

We All We Got

Urban Black Ecologies of Care and Mutual Aid

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Urban ecologies are fraught with inequities, often resulting in humanitarian or charity solutions that emphasize lack rather than communities' self-determination. While these inequities have been widely documented, the COVID-19 pandemic further reveals how these crises are not the sum result of individual failures. Rather, they are systemically produced through policies that harm people. How do Black urban residents contend with the sociohistorical antagonisms between feelings of scarcity (e.g., food and housing insecurity, underemployment, and financial strain) and aspirations for abundance? Using ethnographic encounters in Chicago and Austin we consider how practices of mutual aid are meaningful both spatially and affectively. First, we explore how mutual aid transforms “decaying” urban spaces to meet residents' needs. Second, we explore felt experiences of *mutuality* in social relationships as distinct from authoritarian, *charity*-based relationality. Thinking these spatial and affective dimensions collectively, we work toward a framework of Black ecologies of care and mutual aid.

■ **KEYWORDS:** activism, Austin, Chicago, food access, mutuality, organizing

In times of crisis, dynamics are peculiarly apparent, and insofar as we can catch historical or contemporary shifts on the fly, we might recognize something powerful about race and freedom. (Gilmore 2002: 17)

Cities across the US exist within an ongoing paradox. On the one hand, they are often cited as spaces of possibility, for large companies like Amazon, Google, and Apple decide to locate in them after long periods of state and corporate neglect and for immigrants and migrants looking to relocate for the purpose of building better lives. On the other hand, cities simultaneously serve as sites through which segregation, environmental racism, and unequal access to resources shape everyday life for those for whom those possibilities of a good life—even the ones that propelled them to relocate—are most out of reach. Fueled by what Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002) calls the “fatal couplings of power and difference”, urban ecologies are fraught with inequities that make Black and often poor residents structurally vulnerable to climate disasters, pandemics, and the failures of everyday city infrastructures. These fatal couplings make it impossible to treat “urban,” “environment,” and “race” as distinct categories. Rather, as Leilani Nishime and Kim D. Hester Williams argue, it requires that we “consider nature and environment as relational sites for navigating both embodied racial identities and ecological space and place” (2018: 4).



While the disparate impacts of urban inequities have been widely documented across space and time, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates them and lays bare how these ecologies are not the sum result of individual failures. Relatedly, ongoing global protests and uprising in defense of Black life in the wake of George Floyd's murder in the summer of 2020 contributed to public reckonings about anti-Blackness. In short, the pandemic and global uprisings made it clear: racism—in all its physical, psychic, place-specific manifestations—is deadly.

Responses to the pandemic, global uprisings, and other crises impacting Black life have varied. On one hand, the documented increase in people using emergency food provisions makes clear that charity-based frameworks for addressing acute crises are on the rise and emergency food aid has become a fix that it was never intended to be (Dickinson 2019). On the other hand, mutual aid—as a term and as a practice—has increasingly entered public conversations as an alternative to charity. While some movement spaces and organizations have long used mutual aid as a framework for meeting people's basic, everyday needs, the current political moment has given way to mutual aid being discussed and adapted in various contexts.¹ Black organizers, communities, and residents in cities across the US are at the center of many of these experiments.

How do Black urban residents contend with the deep, sociohistorical antagonisms between feelings of scarcity (e.g., food insecurity, lacking personal protective equipment, job loss, and financial strain) and aspirations for creating sustainable, collective spaces that meet everyone's needs? Black ecologies, as formally theorized by Nathan Hare and later Justin Hosbey and J. T. Roane, provides a framework for thinking through answers to such a question, or a way to map “ongoing susceptibility as a function of historical and ongoing relations” (Roane and Hosbey 2019: np) alongside efforts to confront those relations, resist them, and practice alternative forms of relationality to each other and the earth. As an elastic concept, Black ecologies challenges an approach to environmentalism that does not consider the ways environmental disasters, Blackness, and (insufficient) urban infrastructures are co-constituted within a network of power relations. In this article, we build on and within this work to explore the work of care in ecologies of survival that are created in the context of urban crises.

Using mutual aid as a framework, we explore on-the-ground efforts in Chicago and Austin as manifestations of and experiments with care. We write from an understanding of Black ecologies as theorizing both the ongoing violence that is inflicted on Black people and a “corpus of insurgent knowledge production by these same communities” (Roane and Hosbey 2019: np). Through thinking about how these experiments with care manifest in particular places at particular times, we argue that they are also geographic transformations—no matter how temporary—that challenge ongoing ecological and racial violence. Second, we explore the felt experiences of *mutuality*—the necessary grounds for building right relationships—as distinct from the felt experiences of *charity*. Toward those ends, we offer two ethnographic encounters from two very different cities and contexts: Chicago and Austin. We write both as academics who, in part, research and engage Black ecologies as a framework for understanding the inter-related processes of sustaining and constraining Black life in the urban US, and as Black women who have designed and participated in mutual aid efforts in Chicago and Austin. In this way, our writing here is an attempt to connect the theoretical work of Black ecologies to the work we do outside of the academy, manifesting Nathan Hare's vision for a Black Studies that emanates from collaborative struggle with, for, and alongside communities (Hare 1970). Thinking these spatial and affective dimensions collectively, we work towards a framework of Black ecologies of care as one way to theorize the ongoing experiments in relationality that foreground Black life and ways of living in ecologies of neglect and terror.

Constructing Urban Black Ecologies

In 1969, Nathan Hare, Robert Chrisman, and Alex Ross founded *The Black Scholar* in San Francisco. *The Black Scholar* was meant to serve as a venue for Black theorizing outside of the professionalization of the academy, making way for a kind of fugitive Black study that Moten and Harvey have described as the “downlow lowdown maroon community of the university, into the undercommons of enlightenment, where the work gets done, where the revolution is still black, still strong” (Harney and Moten 2013: 26).

The April 1970 issue, “Black Cities: Colonies or City States?” is comprised of eight short articles and one poem—all of which engage what is at stake for Black people living in cities, given the context of dispossession. The contributors to the 1970 issue wrote in the immediate aftermath of Lyndon Johnson’s 1964 declaration of a war on poverty. “Model Cities” were one programmatic element by which white places were developed and made desirable by the extraction and hoarding of resources from nonwhite places (Metcalf 1970; Seamster and Purifoy 2021). These experimental urban development programs from the late 1960s to mid-1970s were a collaborative effort between the federal government and local stakeholders—real estate developers, city government, and community leaders—to expand white control over the land while also “neutraliz[ing] the effects of the slums” on their land investments (Metcalf 1970). These programs effectively established prototypical neocolonies across the US that fortified extractive economic relationships between poor, nonwhite people in city centers and white elites in the suburban periphery. In such an arrangement, “[B]lack [and Brown] people are to form the backbone of all urban labor” (Metcalf 1970: 25) as workers in healthcare, service, manufacturing, transportation, and education—that “essential” work that keeps the city at large alive and functional. At the same time, they are systematically denied the means, such as earning a living wage, adequate representation in local government, and control of land and property, for self-determined living. The city government then also denies support, fiscal and otherwise, for the development of Black and Brown neighborhood infrastructures (e.g., good roads, access to reliable public transportation, adequate markets and grocers, quality schools) and invests heavily in the policing, surveillance, and incarceration of Black and Brown people to protect the interests of the elite and maintain a conservative standard of law and order (Ladner and Stafford 1970). Ralph Metcalf, Jr. and other contributors to “Black Cities” employ the term neocolony to identify this extractive set of relations as a form of domestic imperialism. US neocolonialism, and the maintenance of urban neocolonies across the country, works to inhibit Black and Brown community thriving. Given the interrelation of the various parts of a neocolony described above, US urban ecologies can also be understood as neocolonial ecologies inside of which “the only resource that nonwhite people in this country have is themselves” (Metcalf 1970:29).

Written during a time when journalists and sociologists were questioning the vitality of cities—and in some cases declaring the death of them—Nathan Hare’s contribution, “Black Ecology” (1970), offers a meditation on the relationship between environmental conditions, decaying city structures, and Black life; a relationship that is, in part, mediated by ongoing structures of colonialism.

The April 1970 issue closes with an article by Richard G. Hatcher, in which he writes that government programs have not alleviated the struggles of urban residents, that there is a crisis in local leadership, and city officials have not mobilized to change anything (1970: 57–58). Collectively, Hare and Hatcher’s articles serve as bookends for framing fraught Black urban ecologies as a result of structural failures, urban planning, segregation, and a lack of political imagination by those in power. From urban water crises (Pulido 2016; Ranganathan 2016) to food apartheid

(Bradley and Galt 2014; Reese 2019) to increased vulnerability to climate-related catastrophes (McKittrick and Woods 2007; Purdum et al. 2021), twenty-first-century cities still grapple with some of the same inequities that Hare and Hatcher wrote of in 1970, and Black residents continue to bear the brunt of the deadly consequences.

In urban cores, the interplay between city structures, the environment, and people makes it impossible to solely equate “ecology” with nature or the natural world. Indeed, the built environment—in part dictated by policies that have disparate impacts—often mediates, interrupts, or influences Black people’s relationship to the natural world. In cases like Hurricane Katrina, for example, the failures of the built environment force Black people to think quickly and collectively about how to survive man-made disasters that could have been avoided. A focus on urban Black ecologies is one way to think about transformation and the shifting relationships between Black people, the earth, and the structures it contains. Relatedly, urban Black ecologies help to locate the development of cities within a broader framework of control and conquest, or how public policy and urban planning transform the “lands of no one” into ghettos, enclosures, and later—in the case of gentrification—lands of opportunity for predominantly white middle-class residents moving back to cities from surrounding suburbs.

Black ecologies are, in part, structured by ongoing violence and vulnerability, but they are also sites of innovation, improvisation, and choreographies of survival. We might imagine them as “the sites through which particular forces of empire (oppression/resistance, black immortality, racial violence, urbicide) bring forth a poetics that envisions a decolonial future” (McKittrick 2013: 5). As Clyde Woods argues, the creative and sometimes improvised responses to racial inequities emanated from those who were most impacted: poor and working class Black people (Woods 2017). Emerging in various forms—music, art, community organizing, urban agriculture, and more—these responses to fraught ecologies map alternative ways of thinking about cities, those who inhabit them, and ways to live in the midst or in spite of persistent threats to Black life.

Hosbey and Roane encourage us to explore “the land stewardship and environmental practices of Black communities in the US South . . . in ‘untamed’ spaces” to “discover new possibilities of regional social and political affiliation outside of domination, extraction and violence” (2021: 68). How are Black city dwellers fostering new possibilities for relating to each other and the spaces they inhabit? What kinds of untamed city spaces do they transform? While city commons are often “fleeting” (Roane 2018; Hosbey and Roane 2021) and “ephemeral” (Reese 2021) as a result of city policies, they are important for imagining urban Black ecologies. Unlike the imagery that an emerging popular abolitionist framework elicits, one of complete destruction of the old order followed by a fantastically just new order, “there is no flood and no ark. There is no newly cleaned earth. There is only a world ravaged by capitalism and exploitation and experiments in creating anew” (Reese 2021: np).

To that end, many of these experiments happen within the context of the everyday violence of state neglect, sometimes proliferating into a set of strategies for using or transforming city resources to take care of one another. In the following section, we review a body of literature on care, highlighting (1) the violence of care enacted through the state and (2) the role of mutuality and solidarity in building care-based frameworks rooted in a sense of collective responsibility. We give ethnographic attention to the matter of Black urban ecologies through an exploration of how Chicago organizers transform public park space into sites for practicing mutual aid—a direct affront to the City of Chicago’s use of violence and surveillance technologies to “mutilate, conceal, and contain” Black people and social life in the city’s parks and other public spaces (Taylor 1999; Williams 2020; Wright 2018). We explore mutual aid as a way out of these violent entanglements, giving emphasis to the ephemeral or fleeting nature of the work and the need

to continue developing new modes of survival and sustainability. We explore the boundaries of mutual aid as a term through a body of literature on care work where the authors contend that by being active participants in alternative economies, feelings of mutuality and solidarity can emerge and evolve through practice into a deeper sense of collective responsibility to land and to each other.

State-Constructed “Deservedness” and Care in Urban Black Ecologies

The city-sanctioned containment and killings of Black people are the result of a kind of cruel mathematics whereby the white ruling class believes “it is simply a result of the earth’s ‘natural’ ecological formation that certain populations will have their needs met, while others not, and even further, these groups represent obstruction to the health and futurity of our planet” (Alagraa 2021: np). Bedour Alagraa frames cruel mathematics, fatal liberalisms, and sovereign power as constitutive elements of ongoing crisis, what she calls the “interminable catastrophe.” The violence is not always as acute as the horrific incidents of police brutality. More often, it is a slow violence and death, which in the urban context means the use of State power and funds to implement development programs that change the built environment in favor of private ownership for the purpose of “mutilating,” “concealing,” and “containing” unfavorable actors; in other words nonwhite people (Williams 2020; Wright 2018).

Similarly, Katherine McKittrick asserts that ship and plantation ledgers recording economic transactions, insurance claims, and lists are records of the dead and dying, “the mathematics of the unliving” (2014: 17) —calculations that are rehearsed and rehashed in the recounting of violent encounters. McKittrick asks: “How then do we think and write and share as decolonial scholars and foster a commitment to acknowledging violence and undoing its persistent frame, rather than simply analytically reprising violence? How do we ethically engage with mathematical and numerical certainties that compile, affirm, and honor bits and pieces of black death?” (2014: 18). Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) reminds us from a Gramscian frame that State power is not a given. Rather it is a *capacity* afforded by the people who consent to their authority. The State manipulates the feelings and desires of the people such that they willingly *concede* their power. One way they gain consent is by weaponizing affect/feelings/emotions.

For Analiese Richard and Daromir Rudnyckyj (2009) and Sarah Ahmed (2004), affect and economy exist in dialectical relationship to one another. Richard and Rudnyckyj’s “economies of affect” framework captures how “affect [is] mobilized [by the controllers of the global market] to facilitate neoliberal transformation and achieve what Foucault referred to as the rationalization of the ‘exercise of government’” (2009: 60), while Ahmed asserts that “emotions *do things*”, referring to the way affect is shaped through intersubjective modes of exchange (2004: 119). Hate, for example, can be weaponized “to create the very outline of different figures or objects of hate, a creation that crucially aligns the figures together and constitutes them as a ‘common’ threat” (2004: 119). Once a common threat is identified, it is then reasonable in a white supremacist frame to declare war, with a goal of domination by way of extermination.

The war metaphor in US politics (e.g., War on Poverty, War on Crime, War on Drugs, War on Terrorism) in combination with neoliberal logics that center personal responsibility frame social problems as personal pathologies (Davenport and Lloyd 2019). In turn the State effectively declared these wars on *victims* of poverty, crime, drug-abuse, and terror. The War on Poverty materialized through Model Cities programs that built neocolonial infrastructures inside of which the onus of maintaining the white supremacist, patriarchal values of “law and order” is placed on the people whereby *we* became responsible for policing, surveilling, and persecuting

each other. Calling the police, “standing our ground”, storming the capital, and voting in favor of less than satisfactory legislation that greenlights more State power under these conditions are justifiable as part of the civic duties of “good” Americans (as opposed to “bad” Americans, and by extension, bad *people*).

Though there is utility in affect theory’s capacity to elucidate how white affect/feelings/emotions are mobilized to construct neocolonial ecologies, Tyrone Palmer (2017) critiques affect theory’s general inattentiveness to blackness as it represents a promise of a post-Human frontier of limitless ontological possibility, a promise that is inaccessible to most Black people. Blackness, according to Sylvia Wynter (2003) and Palmer (2017), is contrary to humanness. Thus Black feelings cannot be adequately understood through popular affect theory. “Modalities of violence” made operable by white feelings of superiority, fear, and disdain for the Other “produce blackness as a locus of incapacities” while “Black affective responses are only legible as signs of pathology . . . as signs of both excess and lack” (Palmer 2017: 32). We therefore amend Ahmed’s (2004) contention to say that it is in fact *white* feelings that do things. *White* feelings build infrastructures of violence while at the same time Black feelings—in particular, otherwise feelings of joy, hope, love, and mutuality made possible by practicing interdependence through care—are “illegible”, “unintelligible”, “unthinkable” in the white imaginary (Palmer 2017; Rankine 2014; Trouillot 1995).² Due to their unintelligibility, Black networks of care and mutual aid provide viable infrastructural material for the establishment of maroon communities inside geographies of violence—hidden in plain sight (Roane 2018). As Celeste Winston argues, these maroon geographies are made up of both physical sites established by those escaping enslavement and more contemporary examples such as “spaces produced through continued Black struggles around policing, incarceration, housing insecurity, unequal food access, environmental racism, and other overlapping forms of racial violence” (2021: 2187). As a result, these maroon geographies, “advance alternative ways of understanding and producing space against and outside of these structures of racial violence rooted in the history and legacies of slavery” (Winston 2021: 2187).

Read together, this body of literature illustrates that a critical role of government is to determine who is deserving of care. By manipulating affect/feelings/emotions, the state encourages the masses to believe that some people deserve to have their needs met while others do not, or that one’s needs not being met is a result of personal failures. These are the foundational logics of charity which “makes rich people and corporations look generous while upholding and legitimizing the systems that concentrate wealth” (Spade 2020: 36). Charity functions as a mechanism of social control of poor, nonwhite people. Through charitable and philanthropic institutions’ strict enforcement of eligibility requirements like “sobriety, piety, curfews, participation in job training or parenting courses, cooperation with the police, a lawful immigration status, or identifying the paternity of children” (Spade 2020: 39), government and private entities are able to control the behaviors of those who they see as morally inferior. By Spade’s analysis, charity can thus be understood as a form of policing based on “prescriptive” ethics illuminating what Lynette Arnold and Felicity Aulino call a “conundrum of care”, whereby “care can do violence” (2021: 16; Heckert 2010).

Redefining Care

Bearing the nickname, the “city in a garden,” Chicago is well known for its lush parks and green spaces, the result of a development project of the late nineteenth century to create oases of green space for leisure and recreation on an increasingly industrialized landscape (Taylor 1999).

Because of overcrowding and racist housing policies during the Great Migration, Black people frequently visited parks and beaches for the fresh air and space that they lacked in their neighborhoods “where sun and elbow room are hard to get” (Fisher 2015: 107). These spaces, however, were highly racialized and often were the settings of violent encounters. The 1919 Red Summer riots in Chicago, for example, began at a South Side beach when a young Black boy crossed over an imagined racial dividing line into the white part of the lake. He was stoned by angry white patrons, ultimately leading to his drowning as police and other beach officials watched with apathy. Violence ensued over the next several days, including white gang members assaulting Black Washington Park patrons in order to claim the space as their own (Fisher 2015).

Though contested spaces where Black people risked violent encounters, parks and beaches functioned as extensions of Black households where they could gather to memorialize their ancestry, remember the past, eat well, practice community, and celebrate special occasions (Dwyer and Hutchison 1990; Fisher 2015). Colin Fisher writes that as a result of the 1919 riots and efforts of white Chicagoans to displace Black Chicagoans, many Black Chicagoans became much less interested in integration, instead favoring “a focus on economic independence, the development of Black institutions, and the building of the Black Metropolis, a city within a city” (Fisher 2015: 123). Occupying space in parks and beaches was one way by which they grew their intersubjective capacities to create such institutions. Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten (2013) would call this process constructing an outside from the inside. Black Chicagoans, rather than conceding to their displacement from the cleaner and more spacious sections of Chicago, developed their own means of leisure, care, and belonging in ephemeral maroon communities throughout Chicago’s urban parks and beaches. Chicago park culture remains vibrant. During the summer months especially, one can expect to smell bar-b-ques, to feel the heavy bass of house, soul, and hip-hop music booming from the trunks of cars with custom stereo systems parked and on display. Vendors can be found selling flags, snacks, water, t-shirts, and other goods. Children play loudly with firecrackers, pop wheelies on their bikes, and help their elder community members sell their wares. Roane would classify this kind of activity as plotting whereby “Black communities renegotiate the terrain of radical exploitation and totalizing social control” in favor of “a vision of social-cosmological-ecological integrity” (2018: 242–261).

bell hooks (2018) invites us to understand these modes of sociality as critical to building a sense of mutuality: a practice of giving and receiving “precious gifts” like time, attention, love, material resources, and skills. In fact, it is “through giving to each other [that] we learn how to experience mutuality”, which in its greatest expression can lead us toward “the experience of knowing we always belong” (2018: 164). This is the gift of mutual aid, “that unceasing labour, producing these new experiments in living even as defeat continues to be the outcome” (Hartman and Moten 2018). The proliferation of these experimental encounters across social geographies is called prefiguration.

Prefiguration is a strategy of experimentation that challenges the relationships of domination responsible for producing interminable crises by instead centering horizontality as a foundational value (Sbicca 2018; Springer and Gahman 2016; White 2018). Simon Springer and Levi Gahman reference the work of Carl Boggs (1977), writing that to prefigure means “to reject the centrism, hierarchy and authority that come with representative politics by emphasizing the embodied practice of enacting horizontal relationships and forms of organization that strive to reflect the future society being sought” (Springer and Gahman 2016: 8).

For Marianne Maeckelbergh (2011) prefiguration can be summed up as a philosophy of practice. At its core, it is a process-based, constantly shifting, highly iterative strategy of self-governing “that transforms existing power relations . . . by actively setting up alternative structures so that people can *experience* for themselves what is possible” (2011: 16–17). She gives due

credit to Black and Indigenous women and femmes leading grassroots efforts in the US South and elsewhere for developing and scaling up prefigurative praxes, causing significant cultural shifts that are visible today. For example, at the 2010 Detroit US Social Forum (USSF), a regional World Social Forum convening, members of Kindred: Southern Healing Justice Collective established Healing Justice People's Movement Assembly and Healing Justice Practice Spaces (HJPSs), "one of the first healing justice practice spaces many people had ever encountered" (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2016: para. 6) And from the USSF annual convenings, key contemporary movement frameworks emerged as theoretical thrusts that many now recognize in movement spaces and the academy as healing justice, transformative justice, and restorative justice (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2016). The strategies that these frameworks aim to outline are emergent from millennia-old Black and Indigenous praxes of relationality informed by spiritual cosmologies that center (non-)human interdependence (Davis 2019), our responsibility to reduce harm and develop accountable relationships (Zehr 2015), our need to transform ourselves by addressing root causes of pain and conflict (Hooker 2016; Lederach 2003), and our right to heal personal and transgenerational traumas while working toward a sense of wholeness (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2016). Today, these are commonly held values inside US political organizing culture, itself a testament to the power of prefiguration. And for many practitioners inside these justice movements, mutual aid is one way that we practice being responsible for the provision of care (material and otherwise) for ourselves as an interdependent social body. Dean Spade (2020) clearly denotes the three tenets of mutual aid projects. First, they "work to meet survival needs and build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need" (2020: 21). Second, they "mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build movements" (2020: 25). Finally, they "are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors" (2020: 28).

Spade recognizes the way that dominant culture has shaped the way we understand responsibility, as a way of demonstrating goodness and expressing pity for those on the society's margins (Spade 2020). Participation in charity and philanthropy is often performative and is unlikely to result in the kinds of transformation of interpersonal relationships that are necessary for the good of our communities. Jia Tolentino (2020) expresses concern that mutual aid as we understand in theory and in political organizing is not the same as popular COVID-era mutual aid. Tolentino (2020) and A. J. Faas et al. (2020) forewarn that many people engaged in COVID-era mutual aid are still invested in capitalist solutions, or at the very least, expect an imminent external intervention (by the US federal government or otherwise) that will relieve them of their duties of caring for one another. Tolentino writes that romanticized tales proliferated by the media of people coming together as a community in the face of crisis contribute to the depoliticization of mutual aid by concealing "the ravages of American inequity under capitalism" (2020: 4). This in part is the conundrum of contemporary mutual aid: can the COVID-era survival work that collectives across the country have activated since 2020 actually be called mutual aid if, in practice, they do not prioritize political education around abolition? Faas et al. (2020) ask similarly: in a moment when people have become increasingly dependent on corporations like Amazon and other online retailers to meet their material needs, "in what ways (if at all), do gifts and mutual aid in the time of coronavirus depart from the polarizations, violences, and ruinations of late-stage capitalism?" (2020: 338). Spade (2020) warns of this danger of co-optation where over time the non-profit sector appoints "community leaders"—typically university educated and well-conditioned to operate the capitalist machine—to run programs that were initially volunteer-based and community controlled. In turn, we may be headed toward the non-profitization of mutual aid, which in reality is charity under a performatively radical name.

Many now believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity, a portal, to return to more cooperative modes of exchange and social life that are based in ethics of care (Goh 2020; Roy 2020; Springer 2020). Springer calls it a “resurgence of reciprocity” (Springer 2020:112) whereby the prevalence of mutual aid action across the country is a direct result of the failures of capitalist alienation, promising a future of cooperative living as long as we build our city infrastructures with mutual aid values at the helm (Goh 2020; Tolentino 2020). Kian Goh (2020), in a May 2020 Pandemic Urbanism Symposium presentation, cites mutual aid as both a social and political enterprise, writing about how people in cities demonstrate solidarity in ways that transcend geographic notions of proximity (e.g., local/non-local, city/non-city). Goh (2020), Tolentino (2020), and Faas et al. (2020) propose that infrastructural interventions be developed—that we must create cities that are better equipped to sustain mutual aid efforts and the feelings of mutuality the work elicits among diverse peoples.

Transforming Policed Space through Mutual Aid

On 18 April 2021, Chicago West Side community members from Pilsen, Little Village, and North Lawndale came together at Douglass Park to hold a ceremonial space in which we could mourn, testify, witness, shout, pray, and profess our discontent at the neglect and outright violence of the city. Armed with new surveillance technologies, \$280 million of the \$1.2 billion city COVID-19 relief funds, and the full support of Mayor Lori Lightfoot, the Chicago Police Department terrorized Black and Brown neighborhoods on the south and west sides and public gathering spaces like Grant Park and Washington Park in what had become an increasingly violent and suppressive year since the nationwide uprisings in Summer 2020. The most recent victim at the time was Little Village’s Adam Toledo, a thirteen-year-old Latino who was killed on 29 March 2021 by officer Eric Stillman following a foot pursuit. His death sparked a series of vigils and marches in his memory and generated community discourse about how people can create community safety while continuing to press the city for more investment in local infrastructure and public services that would support the thriving of neighborhoods most in need. Direct actions and community gatherings served as meeting grounds for such visioning.

On the day of the West Side vigil, surviving loved ones of Chicago Police Department’s victims, concerned community members, and Chicagoland organizers stood one by one in front of the crowd to tell their stories and name their desires for a world otherwise. In such a world, no one is chased to their death, everyone has a chance to repair harm and redeem themselves, and we can feel what it is to be free. A chant of “We love you; We, we love you” resounded after each person’s turn, a sign of solidarity and shared vision for a liberated future that is capacious enough to hold all of our needs. As they spoke, those of us in the grassy surround began to notice police cruisers with steady frequency passing by on both sides of the park. At least two clearly marked and two unmarked but identifiable Chicago Police Department SUVs drove by 1...2...3...4...5...6...7 times at such a pace that at any given moment, we were fully surrounded. As they passed, the officers gazed on our multicultural gathering in the middle of Douglass Park.

We proceeded as representatives from a local Indigenous organization led the group in a medicine wheel ritual which is meant to facilitate the restoration of personal wholeness. Acknowledgment of each direction—North, East, South, West—brings the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical dimensions of ourselves into balance (Dapice 2006; Lavallée 2008). When practiced in a group, the process has the power to generate “a feeling with, rather than a feeling for, others” (Hobart and Kneese 2020: 2), otherwise understood as mutuality. In Afro-

diasporic traditions, walking the *dikenga* or around a crossroads creates a similar effect, while the activation of the circle through ritual ambulation opens up the space in which to carry out “a different kind of cosmological and social vision” (Roane 2018: 247) where all living beings are connected and whole (Bulley 2020). At this makeshift crossroads, the intersection of several pathways in a city park, we activated. As we waited for the signal of the drum beat to change direction each time, the police continued to circle in the opposite direction, creating a sensation of turbulence. Yet we remained safe in the inner world of our collective creation, wielding our people power against surveillance. Enclosed but not captured, our inside, it seemed, would protect us from the outside.

For people who have been “written out of belonging” (Schein 2009: 811) through acts of racism, the residents of the West Side of Chicago understand all too well the scarcity of care (Buch 2015). Yet by gathering together, we demonstrated a clear example of how prefigurative mutual aid can transform landscapes—even those nestled inside enclosures of police surveillance. Rather than the provision of food or other material goods, the organizers of this mutual aid effort provided radical care and spiritual healing, by which we gifted each other a felt sense of belonging (hooks 2018). This scene demonstrates one of the varied ways that mutual aid is carried out in the informal everyday yet maintains the integral values outlined by Dean Spade (2020). In a community that lacks precious resources such as care and safety, we gathered in this time to care for each other, to mobilize and expand our relationships, thereby increasing our senses of safety *in* belonging, and to share with each other the ways that we can act collectively toward radical solutions. More than a political campaign, mutual aid is a relationship practice by which we grow in our understanding that sharing ourselves, our talents, our listening ears, and witnessing eyes is not an elective process, but one that is necessary for collective survival and is a part of our responsibility to each other as interdependent selves.

Climate-Related Disaster Meets Infrastructure Failures

Austin, colloquially referred to as “Silicon Hills” to index the influx of technology companies that have relocated there from Silicon Valley, has long been considered a blue, liberal oasis in the middle of a red state. This characterization, however, masks the historical, political, social, and infrastructural inequities that are endemic to and in part responsible for the city’s rapid growth. Many of these inequalities were bolstered by public policy. In 1928, Austin city government adopted a master plan that sought to create a “negro district” to maintain racially segregated neighborhoods. Forced to move from other parts of the city, Black and many Latinx residents were relocated to the eastern part of the city. Now considered one of the “hippest” parts of the city, east Austin is one of the most rapidly gentrifying areas in the country. Bars, restaurants, breweries, and high-priced apartments line east fifth and sixth streets; and homes priced well over a half million dollars are not uncommon in the area. But many still consider east Austin to be the heart of Black life in the city and hold on to their properties, despite developers’ offers. In a widely publicized case, Brian Mayes, owner of Sam’s BBQ, turned down a \$5 million offer from a developer, heeding residents’ calls to preserve the cultural fabric of the quickly changing neighborhood.³

Despite the growing popularity of east Austin, however, the impact of long-term infrastructure inequities came home to roost during Winter Storm Uri. In February 2021, Winter Storm Uri, an unprecedented winter storm that caused massive infrastructure failures, hit Texas, resulting in households going without power for several days, multi-hour waits in grocery store lines, overcrowding in hotels and shelters, and approximately 700 deaths. Over the course of

five days, the state experienced record low temperatures and infrastructure failures. In Austin, where I am currently based, local power companies, as instructed by ERCOT (Electric Reliability Council of Texas), started rolling blackouts on Sunday night, 14th February, to attempt to preserve energy and “save the grid,” a refrain that was deployed to encourage Texas residents to “do their part” in preventing a massive energy failure. The problem, however, was that the rolling blackouts never rolled. In the early hours of Monday morning, maps showing which neighborhoods had power and which ones did not began to emerge on Twitter, along with critical analysis revealing that the majority of neighborhoods without power were heavily populated by Black and Brown residents.

Though ERCOT had anticipated the storm, little proactive planning was put into place to fortify Texas’s electric grids. In recordings leaked from subsequent meetings, one ERCOT board member was recorded boasting about the revenue that would result from the unprecedented use of electricity in households to stay warm. When criticisms about the rolling blackouts started to roll in, city officials and others quickly explained that it was not racism that dictated who had power and who did not; it was the fact that power to critical resources like hospitals was not cut, and homes and businesses which shared those grids were the lucky ones. The irony is, of course, that the built environment and access to critical resources like hospitals is already racialized. In discussing the role of racism in Austin’s uneven development, Eliot Tretter writes, “historical legacies and contemporary practices of prejudice and violence have influenced the vulnerability of different social groups to changes to the urban environment” (2016: 5).

Much like the New Orleans where residents’ homes were declared inhabitable in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, houseless, poor, and working class residents—many of whom are Black and Latinx, though not exclusively so—were “the victims of federal abandonment and centuries of racial segregation” (McKittrick and Woods 2007: 2). Rather than being “natural,” the power outages, water and food shortages, and millions of dollars in damage across the city and state were the result of ongoing state neglect. Indeed, as many scholars and activists have pointed out, the language of “natural” disaster only serves to mask the systematic ways colonialism, anti-Blackness, and public policy create conditions of vulnerability (Heynen and Ybarra 2020; McKittrick and Woods 2007; Pulido 2018; Purdum et al. 2021; Ranganathan 2020). “Antiblackness is pervasive as climate,” Christina Sharpe writes (2016: 106), and the ongoing climate of anti-Blackness, persisting through plantation structures to the present, in part produces contemporary crises like the impact of winter storm Uri—even in cities like Austin where the Black population is significantly lower than that of any other race. When the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness meets climate-related catastrophes that the state refuses to plan for or mitigate, it amounts to planned abandonment, or the state’s gambling with how many (Black) lives are expendable before needing to intervene or make drastic changes to prevent or reduce loss in the future (Woods 2017; see also Ananya Roy’s 2019 work on racial banishment). Indeed, “communities feel disaster impacts in racialized terms. Anti-Blackness shapes communities’ exposure to environmental hazards and disasters” (Purdum et al. 2021: 3).

We were on our own. Those of us who had economic means, cars, reliable internet or cell service, and time scrambled to find hotel rooms with electricity and water. Many who didn’t used social media as an effort to get much needed help and supplies. Still others—particularly elders and those with disabilities—were heavily reliant on their closest neighbors to provide assistance. The confluence of glaring infrastructure failure, inequality, and urgent needs created conditions ripe for organizing and mutual aid efforts. Both long-term organizations and new, rag-tag formations like the one I co-led leveraged our networks and personal resources to raise and distribute money, buy supplies, prepare meals, and make deliveries. While the Chicago example above illustrates how Chicagoans transformed public park spaces into memorial sites, those leading

one mutual aid effort in Austin used different strategies: social media, WhatsApp, and to some extent their own homes and kitchens, transforming what some might consider “private” space into sites for mutual aid organizing. The winter storm mutual aid efforts worked to elide bureaucratic red tape to get resources and money directly into the hands of people who needed it. Rather than having to fill out forms to prove their need, people’s needs were largely taken at face value by organizers and volunteers. This not only reflected a political belief in redistributing and sharing resources but it also refused the logics of dehumanization as the basis for receiving help. Over the course of our time organizing, it was not uncommon for us to receive texts, emails, and calls from people stating their appreciation for being believed. Mutual aid temporarily eased the psychological warfare and trauma Austinites experienced acutely during the storms and more generally in a city that in part thrives off anti-Blackness masked under liberal notions of diversity and multiculturalism.

Conclusion

Though different geographic and cultural contexts, both Chicago and Austin are home to established and emerging mutual aid efforts that seek to reimagine care in the context of state abandonment. In both cases, organizers and volunteers were prompted by immediate disasters: the ongoing police violence and food insecurity and the immediate dangers presented by unprecedented winter storms and multi-day power outages. The political work of reimagining relationality through care also has geographic implications. If “freedom is a place,” as Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues (2017: 227) and if “Black matters are spatial matters” as McKittrick declares (2006: xii), then the transformation of surveilled and under resourced places is deeply connected to the work of mutual aid. Through mutual aid, “what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system” (brown 2017: 53). What we practice at a small scale is often improvised, ephemeral, and not formally institutionalized. That is, in some ways, an asset, reflecting how these practices are rooted in a pursuit of liberated life-ways (Heynen and Ybarra 2020: 22) that reflect forms of care and healing that are already practiced within communities (Ranganathan and Bratman 2021: 116). In short, mutual aid efforts may emerge in response to specific, immediate crises, but they also work to transform geographies into liberatory space where people can both have their needs met and practice relationality that is not rooted in extraction. Mutual aid strengthens us as we engage in struggles to transform harmful forms of power. As a practice, mutual aid reminds us that the political demands of struggle for a liberated world cannot be met or realized without infrastructures to care for each other in ways that counteract the violence of the state. If we’re all we got, then we must be our own nourishment. If freedom is a place, then it is built, challenged, destroyed, and rebuilt in the context of catastrophe.

While we engage and believe in the work of mutual aid, we are careful to not romanticize it. Mutual aid efforts run the risk of being co-opted (like the police offering US Department of Agriculture food boxes in Chicago); organizers and volunteers burn out from the physically and emotionally taxing work; and concerns about funding efforts are almost always present, presenting ethical quandaries about who can (or should) fund radical work. Yet, mutual aid creates a political, social, and spiritual container for people to practice collectively working through struggle and difference. Writing in the context of theorizing abolition ecologies, Nik Heynen and Megan Ybarra write, “while these conversations are not easy, the alternative is to define communities by the shared violence they suffer—racism, capitalism, and settler colonialism—rather than the places they have made for themselves” (2020: 23). As a prefigurative praxis,

mutual aid demands reimagining care such that people's needs are met and their humanity is not weighed against arbitrary measures of deservedness.

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■ NOTES

1. One of the challenges of mutual aid entering public conversations and debates is it gets taken up widely and in some cases its applications more closely resemble charity than the political work that is foundational to understanding mutual aid. Though our paper does not address this specifically, we offer this note to acknowledge that more public and mainstream conversations about mutual aid are not without challenges and complexity.
2. In *The Sanctified Church* (1981), Zora Neal Hurston suggests that a spiritual analytic can better help us locate Black feeling. She tells the story of High John the Conqueror, a traditional Black American spiritual figure who one day appeared to enslaved Africans in the plantation south as a liberator. High John took them on a journey beyond the enclosure of the plantation to the abundant heavens through subversive practices of song, humor, and astral projection. On their return, the white slave master could not conceive of their joy: "Us got all that [joy], and he don't know nothing at all about it" (Hurston 1981: 77).
3. There are many articles that document this story. See Dan Solomon's article in *The Texas Monthly* as one example (<https://www.texasmonthly.com/the-culture/5-million-sams-bbq-dilemma/>).

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