is not to say that disaster does not carry undeniable risks that ought to be mitigated, only that these risks also bear the potential for liberatory futures. We see these visions of resistance embedded in the motivations and efforts of MADR affiliates. As Demi defined it, “MADR is a community resistance to the war that’s placed upon it by this, as we call it, man-made natural disaster.”

Through conceptualizing mutual aid as an act of resistance, MADR affiliates identify the potential in their efforts to transcend the more-or-less isolated events of natural disasters and challenge social injustice more broadly. In the moment of offering relief in a mutual aid capacity, possibilities are simultaneously created for embodying social change. By forging connections among otherwise alienated or disconnected groups and individuals, the horizontal, intersectional, and collective work of mutual aid-driven relief envisions radically different futures that resist the oppressive forces and imbalances of power that are implicated in the social experience of natural disaster.

Mutual aid as birthright

If mutual aid is indeed an act of resistance, my conversations with MADR participants indicate that it is one rooted in human nature. Throughout interviews and workshop sessions, mutual aid was repeatedly referred to in the language of biology, cosmology, and mycelium. Reminiscent of Peter Kropotkin’s evolutionary theorization of mutual aid, Alex asserted that,

“humans tend to have a natural inclination toward assisting each other. I think that’s something that comes from evolution.” Milo referred to mutual aid as a “birthright,” one which “has been stripped from us as beings” in contemporary society. MADR facilitators in Tucson similarly focused on this stripping -- this unnatural removal -- of our mutualistic nature in our current epoch. One facilitator highlighted historic examples of mutual aid, such as those witnessed among the Black Panthers and International Workers of the World, and invited attendees to identify instances of mutual aid in their own corners of the world.

Payton framed mutual aid as a mode of being that transcends the history of oppression, rupturing its presumed continuity and universality, arguing that “mutual aid really goes into a nonlinear, once again, pre-colonial way of thinking... that everything is cosmological, everything is connected to everything [...] it continues to flow outward beyond ourselves, like dominos, in all directions all of the time.” According to Payton, “when we’re thinking about it from a biological perspective, when we’re thinking about our connection to life and the whole of creation, it is our capacity to continue living.”

The emphasis on mutual aid as an organic, innate capacity embedded in the human (and perhaps more-than-human, as a couple of interviewees indicated) experience has compelling implications when considering motivations to take action in response to disaster or perceived injustice. If something is natural, it is potentially accessible, free, and retrievable. If something is stripped, it has the potential to be relocated. If social actors believe that something is indeed their birthright, they can seek to reclaim it, thus restoring themselves to a more whole state of being.

The urgency and impact of climate change

Payton's notion of mutual aid as humanity's capacity for survival seems particularly salient in the contemporary context of climate change. In each of the interviews I conducted, climate change (alternately referred to by participants as climate chaos, climate catastrophe, as climate crisis) was identified as a factor central to the work that MADR engages in. The urgency of climate-driven disasters was witnessed by participants in the intensity of recent wildfire seasons in the western United States, intensifying hurricanes, and rising sea levels. "The climate catastrophe is at our doorstep now," noted Lesley. Similarly, Milo communicated the immediacy of climate change in relation to its impacts on vulnerable communities, claiming that "these issues are going to be increasingly on the forefront and, of course, increasingly target or affect marginalized people more so than others." When asked to what extent they identified climate change as a social issue, Demi identified it as "the highest-ranking priority that needs to be attended to for obvious reasons," citing growing human populations as a significant factor in global environmental risk.

Payton extended the context for climate change to the history of global capitalism, asserting that "the endless production model of conquest is, I think, the grounds for climate chaos we are experiencing right now." This systemic and historically-rooted understanding of climate change and its socioeconomic foundation is embedded in the same critiques of disaster capitalism that were a primary focus during MADR's workshops.

Other motivating factors

Various other factors pertaining to involvement with MADR efforts surfaced over the course of the workshop shares and interviews. Among these, pre-existing ties to other horizontally-structured and mutual aid organizations were often apparent. For example, Milo's

work as a community organizer predated their involvement with MADR by quite a few years and subsequently informed their disaster-related work. “Community organizing is disaster preparedness and disaster preparedness is community organizing,” they observed. Likewise, Lesley cited engagement with Food Not Bombs (an anti-capitalist, mutual aid organization geared toward combating hunger and centering food justice) in her community as the launching-off point of West Street Recovery, a mutual aid disaster relief group local to Houston and closely affiliated with MADR. Discussing the rapid response of MADR to Hurricane Florence in Lumberton and Wilmington, North Carolina, Payton identified a pre-existing network of horizontally-minded organizers in Richmond, Virginia as a crucial component in organizing relief efforts. Alex’s long-standing relationship with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, an organization campaigning for living wages for migrant farmworkers in south-central Florida, allowed for him to engage quickly and effectively with that community in the wake of Hurricane Irma. Demi’s online network of queer, anarchist activists in the southeast allowed for them to organize the travel and fundraising necessary to contribute to MADR relief efforts in Baton Rouge. The cross-pollination between movements is referred to as “social movement spillover,” wherein “the ideas, tactics, style, participants, and organizations of one movement often spill over its boundaries to affect other social movement” (Meyer and Whittier 1994: 277). In the case of MADR, spillover appears to occur between various anti-capitalist, anti-state, environmental and social justice social movements and the burgeoning movement for disaster justice.

MADR’s educational outreach efforts have also contributed directly to relief and recovery efforts. In Tucson, workshop facilitators encouraged the exchange of personal information among attendees in order to form a social network responsive to natural disasters. A significant amount of time was spent encouraging workshop participants to make introductions

and form connections among each other, both around environmental and other social concerns (the immigrant rights movement in Arizona receiving perhaps the most sustained focus, with representatives from organizations such as Mariposas Sin Fronteras and No Mas Muertes given space to discuss their communities' needs and efforts). Payton noted that within weeks of MADR's west coast tour stopping in northern California, the Camp Fire of 2018 devastated Butte County, volunteers in the area utilized skills and resources obtained through MADR's workshops to organize mutual aid relief efforts.

Defining vulnerability

Going into my interviews, I was aware of how academic and popular literature commonly define vulnerability (see pages 11-18). However, I was eager to learn how participants in my research identified vulnerable groups and identities. I found their responses to cover an expansive and dynamic social landscape, falling both within and outside of commonly cited research. Across these interviews, vulnerable populations identified included migrant farmworkers (in particular, those working with H2A temporary visas), undocumented people, disabled people, homebound people (variously attributed to ability, age, and health), people of color, those living in post-colonized areas, incarcerated people, indigenous people, culturally marginalized people, people with warrants out for their arrest, mentally ill people, those living with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (in some cases as a result of previous experiences with natural disaster), people with lower socioeconomic status, immigrants, rural populations, previously displaced people (again, resulting from previous natural disaster), and those living in environmentally degraded or at-risk areas.

Another common observation among MADR participants is that pre-existing marginalization is often exacerbated by disaster. As Milo notes, referencing the high-risk nature of extreme weather events, “the inequalities that are often invisibilized become incredibly visible there and undeniable with the most grave of consequences.” Multiple interviewees, as well as the facilitators of the workshop, discussed incarcerated people as one such group facing unique and intensified risk in natural disasters. Milo cited examples of inhumane treatment of prisoners during hurricanes, including inaction around evacuations in flood-prone areas. They discussed actions taken out of concern for this vulnerable and often overlooked group, such as:

phone-banking and ‘phone zaps’ that can be done to these jails and prisons in order to get them evacuated, at least to let them know that people are watching them and that we care about what happens to the people in there, because they are people.

Alex’s familiarity with the farmworker community in Immokalee, Florida was both a motivating factor behind his MADR participation and a key factor in his understanding of vulnerability. While he noted that factors such as an ongoing housing shortage, cultural marginalization, and the lack of access to resources (the nearest hospital, he told me, is over 45 minutes away) create a matrix of challenges unique to this population, he also emphasized their potential. “You can’t deny that people are vulnerable or in need after a crisis,” he said, “but they’re much more than the moment they find themselves in. They have possibilities, too.”

MADR’s approach to vulnerable communities, echoed by interviewees and throughout the workshop, is fundamentally horizontal and autonomous -- vulnerable communities should inform, not be informed by, relief and recovery volunteers and organizers. One workshop facilitator emphasized that survivors of disaster should be considered as the authority in matters of direct action, and their voices should shape the allocation of resources and direction of relief

efforts. This philosophy is associated with the *zapatista* principle of “leadership from below,” a core value identified on MADR’s website and communicated through their workshops. Alex affirmed this principle, pointing out that “the entire mentality of an organization like Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, and I know the CIW [Coalition of Immokalee Workers] as a farmworker-led organization, is that the people doing the relief have to have a way of taking leadership from those impacted, there has to be a way of not coming in to save or to, essentially, redeem the people involved, because it’s often a very condescending sort of thing.” In this sense, vulnerability may be socially predetermined to some degree, but it does not signify that a group is incapable of taking an active role in their recovery due to their at-risk or in-need status. In fact, MADR’s philosophy indicates that perspectives, knowledge, and skills generated from vulnerable groups are capable of informing particularly effective and egalitarian relief efforts.

MADR: Aid grounded in analysis

Throughout the interviews and workshops I engaged in with MADR organizers and volunteers, analysis, critique, and resistance are central to the organization’s relief and recovery efforts. There is a distinct focus on transformative justice shared among the voices represented in this research -- MADR affiliates don’t want to simply clean up, they want to rebuild, reimagine, and restructure society. Critiques of capitalism, colonialism, conventional non-profit and state actors extend the perspectives of those I observed and spoke with beyond the realm of disaster relief in any isolated capacity. MADR does not concern itself with the redistribution of power in the world of disaster relief and recovery, but throughout society. Failures of the state and non-profit sector are framed in broader socio-historical contexts, wherein disaster is conceptualized in the outcomes of systems, not simply in the patterns of weather. Climate change and society’s

responsibility for its consequences cannot be detached from the perspectives on disaster and relief held by the volunteers, organizers, and facilitators represented here.

The rich and varied analyses shared with me by interview participants locate the motivation to act within a mutual aid capacity beyond any isolated experience with disaster or individualized focus alone. Ultimately, the transformative potential identified as latent in mutual aid disaster relief is central to their efforts. Likewise, the structure and content of MADR's workshops reflect core values of voluntary, communal, autonomous efforts to provide relief grounded in an orientation toward justice. Ultimately, my findings indicate that critique, analysis, and personal motivation are deeply and inherently enmeshed for those engaged in mutual aid.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Through this research, I have explored the motivations that propel individuals into involvement with grassroots disaster relief, specifically within the MADR network. In discussing these motivations with interviewees and observing a two-day workshop geared toward generating community engagement focused on localized risk in Tucson, Arizona, a number of themes regarding the efforts and beliefs of MADR's efforts and affiliates have emerged. In addition to speaking to the motives of those involved in MADR organizing, labor, and community outreach, these motives highlight the ways in which state, federal, and industrial non-profit assistance often fall short of meeting the needs of marginalized individuals and communities, pointing to how these gaps might be filled by non-conventional relief efforts.

The emphasis on care and connection was voiced among my interviewees, as well as throughout the two-day workshop, as a powerful element of MADR's approach to relief work. The ability to "meet people where they're at," as Erin says, differentiates MADR's community needs-focused approach from "top-down" relief efforts that may factor in broader demographic concerns, but often neglect to turn to the vulnerable communities they intend to serve for direction. Empathy and compassion are not generally associated with neoliberal apparatuses of government aid or industrial non-profit relief administration. In contrast, MADR affiliates view their work as humanizing, connective, and mutualistic.

The ability to understand natural disaster as a social construct (whether or not explicitly articulated as such) allows for MADR volunteers and organizers to re-frame the crises to which they are responding. This, combined with the emphasis on climate change as a pressing environmental *and* social issue, informs the vision of MADR; Natural disasters are not seen as isolated phenomena that can be addressed through temporary relief efforts. Rather, conceptualizing the outcomes of natural disasters as an extension of pre-existing social conditions allows for MADR to approach these events with a critical eye toward the factors that create and exacerbate vulnerabilities, with the intention to build longitudinal resilience in the face of unjust conditions.

MADR affiliates value the principles of mutual aid deeply, identifying this worldview within the context of natural disaster relief and recovery and beyond, illuminating potentially viable points of resistance to achieve social change. Individuals engaged in this network seek not only to provide immediate assistance to those in need, but to redistribute power to the hands of the most vulnerable, allowing them to articulate their own needs and take agency in their trajectories of recovery.

Ultimately, the analysis and critique shared by interview participants and observed during MADR's two-day workshop illuminate a justice-oriented organization, one which views disaster relief and social justice as inherently intertwined. While MADR is a relatively nascent relief network, one which is still finding its bearings in many ways (a fact echoed by interviewees involved with MADR in organizational capacities), it is distinct in its orientation toward transformative justice within the relief and recovery world. In this sense, it appears to border on the efforts of social movements. MADR affiliates' analysis of the potential for relief work to resist oppressive structures and transform social relations with the end goal of achieving a more

equitable distribution of resources (and, therefore, life chances) is central to the vision of this organization and its efforts. Understanding MADR as social movement-adjacent adds a fascinating dimension when considering the motivations of actors to take part in its efforts; While immediate relief and recovery may be a key motivator, a deeper vision for social change may factor into their drive to act within this capacity.

Call for future research

As indicated by my data, as well as a critical mass of literature, climate change poses a significant and unprecedented threat to society and the environment. With this impetus in mind, the call for research into disaster studies is more pertinent than ever. Studies highlighting the range of outcomes experiences and the potentials and pitfalls of various relief efforts can play a crucial role in understanding the hazards of weather phenomena and relevant social impacts. While this thesis has provided a glimpse into one grassroots organization, there are a number of other relief and recovery organizations worthy of deeper analysis.

Furthermore, while the workshops and first-hand accounts of volunteer experiences shed significant light on the motivations of MADR affiliates and the outcomes of their efforts, there is the limitation of not directly witnessing this work. Future research into the material outcomes and the extent of the effectiveness of various MADR efforts would contribute to the field of disaster studies. Insight into how the on-the-ground efforts of this grassroots organization could potentially inform broader, sustained efforts to provide relief to marginalized and vulnerable populations. Understanding the range of disaster impacts and outcomes points toward the types of relief and recovery work that may be more or less effective within any one set of conditions.

Vulnerability and resilience are by no means universally distributed, and this awareness can potentially inform sustainable, equitable relief efforts.

Mutual Aid: Looking Toward the Future

The principles of mutual aid that MADR incorporate into their disaster relief efforts reveal one alternative to conventional approaches to mitigating crises, which ultimately extends beyond the world of disaster relief and recovery. How might identifying vulnerabilities in our social systems in ways that fundamentally flatten hierarchies of power allow for new and effective visions for the future? The philosophy of mutual aid argues that horizontal cooperation, self-determination, and critical direct action carries promise for sustaining strong communities that are better equipped to face crises. MADR applies this vision to the work they do in showing up for communities faced with natural disaster, paying particular attention to the needs and voices of the marginalized.

Organizations like MADR further the debate around top-down/bottom-up approaches to disaster relief, pointing toward the potential for the latter to serve the needs of vulnerable groups in unique ways, centering the perspectives of the very populations that seek to provide relief for. Here, the focus on solidarity (rather than charity) is central; as Milo indicated, MADR seeks to avoid creating a dynamic with “powerful givers and powerless receivers.” To this extent, MADR stands apart as an organization geared toward social justice that is generated from the grassroots in the truest sense; in order to provide meaningful and responsible relief, one must think critically about power in the disaster context and beyond. By combining this critical lens with material relief efforts, MADR shifts the focus from the charitable notion of giving aid toward the necessity of working closely with communities, embracing difference, and engaging

mutualistically in order to facilitate recovery -- not just from immediate disaster, but from injustices that create and sustain vulnerability.

There is no doubt that climate change will continue to shape the world we live in -- through weather phenomena, patterns in migration, technological developments, political debate, and popular discourse, climate change will profoundly alter the ways in which we experience life on this planet and make meaning within society. In order to navigate the uncertainty of a world faced with ecological collapse and social unrest, members of society must be able to take action in ways that resonate with their understandings of the world. Organizations like MADR may inspire action among individuals who are critical of conventional relief charities and non-profits, with the potential to create a wide, responsive network of informed and justice-oriented people capable of stepping up to meet the diverse needs of communities in crisis.

The philosophy of mutual aid is applicable beyond the world of natural disaster and climate change, with the potential to generate roots of resistance and deep connection in marginalized communities. To this extent, social inequality can be challenged by the reclamation of autonomy in the face of marginalization. The notion of solidarity emphasizes the efficacy of “people power,” wherein social actors can work together to achieve meaningful outcomes, maintaining healthy space for difference in the process. Exploring the approach of MADR and the motivations of its actors points to an important intersection of activism, solidarity, and awareness-raising. How might the spread of a mutual aid perspective reshape the terrain of other social issues? In a contentious society marked by profound divisions, what might the reclamation of mutual aid as a guiding principle offer in terms of reconciliation and progress?

Through conversation with MADR actors and participation in their workshop, alternatives to top-down and radical reconceptualizations of bottom-up disaster relief efforts

reveal the power of mutual aid as a principled approach to relief and recovery that centers justice in the concept of resilience; in this sense, without addressing the underlying issues that render communities vulnerable, relief work is ultimately short-sighted and limited in its ability to generate longitudinal capacities for coping with disaster. MADR actors' analyses of systemic factors shaping the experience of disaster, alongside their material efforts to help individuals and communities rebuild in the face of loss, speak to a growing awareness of the interconnectedness of ecological and social justice in our world. Together, dual critique and response provide a powerful lens through which opportunities to act in solidarity with disaster communities may reveal themselves.

Appendix A

The following interview guide was utilized in each of the seven in-depth interviews conducted for this project. While each of these topics was addressed over the course of every

interview, the semi-structured nature of these exchanges resulted in the formation of various follow-up questions and, in some cases, altered trajectories of conversation, as was deemed the most appropriate and discursively authentic.

Interview Guide:

- What drew you into natural disaster relief?
- Can you explain to me what your involvement with MADR has entailed?
 - Why did you choose MADR, as opposed to more mainstream relief work?
- Can you share with me one of the most meaningful experiences you've had working with MADR?
- How would you define a vulnerable group in the face of natural disaster in our society?
 - What unique challenges do you believe vulnerable groups face leading up to, during, or in the wake of a natural disaster?
- Can you describe any challenges you've encountered in grassroots relief work?
- How do you see MADR's efforts as different from other forms of relief work, if at all?
- What does mutual aid mean to you, personally?
 - What are the values of mutual aid and how do you connect with those values?
How do your values maybe differ?
How do you define "activism"?

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